



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.

Except where otherwise noted, this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. This means each author holds the copyright to her or his work, and grants all users the rights to: share (copy and/or redistribute the material in any medium or format) or adapt (remix, transform, and/or build upon the material) the article, as long as the original author and source is cited, and the use is for noncommercial purposes.

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.

Editorial Staff

Editor

Laurie Moberg, Institute for Advanced Study,
University of Minnesota

Administrative Editor

Phyllis Mauch Messenger

Editorial Assistant

Caitlin Cook-Isaacson
Master's Student, Heritage Studies and Public
History and Institute for Advanced Study,
University of Minnesota

Media and Production Manager

Joanne Richardson, Institute for Advanced Study,
University of Minnesota

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>

ISSN 2471-190X

Editorial Board

Jay Bell: Soil, Water, and Climate, University of
Minnesota

M. Bianet Castellanos: Institute for Advanced
Study and American Studies, University of
Minnesota

Vicente M. Diaz: American Indian Studies,
University of Minnesota

Tia-Simone Gardner: Media and Cultural Studies,
Macalester College

Mark Gorman: Policy Analyst, Washington, D.C.

Katherine Hayes: American Indian Studies and
Anthropology, University of Minnesota

Nenette Luarca-Shoaf: Lucas Museum of
Narrative Art

David Naguib Pellow: Environmental Studies,
University of California, Santa Barbara

Wendy F. Todd: American Indian Studies and
Earth & Environmental Sciences, University of
Minnesota Duluth

Robert Sterner: Large Lakes Observatory and
Biology, University of Minnesota Duluth

Kelly Wisecup: Department of English and Center
for Native American and Indigenous Research,
Northwestern University

CONTENTS

Introduction

Introduction to Issue 22 | Women & Water: Confrontation, by Laurie Moberg, Editor 4

Features (Peer Review)

Storying the Floods: Experiments in Feminist Flood Futures
By Caroline Gottschalk Druschke, Margot Higgins, Tamara Dean, Eric G. Booth, and Rebecca Lave 7

Formless Like Water: *Defensoras* and the Work of Water Protection
By Natalia Guzmán Solano 27

Women and Urban Waterways in Korean Modernist Literature
By Anne Whitehouse 44

Features

Washed Up
By Shannon LeBlanc 62

Open Water
By Aizita Magaña 72

Geographies

Resonant Rivers: Water, Indigenous Relationality, and Other Futures
By Caroline Fidan Tyler Doenmez 86

In Review

We Are On Dakhóta Land: A Review of Diane Wilson's *The Seed Keeper*
By Racquel Banaszak 93

Perspectives

Water Memories: Exploring Our Relationship With Water
By Lee Vue 100

Primary Sources

Women & Water: Inspiration and Resources
By Racquel Banaszak, Caroline Doenmez, Caroline Gottschalk Druschke, Becky Jacobs,
Shannon LeBlanc, Phyllis Mauch Messenger, Lee Vue, and Anne Whitehouse 115

Teaching and Practice

Fisher Women and Job Insecurity in West Africa
By Ifesinachi Okafor-Yarwood 125

Editorial

Thank You, by *Open Rivers* Editorial Staff 130

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION TO ISSUE 22

WOMEN & WATER: CONFRONTATION

By Laurie Moberg, Editor

As part of our core values, *Open Rivers* publishes work that recognizes the interconnectedness of human and biogeophysical systems. Rarely, however, have we framed that intersection as a space of confrontation. Perhaps that is because confrontations are often framed as antagonistic; we confront in order to create resolutions, overcome challenges, or be heard. The collection of articles in this issue, however, evokes something different. The confrontations

that emerge here between women and water focus less on conclusions and more on ever-on-going processes of engaging with water as a site of trauma, of change, and of possibility. For that reason, we call this issue “Women & Water: Confrontation.”

Several articles demonstrate how confrontations between women and water can be tied to trauma. Two features in this issue offer narratives of



Sunset in Seoul along the Cheonggyecheon stream. Image by Stefan K on Unsplash.

personal struggles intertwined with water. Shannon LeBlanc shares an essay detailing her experience of how competitive swimming became entangled with sexual assault. Aizita Magaña takes us to the San Francisco Bay as she braves swimming in open water with the support of a pod of women after being scarred by a near drowning in a riptide. In her review of Diane Wilson's *The Seed Keeper*, Racquel Banaszak guides us through intergenerational traumas wrought in the lives of Dakhóta women in the novel and paralleled in her own experiences. Caroline Fidan Tyler Doenmez's republished article details how the legacy of some of these traumas manifests in new forms by mapping the ways several Canadian rivers are linked to the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. Together, these four articles demonstrate not only how water flows through these traumas, but also how it might contribute to the ever-unfinished process of confronting difficult lived experiences of women.

Ongoing changes in the physical or social landscape, or both, also instigate confrontations. Some of the articles in this issue draw our attention to these kinds of confrontations and the actions they provoke. In the face of recurring and intensifying flooding in the Driftless Area of southwestern Wisconsin, Caroline Gottschalk Druschke, Margot Higgins, Tamara Dean, Eric G. Booth, and Rebecca Lave share narratives from the Stories from the Flood project. They "argue for the power of feminist praxis" like this as a methodology for coping with the unpredictability of these physical upheavals. Natalia Guzmán Solano's article traces the work of water *defensoras* in Peru, detailing a variety of adaptable strategies women employ in the work of opposing extractive mining corporations that will irreparably change the land- and waterscapes. In her article republished from *The Conversation*, Ifesinachi Okafor-Yarwood explains the ways that women are central to the West African

fishing industry, but especially vulnerable to shifting physical and social conditions—from climate change to fishery depletion to the Covid pandemic.

Other articles discuss confrontations that open up possibilities. For example, Anne Whitehouse's analysis of Pak T'ae-wŏn's novel *Scenes from Ch'ŏnggye Stream* explores the commonalities in experiences between women and water and their potentialities in 1930s Korea and today. In her photo essay, Lee Vue reflects on the challenges of extended canoe trips; her perseverance created a lifelong commitment and relationship with water as "a parent, teacher, mentor, therapist, and friend." Finally, in our Primary Sources column, we offer a variety of resources that are inspirations for the authors in our last two issues on women and water. From art installations to music, podcasts to articles, these resources challenge us as readers to confront new perspectives on women and water and to see the possibilities they present.

As a whole, this issue illustrates myriad ways women and water are entangled in messy personal, social, and physical confrontations. Rather than single moments of collision and resolution, a single breaker crashing upon the shore, these articles emphasize the complexities and the possibilities of ongoing relationships between women and water, like the ceaseless flow of water over rapids. Whether complicit in change, a source of trauma, or a partner for creating new possibilities, water has a profound influence on women's lives. Similarly, women's choices and practices, whether engaging water directly or indirectly, shape our water systems. We share this collection of articles as a reminder: we are always in relationship with water. Perhaps what matters most is determining what kind of future we want and acting to build relationships with water that make that future possible. Enjoy.

Recommended Citation

Moberg, Laurie. 2022. "Introduction to Issue 22 | Women & Water: Confrontation." *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 22. <https://openrivers.lib.umn.edu/article/introduction-to-issue-22/>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.9729>

About the Author

Laurie Moberg serves as editor for *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community* and as the project manager for the Environmental Stewardship, Place, and Community Initiative at the University of Minnesota. She earned her Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Minnesota in 2018. Her doctoral research investigates recurrent episodes of flooding on rivers in Thailand and queries how the ecological, social, and cosmological entanglements between people and the material world are reimagined and reconfigured in the aftermath of disasters. In her current work, she approaches public scholarship as a critical strategy for expanding whose stories are heard, for shaping our public conversations, and for forming solutions for our shared ecological challenges.

FEATURE (PEER REVIEW)

STORYING THE FLOODS: EXPERIMENTS IN FEMINIST FLOOD FUTURES

By Caroline Gottschalk Druschke, Margot Higgins, Tamara Dean, Eric G. Booth, and Rebecca Lave

Editor's note: This feature article has been peer reviewed.

Residents of the steep, unglaciated Driftless Area in the Upper Mississippi River basin have a long history with floods. This region was already prone to flooding, but the dramatic conversion from native vegetation to agriculture by white settlers in the late 1800s increased its severity. The introduction and spread of soil conservation practices in the mid-1900s mitigated some of these impacts, but severe flooding has increased again over the last 15 years because

of the increasing frequency of heavy rainfall in the region prompted by a warming climate. Life in Wisconsin's Kickapoo River and Coon Creek watersheds, the focus of our Driftless work, has been punctuated by major floods in 2007, 2008, 2016, 2017, and the worst in recorded history in 2018. As flooding becomes more frequent and more severe across these watersheds, community members are working together to re-imagine ways to live well together with worsening floods.



Fortney Farm in Soldiers Grove. Image courtesy of Tim Hundt

Here we look to our experience collaborating with a community-driven oral history effort in southwestern Wisconsin called Stories from the Flood, and to the work it inspired developing participatory flood models in Driftless watersheds, to consider the importance of feminist approaches for building more equitable flood futures. As we highlight below, the oral histories gathered in the Stories from the Flood archive—a largely women-created, women-led, and women-sustained project—chronicle the ways that much of the informal infrastructure that supported community members as they moved through the 2018 flood and towards longer-term recovery came together through feminist (i.e., sometimes women-driven, but, especially, non-hierarchical, extemporaneous, grassroots, experimental) approaches towards what is typically framed as “women’s work”: cleaning, feeding, clothing,

tending, gathering, supporting, storytelling, and also organizing others to respond flexibly and collaboratively. That includes the work of Stories from the Flood itself; by gathering over 100 stories of flood impacts and responses across the region, the project has supported individual and community healing and built a pool of textured wisdom for future flood response that highlights the power of feminist methodology, emphasizing the importance of place-based narratives for responding to an accelerating future of flooding.

In light of that work, we argue here for the power of feminist praxis—with a strong emphasis on narrative—to help navigate the present and future of flooding in the Driftless Area and beyond. In the essay that follows, we detail the forces that have created and sustained these precarious flood conditions in the Driftless Area, situate our work



Students recording a story for Stories from the Flood. Image courtesy of Sydney Widell.

within feminist theories of climate justice, then feature passages from *Stories from the Flood* that detail what we refer to as feminist responses to the increasing reality of flooding. We leverage the example of *Stories from the Flood*—both the project itself, and the stories amplified within it—to close the essay with a wider argument

about the importance of feminist interventions in flooding, which we insist must embrace flexibility, place-appropriateness, and narrative. We see these feminist interventions as central to working towards more equitable, justice-oriented futures for communities living in the midst of climate-exacerbated flooding.

An Accelerating History of Flooding and Response in the Region

While flooding has shaped the biophysical and cultural landscape of the Driftless Area for thousands of years, its magnitude and frequency have shifted in response to changes in climate, land use, and land cover. Due to the region's steep, unglaciated landscape, even subtle changes in these interdependent drivers led to noticeable changes in flooding even before the forced removal of Indigenous peoples—including the Ho-Chunk, Sauk and Fox, Santee Dakota, and Kickapoo—by Euro-Americans beginning in the 1830s (Knox, 1985; 1993). But the widespread settler conversion of prairie, oak-savannah, and forest ecosystems to cropland and pasture—including on steep hillslopes—triggered a devastating cycle of increased runoff, erosion, gulying, and downstream flooding and sedimentation. By the early 20th century, the erosion and flooding crisis had grown into an existential one for both the region's farms and its floodplain communities, threatening their very existence: upstream farmers were losing an intolerable amount of soil, the same soil that was literally burying communities downstream. The situation was so dire that conservationist Aldo Leopold (1935) lamented after a visit to Coon Valley, Wisconsin in the 1930s:

Gone is the humus of the old prairie which until recently enabled the upland ridges to take on the rains as they came... Every rain pours off the ridges as from a roof. The ravines of the grazed slopes are the gutters. In their pastured condition they cannot resist the abrasion of the silt-laden torrents. Great gashing gullies are torn out of the hillside. Each gully dumps its load of hillslope rocks

upon the fields of the creek bottom and its muddy waters into the already swollen streams. (pp. 205–208)

Initial responses to this devastation were private, uncoordinated, and short-lived, and, as early as 1907, included elevating homes in the floodplain only to be flooded again by the next larger event (Trimble, 2013). Growing calls to state and federal agencies for more holistic and effective solutions, along with a national recognition of soil erosion as a “national menace,” helped usher in a new era of soil and water conservation (Bennett, 1934). While funded primarily through New Deal programs and led largely by federal and state soil and water scientists and technicians, new knowledge and practices related to land management were co-developed with local progressive farmers, mediated by the unique regional physiography, and tested in real time (Nygren, 2015).

The Coon Creek watershed—its lands and its people—were the subject of the first experiment in watershed-scale implementation of practices such as contour strip cropping to alleviate soil erosion and flooding in the 1930s (Anderson, 2002). And while this was a federal intervention in the form of the new Soil Conservation Service, the project's success—and it *was* successful—was largely the result of a network of committed farmers throughout the region willing to experiment together on innovative solutions to what must have seemed a completely overwhelming problem on land they knew well. This experimental, community-driven, locally appropriate approach is something we return to below, as it inspires the

work we are invested in today. While the success of this watershed-scale project in the 1930s came in large part from male farm owners and federal conservation agents, we want to argue that this is exactly the kind of intervention that we see in keeping with a feminist response: collaborative, experimental, place-appropriate, and radical.

In the wake of the adoption of soil conservation measures in the region, evidence began to accumulate showing the benefit of these land management changes on individual farms, but their widespread adoption by private landowners and the subsequent reduction in downstream flooding took many more decades to materialize and document (Trimble and Lund 1982). During the interim period, from the 1940s to the 1970s, as floods slowly moderated but continued, the patience of local residents understandably wore thin. In response to repeated calls from the region and across the country for more immediate solutions, the federal government greatly expanded its flood mitigation role from a focus on land management to include large structural interventions via levees and dams. The USDA Small Watershed Program initiated by Public Law 566 (1956) funded the construction of thousands of dams throughout the country; in the 1960s, fourteen of these PL-566 earthen dams were constructed in the Coon Creek watershed, regulating flow from a full quarter of the watershed above Coon Valley, with another nine of these structures constructed in the West Fork Kickapoo River watershed, regulating 35 percent of its flow.

This dam-building era was founded upon what Joshua M. Nygren (2016) called an “ethic of control” over land and water resources that has been a longstanding characteristic of federal

flood prevention efforts since the early twentieth century and is embodied in agencies like the US Army Corps of Engineers. This attitude is still pervasive today as communities begin to battle another major driver of flooding: climate change, and specifically the increasing frequency of heavy rainfall. But a growing recognition of the limits of structural measures and their unintended consequences downstream (Williams, 1994; Pinter and Heine, 2005) has provided an opening for more serious consideration and, in some cases, implementation of nonstructural and low-tech measures under banners such as natural flood management and nature-based solutions (Lane, 2017; Gonzalez & Kuzma, 2020; Chiu et al., 2021).

In the Coon Creek and Kickapoo River watersheds these shifts have prompted renewed interest in dynamic land management practices like managed rotational grazing and agroforestry, along with stream-floodplain restoration, while reinvigorating pride in the conservation successes of the 1930s. But growing interest in these watershed-wide approaches linking land management practices with stream health exist alongside an enduring reliance on structural solutions like levees and dams. This is in part because of limited rural community capacity to experiment with alternatives solutions like floodplain reconnection and restored wetlands (Consoer and Millman, 2018), and in part because of a near century of policy and implementation that has favored structural intervention (Nygren, 2016). We argue that the narrative-centric feminist approach we advocate for here is in keeping with other nonstructural interventions in flooding: dynamic, emplaced, and experimental strategies for changing landscapes and conversations.

A Feminist Approach to Flooding

Since 2019, *Stories from the Flood* has gathered over 100 community stories of flooding in hopes of supporting community healing and serving as a resource for future conversations about flood recovery and resilience (Wilson, 2021; Wisconsin Humanities, 2021; Gottschalk Druschke et al., 2022a; 2022b). Inspired by our experiences with *Stories from the Flood*, we argue for the importance of narrative as a feminist methodology for intervening in flooding: a technique both for recovering from the material and psychic damage of past flooding and for envisioning possible strategies to alleviate these devastating impacts from future floods. Stories convey important nuance, including emotional and affective experiences, that can supplement and complicate scientific data. As Cleo Wölfe Hazard (2002) suggests, “Data are imbued with feeling, and that feeling can change data’s meaning and how it is taken up in river management” (p. 85). Anna Tsing (2015) writes of the methodological possibilities of story for the kind of work we propose: “To listen to and tell a rush of stories is a *method*.... A rush of stories cannot be neatly summed up. Its scales do not nest neatly; they draw attention to interrupting geographies and tempos. These interruptions elicit more stories” (p. 37). Stories defy control, they multiply, they link to the specific, in keeping with the sorts of nonstructural flood management approaches we highlighted above that offer dynamic, tailored approaches to flood response adapted to the particular circumstances of the individual, the community, and the landscape.

We find much in this perspective that resonates with Farhana Sultana’s (2022) feminist framing of “critical climate justice,” work that, as she explains, “encourages policymakers and citizens to approach climate change in more comprehensive ways. It calls for accountability to intersectional feminist analysis, so that lived experiences and wisdom of differently situated subjects are heard and heeded, and appropriate

and inclusive policies and programs are planned” (p. 5). And we would add the importance of *telling* these stories. The feminist participatory approach we propose makes space for community members to heal through the sharing of their own stories, often setting the stage for others to feel more comfortable adding their own stories, while also providing an opportunity for essential, nuanced understanding from those who hear and heed those narratives. We see narrative-centric approaches as part of configuring this pathway forward, building from feminist scholars who have insisted that disaster response should be understood as intersectional, in terms of both overlapping identities and material well-being and lived experience (Ranganathan, 2019; hooks, 2016; Taylor, 2017).

Stories from the Flood—as a project in its own right, and in terms of the stories it contains—highlights feminist, experimental, collaborative, community-grounded responses to living together with floods. This work is built from the understanding that sharing stories can be powerful for both the individual and the community, especially in the absence of formalized support. Community storytellers have reported that their contributions to *Stories from the Flood* have helped them work through the repeated traumas of frequent flooding, alongside the traumas prompted by persistent State neglect. Paying deep attention to these stories requires moving beyond disciplinary biases to take a more generous, radically empathetic view of what these blended practices might offer, where “radical empathy,” as Isabel Wilkerson (2021) describes, “means putting in the work to educate oneself and to listen with a humble heart to understand another’s experience from their perspective, not as we imagine we would feel.” We have written elsewhere about the importance of narrative for individual and community healing from the trauma of flood events (Gottschalk Druschke et

al., 2022a; 2022b), and we want to point to this dual contribution of story: story offers a method for healing from flood-related trauma and also for imagining how to live well with future floods. It is no surprise, then, that we take inspiration from related projects like the Houston Flood Museum, a story-centered project related to flooding in the wake of Hurricane Harvey. As founder Lacy M. Johnson has explained, the point of that project is “to discover and collect these histories, as many as we can, about this storm and all the others, about the flooding to which this city is exceptionally prone, and to think in a critical way about the city and its heroes and its flaws” (p. 7). This is messy work, and we argue that this messiness and multiplicity is central to its importance as a flood management technique that exceeds control. And this work can have larger political and institutional impacts.

Dylan Harris (2017) has pointed to the ways that stories can bring climate change policy into focus. As he argues, “Storytelling makes the symbolic visceral, creating a material experience. In many ways, stories connect the ‘out there’ to the here and now, while at the same time inspiring the critical capacity necessary to imagine a then and there, a task critical to policymakers” (Harris, 2017, p. 179). In later work, Harris leans on narrative to advocate for experimentation, building from conversations in feminist political ecology that emerge from community-based work. He argues for an experimental approach linked to scholar-activist research, in which researchers

“work alongside the communities in which they study, allowing the community’s needs to inform their research rather than approaching them with a specific research agenda (Nagar & Shank, 2013, Routledge & Derickson, 2015). In doing so, research questions and answers emerge through collaboration, creating more equitable forms of environmental knowledge (Sundberg, 2004)” (Harris, 2021, p. 333). By working in collaboration, with an intentional concern with equity, we hope this methodology works to resist the kinds of extraction that are so common in academic research (Tuck & Yang, 2013; Itchuaqiyaq, et al., forthcoming). This community-driven approach is a continued goal for our shared work and continues to be inspired by the lessons of our community collaborators from Stories from the Flood.

In the following section, we offer a suite of passages from the Stories from the Flood archive that demonstrate the power of the feminist flood methodology we propose: this “rush of stories” that “draw attention to interrupting geographies and tempos,” in Tsing’s (2015) words; that amplify the “lived experiences and wisdom of differently situated subjects,” as Sultana (2022) puts it; and that “make the symbolic visceral,” and “creat[e] more equitable forms of environmental knowledge,” as Harris (2017, 2021) suggests. We propose that Stories from the Flood offers important lessons for other narrative-centric feminist interventions in climate-exacerbated flooding.

Stories From the 2018 Flood

Taken together, the more than one hundred community members who contributed their stories to Stories from the Flood offer a wide-ranging, nuanced, visceral retelling of the ways that flooding was experienced across the Coon Creek and Kickapoo River watersheds in 2018. We highlight some of these stories here to demonstrate how narrative methodologies can provide an urgently

critical way of understanding the asymmetric impacts of flooding on marginalized communities and offer insights into rich and creative models for justice-oriented response.

On Monday, August 27, 2018, around 10:00 p.m., after several hours of steady rain, Judy Mixter accompanied her husband Richard into

their basement in Coon Valley, Wisconsin, near the banks of Coon Creek, to check on the water seeping through the walls. As Judy recounted:

We got halfway down and both of the basement windows, the back windows, had busted in and the mud and the water was gushing in. It was like geysers. [...] And we were just kinda like in shock and you couldn't go down into the basement. By that time there was probably, I don't know, about six-seven inches on the floor and you couldn't go down there to put anything up because the electricity was still on and we didn't know if we'd get electrocuted.

They abruptly headed back upstairs to get dressed and consider what to do next as rushing water surrounded the house. As she continued:

And then it just started—it must've been around midnight, I think it was, it was just rapids. I mean we were just...I...I can't even describe it. 'Cause we...we would go out on the porch and you couldn't go anywhere. You couldn't get off the porch because it was just going so fast. And it started coming up the deck steps. It got up to the deck and I—then I kinda started to panic a little bit. Electricity was still on and I said, "What do I save?" You know, you look around your house.

As water seeped up through the floor on the main level, they grabbed the dog and a few important documents and moved out to the porch, where they tried to get the attention of a fire and rescue team. The house shuddered, followed by a large crash, as an exterior basement wall caved in. Soon after, a backhoe scooped the Mixters and their dog off the porch and carried them to the post office, where police transported them to shelter at the local school.

Scenes of extreme flooding occurred through the night and following day all over the Coon Creek and Kickapoo River watersheds when more than

11 inches of rain fell in some locations in just 24 hours. Foundations collapsed. Hillsides crumbled. Earthen dams liquified. Barns and outbuildings washed away. Volunteer firefighters woke sleeping families and carried them by backhoe and boat to safety. The widespread devastation was exacerbated by a second flood the following week.

The 2018 floods compounded existing challenges in this rural and under-resourced region, a multi-county area with a higher poverty level than the state average; limited access to public transportation, health care, and high wage employment; and some of the highest levels of chronic homelessness in the state (Couleecap, 2019; Institute for Community Alliances, 2020). But in the days and weeks that followed, community members came together to find creative ways to respond. Women led much of that informal but critical work, addressing emergency needs like clothing and food, while building and sustaining broader networks of economic and emotional support. Time and time again, women across these watersheds felt called to address the question "What can we do?" They experimented with a variety of responses, inviting others into their shared work.

Two miles outside of Coon Valley, Peggy Way found herself downstream of two major dam breaches. Her log cabin home of 35 years sat alongside Timber Coulee Creek but had never previously flooded. As water rushed around and up to the porch of her home, elevated four feet off the ground, Way finally decided to call for help. She was rescued by raft, along with her three dogs, and returned the next day to survey the damage. Because the flood water did not quite reach her elevated first floor, Way called herself "extremely lucky," but she described all of the wiring and ductwork in the ceiling of her basement as "wet, hanging with debris, soybeans" and chronicled losing furniture, televisions, a microwave, most her family pictures, her furnace, her hot water heater, a freezer newly stocked with pounds of fresh blueberries,

strawberries, and peaches, an older Mustang convertible, a late model SUV, a small tractor, her grandchildren's bicycles, and part of her home's foundation. When her sister arrived to help, Way remembered:

I stood there with my sister and thought, "I don't," and I said, "I just have no clue where...where do we even start?" And she said, "Here's a shovel." Pulled it out of the mud. "Start. We dig." And I'm like, "Okay."

Two days later, Way put out a call on Facebook for help, and she recalled family, neighbors, and former coworkers assembling at her home:

They set up a bucket brigade and hauled buckets of mud, scooped the mud—my basement is 30 x 40, it's big. And it had four to five inches of mud from one end to the other. So, bucket by bucket by bucket they hauled out all that mud.

As she continued:

They were awesome, unbelievable, amazing how the friends and the families and the people in this valley all pulled together in different places. So, they got all the junk out, but a lot of the mud was still there. The next day there was a group [...] an Amish Mennonite group that originates out of Ohio, and they had called their Wisconsin people [...] and they came and asked me, "Would you okay people to come in and help?" And I said, "Well, what are you charging?" "We're not charging. This is part of the service that we do for the country, people of our communities." So, um, I said, "Sure." [...] So, she said, "We'll be here at 8 o'clock tomorrow with a team."

And they were. By the time they left the next evening, Way reflected it was, "Amazing. They went through that basement, cleaned it top to bottom, every last speck of mud."



Community members watch the Kickapoo River flow over the bridge in Viola. Image courtesy of Tim Hundt.

Twenty-five miles southeast of Coon Valley in La Farge, Julie Fraser was getting messages through the night about damage, particularly to the United Methodist Church where she led the youth ministry. She headed back to the church “at the crack of dawn the next morning” to start the cleanup where she heard that a church member in Viola, eight river miles downstream, had a basement wall collapse. Fraser left the church for Viola to help salvage whatever they could from the house. As Fraser recalled:

So at that point I was realizing how much damage this was hitting the whole community, not just La Farge but Viola, you know, and other communities. And—and I’m the type of person that just can’t sit still very well anyways so I’m like, “Well what can we do?”

The next day, Fraser told her pastor about a self-described “crazy idea” and the pastor, to her credit, told Fraser to run with it:

So, I turned this into a donation center, um, because so many people were homeless. So many people had lost everything and we basically—I couldn’t use the basement ‘cause we were still tryin’ to salvage what we could down there. Um, I...I took the whole sanctuary and out front and every room, space we had and for five weeks, seven days a week, um, I let people come in and take whatever they needed. And that included, you know, the food, cleaning supplies. I mean we had everything.

Fraser saw an urgent need and addressed it, using the resources at her disposal to create temporary infrastructure to respond to the floods, and coordinating others to support the effort.

Down in Gays Mills, Wisconsin, 45 river miles south but only 20 as the crow flies, the flood peaked later that Tuesday morning as waters converged from across the Kickapoo River watershed. This was the worst flood in the town’s



Post-flood recovery efforts at the Gay Mills Community Center. Image courtesy of Tim Hundt.

150-year memory. Jill Riggs and Kathy Shepherd sprang into action using the shared kitchen space in the Gays Mills Community Center to feed folks across the community. Riggs kicked things off, issuing a message to the community that she would cook anything they brought over to the Community Center, then Shepherd joined in. They put out a call for donations; Organic Valley, Sam's Club, and local businesses dropped off food while relief organizations like the Red Cross used the space as a distribution point for water and cleaning supplies. For three weeks, Riggs and Shepherd and a rotating crew of volunteers worked day and night preparing and delivering meals to Gays Mills, Steuben, Soldiers Grove, and Readstown, feeding hundreds of people each day. Shepherd described the inspiration for their work:

Yeah. I came in and thought, "I can't clean mud." You know? I was like, "I'm a restaurant person. Let's go see if anything's going down in the kitchen."

Things grew from there. As she continued:

It was so cool though. So many people came here to volunteer and so much food and this kitchen is amazing. Like, they got this kitchen after the first big flood [...] And it was so neat to see it, like, with so much life in it. People came in and it's so nice when their whole house is under water to have something better than just, like, a cold peanut butter—not that there's anything wrong with peanut butter and jelly but, like, meatloaf and mashed potatoes when—is, you know, we were able to feed people really good food.

Riggs and Shepherd, and the crew they inspired, shared food, comfort, and community for weeks along the river's banks.

Twenty miles northeast, in Liberty, along the West Fork of the Kickapoo, coauthor Tamara

Dean woke in the 5:00 a.m. dark of that first flood morning, hearing light plinks of rain on the window against the backdrop of a steady roar. As she recalled in her oral history:

And I knew what the roar meant because I had heard the same sound after the 2008 flood—that was June of 2008. And it was the sound of water rushing through that floodplain across from our house. It had filled this whole quarter acre, or I should say maybe 1200-foot-wide floodplain. Whereas usually the river is only 45 foot wide. And the roar was, you know, like, an ocean because this waterway was just rushing. It was carrying trees and debris down with it.

Dean's home was high enough to be spared the flood, so she and her partner David Klann spent the next two days helping local neighbors with clean-up, until the surrounding roads slowly reopened. On Thursday, they headed into Viola to bring supplies to the food pantry and join volunteers cleaning up the Methodist Church and the public restrooms. As Dean explained:

With Viola, we knew that it must have been bad this time. So yeah, we just went to see whatever we—see what we could do. And the interesting thing about that was, we ran into a lot of friends there who also weren't personally flooded at their house but who had come out to help—who lived quite far away and...and that was cool.

Not long after, Dean, a member of the board of the nonprofit Driftless Writing Center based in Viroqua, Wisconsin, was chatting with fellow board members Lisa Henner, Robin Hosemann, and Jennifer Morales, and they began scheming how they could connect their shared love—writing—with the shorter-term clean-up and longer-term recovery from the flood. That conversation became *Stories from the Flood*.

As Dean later reflected in a Wisconsin Public Radio [interview](#) about the project:

Some of us on the Board were helping with clean-up in the days after that terrible flood, and we thought, you know, we're happy to mop and to haul away refuse, but we'd like to do something more for people. And what the Driftless Writing Center does the best, really, is help people tell stories. And we also knew about the research that shows when people tell their stories they begin to heal and move forward. So we thought, "Okay, we can collect people's stories and be listening ears for people who want to share their stories and help them move through it." (Davis, 2019)

As Julie Fraser, Kathy Shepherd, and Tamara Dean all explained, they felt compelled to respond to the floods in the ways they knew best: organizing through the local church to provide the clothing and other items that people had lost; cooking hot meals for community members without food or stability; making space for watershed residents to tell stories at the confluence of love and grief and place in community with others to support recovery. And they weren't alone in that. Marcy West, then Executive Director of the [Kickapoo Valley Reserve](#) in La Farge, realized she could open up their Visitor Center as a charging station for neighbors without power and use state vehicles to run bleach and hydrogen peroxide to folks who needed it. Randi Strangstalien in Westby responded to a friend's plea—"I wish I knew how to help people"—by managing a flood recovery Facebook group that surged to 3,500 members and thousands of volunteer hours, matching willing volunteers with folks who needed help. As she explained on the local news, "If you think something might work, step up and try it. Because all of sudden, it turns into something that 4,000 people come marching behind you, ready to help and willing." Gillian Pomplun, long-time area journalist, offered extensive coverage about the impacts of the

flood and continues to share critical information about ongoing recovery efforts. Pomplun filled an important need for communication about a long, slowly unfolding event that quickly faded from major media outlets. Coauthors Higgins and Gottschalk Druschke led many semesters of undergraduates at University of Wisconsin-La Crosse and University of Wisconsin-Madison in support of Stories from the Flood when the project needed additional help to gather flood stories, identify flood impacts and recovery ideas, and create materials to prepare the collection for Tiffany Trimmer with the Oral History Program at UW-La Crosse and Kristen Parrott with the Vernon County Historical Society. Hetti Brown, Executive Director of [Couleecap, Inc.](#), a nonprofit focused on supporting the needs of low-income residents in the area, created Project Recovery to support the emerging psychological and resource needs of community members impacted by floods.

What is clear from story after story gathered in the Stories from the Flood archive is that many individuals—and especially many *women*—came together in the absence of state infrastructures and in response to damage exacerbated by structural neglect to begin the work of recovery in mundane—but essential—ways, and to create channels for others to join the effort. As we consider how to make sense of these stories beyond the local case, we note that, taken together, these experiments in flood response built an informal and powerful infrastructure of mutual aid and community support that responded, collaboratively, to local needs as they emerged. These experiments echoed earlier work in these same valleys to experiment with creative responses to flooding. Building from these earlier radical changes in land management, we look forward to the power of story, and recognize that the many rich retellings of these mundane but heroic acts amplified their power, shaping and reshaping the community's experience of the 2018 floods while also shaping and reshaping the possibilities for future response.

Importantly, we want to return to the Houston Flood Museum's Lacy M. Johnson, heeding her caution as she reminds us that these oft-repeated "stories of everyday heroism," in her case about flood response after Hurricane Harvey in Houston, Texas, "have become the official stories of the storm: a story of sacrifice and resilience, of working together for the common good. We repeat these stories because we like what they say about us as a community, as people—but these stories aren't complete, and they are only partially true" (p. 3). Johnson points, too, to the ease with which more affluent, more white residents were able to receive mutual and federal aid compared to their less affluent, less white neighbors. "These stories," Johnson continues, "and the inequality they represent, also tell us who we are as a community, as people" (p. 4). Stories of heroism, sacrifice, and resilience in the Coon Creek and Kickapoo River watersheds are real, and they matter. But they are only partially true. They point attention to the structural inequities that make these everyday acts of heroism necessary in the first place. Community members needed to come together to share emergency clothing at the local church, or cook hot meals for stranded residents, or match Amish volunteers with struggling families, or spend years building and sustaining an oral history project focused on recovering from acute and sustained trauma because there were no institutional structures to fill those gaps. As Johnson reflects on flooding, "Though rain might fall without regard for social and economic disparities, flooding reinforces the inequalities that surround us every day" (p. 4). This is certainly true of flood response and recovery in the Driftless watersheds where we live and work.

As the floodwaters receded, community members checked on neighbors, friends, and strangers;

slopped out barns, basements, and first floors; tallied the damage in barns, cars, photo albums, canned goods, and cattle. Some made phone calls to insurance agents and federal agencies. Many didn't. They had lived through significant flooding before—2017, 2016, 2008, 2007, 1978, 1966, 1935—and had struggled to get coordinated support. Residents detailed not having the right receipts for FEMA reimbursement, not having the correct kind of insurance, not having the time or energy to manage the emotional and administrative labor of navigating flood bureaucracies. Many discovered their homes had migrated into the floodplain over time—purchased a seemingly reasonable distance and height from the banks of the Kickapoo River or Coon Creek only to find that what was once "safe" was now "100-year floodplain," as flood maps are redrawn in light of climate change—exacerbated increases in precipitation (Lea and Pralle, 2022). In the years since 2018, residents continue to navigate the slow pace of flood recovery and try to think as a community about future flood resilience—if such a thing is even possible—all the while holding their breaths waiting on the next flood, a recurrent nightmare they know will be exponentially worse in the midst of a global pandemic.

Our point here is that community members across the Kickapoo River and Coon Creek watersheds are already creating and sustaining creative responses to flooding, and have been for well over a century, inspiring us to argue for new flood management methodologies that attend to improvisation, narrative, and mutual support. We are heartened by projects around the region—and beyond—that think differently about the problem of flooding, following in the tradition of the Coon Creek watershed experiments of the 1930s and the improvised flood responses detailed above.

Creating New Stories about Flooding for More Livable Futures

We close this essay by suggesting that attending to the messiness of these fine-scale stories is essential to the work of living through increasingly frequent and severe flooding in the region and of imagining justice-oriented flood futures. First, these individual narratives offer testimony to the devastating personal impacts of flooding, impacts that often amplify already existing forms of precarity. This testimony calls listeners and readers to bear witness to the immediate and ongoing damage of chronic flooding. Second, stories point to myriad systemic failures so often elided in structural, engineering-based approaches to flooding: an acute lack of mental health resources for flood-affected communities; a lack of physical health information and care related to flood-borne illness; the absence of a widespread early warning system for flood events; the need for

more integration across these small communities to organize for federal aid. The list goes on. Third, we believe that these fine-scale stories—invited through creative mechanisms that make space for individual and community storytelling—offer the possibility to narrate new flood futures that work beyond structural solutions focused on control, document community strengths and needs, and cohere communities to imagine and create more livable futures.

As we write this, we are in the midst of finalizing the transfer of [85 audio files](#), 14 written stories, and 1 video story from Stories from the Flood, collectively representing over 100 storytellers, to the Oral History Program at UW-La Crosse's Murphy Library and to the Vernon County Historical Society. Meanwhile, coauthors



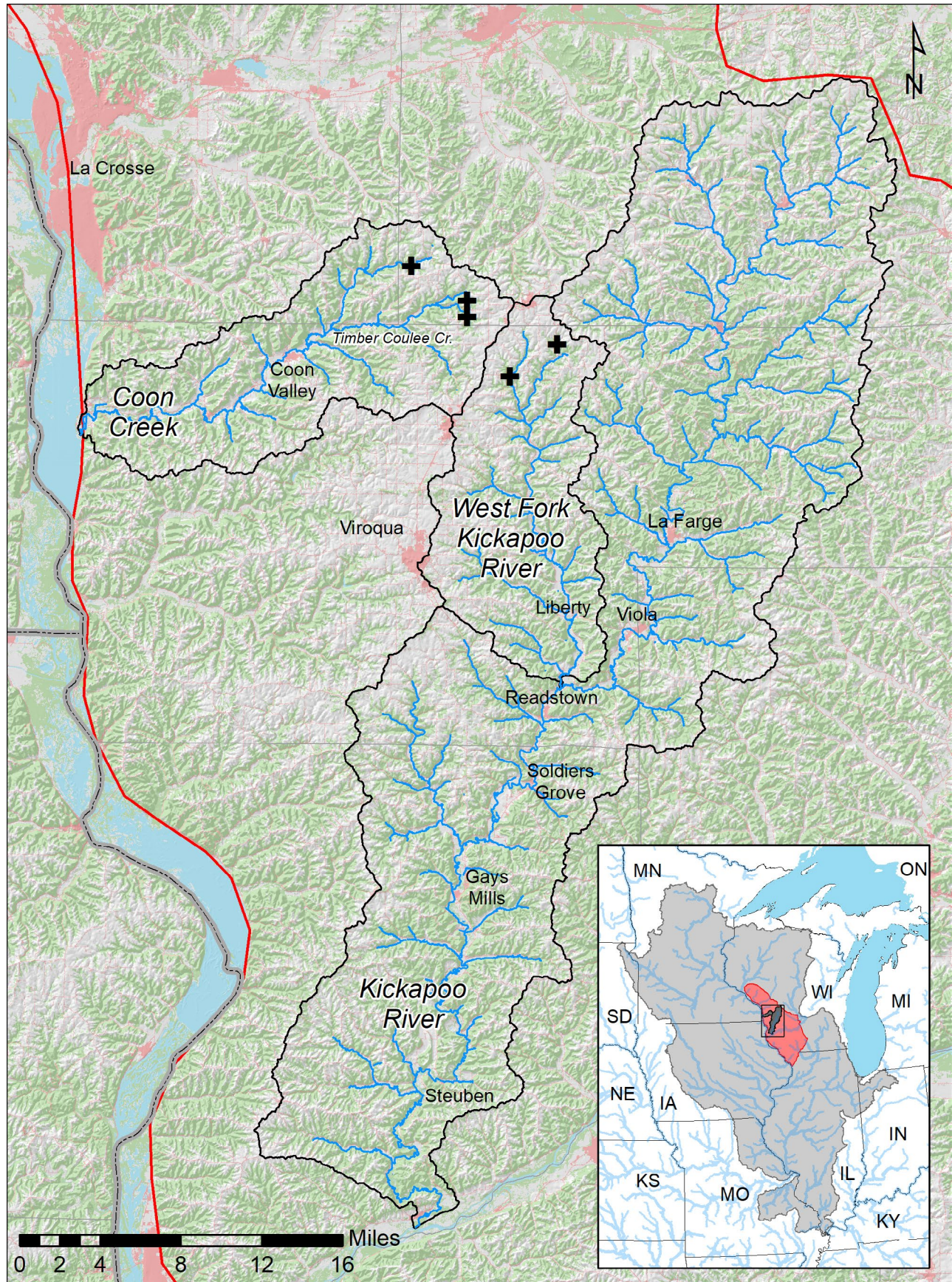
Watershed meeting in Coon Creek. Image courtesy of the authors.

Gottschalk Druschke, Booth, and Lave are continuing flood-focused research interviews with stream and watershed managers across the region and beginning the work of combining and refining recently developed hydrologic and hydraulic models of the Coon Creek and West Fork Kickapoo River watersheds into a publicly accessible interface to feature them in a series of community meetings to foster conversations about shared pathways into the flood-filled future we have detailed above (Pomplun, 2021).

In this ongoing work, we are trying to connect storytelling with flood modeling to engage community members to develop new flood futures on their own terms. We are working to link modeling approaches across scales, from the stream reach to the watershed, to highlight the sorts of connections that Coon Creek farmers in the 1930s knew so well: that what happens on a neighbor's farm upstream impacts all their neighbors downstream. And our past experience tells us that these upstream and downstream connections have crucial psychic, argumentative power to change material and symbolic landscapes (Gottschalk Druschke, 2013). Just as important, we are building these models from our wider experiences over five years of focused research interviews, surveys, informal conversations, public meetings, in-stream research, and fellowship. Like Cleo Wölflé Hazard (2022), we understand the river as "a presence that takes form from specific, yet constantly shifting physical, social, and psychic forces," and we are studying its flows, its infrastructures, its political and social forces (p. 7). We are trying to constantly work together, in community, to "hone an ability to sense fluvial and ecological histories by learning to see abandoned channels and old river terraces while walking across a floodplain," and also to "learn to sense political and social underflows by studying resistance to top-down management" (Wölflé Hazard, 2022, p. 7). As Wölflé Hazard argues, "When we are sensing in this physical and conceptual mode simultaneously, rivers come

into view as messy riparian braids of life, water, and sediment, shaped by and shaping human societies as they practice interfacing with other animals and altering flows using science and other systematic practices" (p. 8).

In our current work, the point of linking hydrologic and hydraulic models with engagement and story is to embrace this messiness, to consider the ways that river communities and human communities continue to shape each other, and to spark informed conversations with community members about their hopes, fears, and dreams for the future of their watersheds. Working in collaboration with local partners, we are planning watershed meetings that will allow community members to visualize the impacts of various flood responses on their landscape, and to talk over what changes they want to see and how they might get there together. Central to our work on the project is the idea that we are not using these models to "solve" the problem of flooding with a predetermined answer. Instead, we see our work in harmony with the experimental approaches of Lacy Johnson critically storying the Houston floods, Randi Strangstalien conjuring up a Facebook volunteer network, Coon Creek farmers in the 1930s trying new approaches in the face of a seemingly intractable erosion problem, and Driftless Writing Center board members and friends taking a chance to see whether an idea for a community-driven oral history project could blossom into an irreplaceable archive about flood impacts and potential solutions. Like them, we want to take a risk to create the conditions to think otherwise about flooding. Most of all, we are working to build, extend, nourish, and sustain relationships in community, even when that is hard, risky, unstable, and uncomfortable. At the heart of our engagement across these projects is the attempt to engage in a feminist mode to make space for community members across the Coon Creek and Kickapoo River watersheds to story their own solutions for the continued and worsening problem of flooding.



Map of the area covered in this article. Image courtesy of the authors.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank, first and foremost, members of the Kickapoo River and Coon Creek watershed communities who shared their personal stories for this project. The Stories from the Flood project was supported with financial contributions from Wisconsin Humanities, the John D. and Leslie Henner Burns Family Foundation, the La Farge Lions Club, Vernon Communications Cooperative, Vernon Electric Cooperative, Westby Co-op Credit Union, the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Morgridge Center for Public Service, UW-Madison's Robert F. and Jean E. Holtz Center for Science & Technology Studies, UW-Madison's Department of English, and the Kickapoo Valley Reforestation Fund in UW-Madison's College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, along with important donations of time and expertise from the Driftless Writing Center, the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse's Oral History Program at the Murphy Library, and students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, including ongoing support from UW-Madison student Julia Buskirk. This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under award #2009353, CNH2-S: Interactive Dynamics of Stream Restoration and Flood Resilience in a Changing Climate.

References

- Anderson, R. (2002). Coon Valley Days. *Wisconsin Academy Review*, 48(2), 42–48.
- Bennett, H. H. (1934). Soil Erosion—A National Menace. *The Scientific Monthly*, 39(5), 385–404. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/15812>.
- Chiu, Y. Y., Raina, N., & Chen, H. E. (2021). Evolution of flood defense strategies: Toward nature-based solutions. *Environments*, 9(1), 2.
- Consoer, M., & Milman, A. (2018). Opportunities, constraints, and choices for flood mitigation in rural areas: Perspectives of municipalities in Massachusetts. *Journal of Flood Risk Management*, 11(2), 141–151.
- Couleecap. (2019). Community Needs Assessment 2019. https://www.couleecap.org/uploads/1/2/2/5/122572786/2019_na_report_final.pdf.
- Davis, J. (2019). *Stories From The Flood* Aims To Lift The Spirits Of Flood Victims: Oral History Project Focuses On August 2018 Flooding In Southwestern Wisconsin. Wisconsin Public Radio. <https://www.wpr.org/stories-flood-aims-lift-spirits-flood-victims>.
- Gonzalez, M., & Kuzma, S. (2020). Nature-Based Flood Mitigation Can Help Mississippi River Farmers. World Resources Institute. <https://www.wri.org/insights/nature-based-flood-mitigation-can-help-mississippi-river-farmers>.
- Gottschalk Druschke, C. (2013). Watershed as Common-place: Communicating for Conservation at the Watershed Scale. *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture*, 7(1), 80–96.
- Gottschalk Druschke, C., Dean, T., Alsbury, R., Buskirk, J., Higgins, M., Johnson, E., Koretskov, S., Ledrowski, N., Navarre, M., Steinmetz, B., Waldinger, E., Wolle, E., Wood, S., and Zuleger, C.

(2022a). Cultivating Empathy on the Eve of a Pandemic. *Reflections: A Journal of Community-Engaged Writing and Rhetoric*. 21(1). <https://reflectionsjournal.net/2022/02/cultivating-empathy/>.

Gottschalk Druschke, C., Dean, T., Higgins, M., Beaty, M., Henner, L., Higgins, M., Hosemann, R., Meyer, J., Sellers, B., Widell, S., Woser, T. (2022b). Stories from the Flood: Promoting Healing and Fostering Policy Change Through Storytelling, Community Literacy, and Community-based Learning. *Community Literacy Journal*. 16(2).

Harris, D. M. (2017). Telling the Story of Climate Change: Geologic Imagination, Praxis, and Policy. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 31, 179–183.

Harris, D. M. (2021). Storying Climate Knowledge: Notes on Experimental Political Ecology. *Geoforum*, 126, 331–339.

hooks. b. (2016). *Feminism Is For Everybody: Passionate Politics*. New York: Routledge.

Institute for Community Alliances. (2020). Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) Report 2019. <https://static1.squarespace.com/...2019+State+of+Homelessness+in+Wisconsin+Report+v2.pdf>.

Itchuaqiyag, C. U., Gottschalk Druschke, C., Cagle, L. E., Bloom-Pojar, R. To community with care: Enacting positive barriers to access as good relations. *Community Literacy Journal*. Forthcoming.

Johnson, L. M. (2022) “Introduction: More City Than Water.” *More City than Water: A Houston Flood Atlas*. Johnson, L. M. & Beckett, C., eds. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Knox, J. C. (1985). Responses of floods to Holocene climatic change in the Upper Mississippi Valley. *Quaternary Research*, 23(3), 287–300.

Knox, J. C. (1993). Large increases in flood magnitude in response to modest changes in climate. *Nature*, 361(6411), 430–432.

Lane, S. N. (2017). Natural flood management. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Water*, 4(3), e1211.

Lea, D., & Pralle, S. (2022). To appeal and amend: Changes to recently updated Flood Insurance Rate Maps. *Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy*, 13(1), 28–47.

Leopold, A. (1935). Coon Valley: An adventure in cooperative conservation. *American Forests*, 41(5), 205–208.

Nagar, R., & Shank, S. (2013). Retelling stories, resisting dichotomies: Staging identity, marginalization and activism in Minneapolis and Sitapur. In *Rethinking feminist interventions into the urban*. New York: Routledge, pp. 104–121.

Nygren, J. M. (2015). *Soil, Water, and the State: The Conservation-Industrial Complex and American Agriculture since 1920*, Doctoral dissertation, University of Kansas.

Nygren, J. M. (2016). The Bulldozer in the Watershed: Conservation, Water, and Technological Optimism in the Post–World War II United States. *Environmental History*, 21(1), 126–136.

- Pinter, N., & Heine, R. A. (2005). Hydrodynamic and morphodynamic response to river engineering documented by fixed-discharge analysis, Lower Missouri River, USA. *Journal of Hydrology*, 302(1–4), 70–91.
- Pomplun, G. (2021). Is stream bank restoration linked to flood resilience? *SWNews4U*. <https://www.swnews4u.com/local/public-safety/stream-bank-restoration-linked-flood-resilience/>.
- Ranganathan, M. (2019). From Urban Resilience to Abolitionist Climate Justice. *Antipode* 53(1) pp. 115–137.
- Routledge, P., & Derickson, K. D. (2015). Situated solidarities and the practice of scholar-activism. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 33(3), 391–407.
- Sultana, F. (2022). Critical Climate Justice. *The Geographical Journal*, 188(1), 118–124.
- Sundberg, J. (2004). Identities in the Making: Conservation, Gender and Race in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, Guatemala. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 11(1), 43–66.
- Taylor, K. Y. (Ed.). (2017). *How we get free: Black feminism and the Combahee River Collective*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2013). R-words: Refusing Research. In *Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry with Youth and Communities*, Paris, D. & Winn, M. T., eds. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, pp. 223–247.
- Trimble, S. W. (2013). *Historical agriculture and soil erosion in the Upper Mississippi Valley Hill Country*. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.
- Trimble, S. W., & Lund, S. W. (1982). *Soil conservation and the reduction of erosion and sedimentation in the Coon Creek Basin, Wisconsin* (Vol. 1234). US Government Printing Office.
- Tsing, A. L. (2015). *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Wilkerson, I. (2020). *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. New York: Random House.
- Williams, P. B. (1994). Flood control vs. flood management. *Civil Engineering*, 64(5), 51.
- Wilson, R. (2021). Living with Floods: A Conversation with Caroline Gottschalk Druschke. *Edge Effects*, Center for Culture, History, and Environment, Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. <https://edgeeffects.net/caroline-gottschalk-druschke>.
- Wisconsin Humanities. (2021). The Power of Experience (With Caroline Gottschalk Druschke), *Human Powered*. <https://wisconsinhumanities.org/episode-2/>.
- Wölflé Hazard, C. (2022). *Underflows: Queer Trans Ecologies and River Justice*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Recommended Citation

Gottschalk Druschke, Caroline, Margot Higgins, Tamara Dean, Eric Booth, Rebecca Lave. 2022. "Storying the Floods: Experiments in Feminist Flood Futures." *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 22. <https://openrivers.lib.umn.edu/article/storying-the-floods/>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.9720>

About the Authors

Caroline Gottschalk Druschke is a professor of rhetoric in the department of English at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she also serves as Chair of Water@UW, an umbrella organization that connects water scholars across the UW-Madison campus and across the state. Gottschalk Druschke's research, teaching, and community work are centrally focused on the questions of how people change rivers, and how rivers change people.

Margot Higgins is an associate professor in the Environmental Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse (UW-L). She and her students interviewed over a dozen people that were impacted by the 2018 floods and contributed to the coding of those transcripts that were donated to the Oral History Program at UW-L.

Tamara Dean is a widely published author whose essay, "[Safer Than Childbirth](#)," recently appeared in *The American Scholar* and *The Guardian*. Three of her essays have been nominated for Pushcart prizes. "[Slow Blues](#)" was a 2021 National Magazine Award finalist. Her work has also been published in *Creative Nonfiction*, *Orion*, *The Progressive*, *The Southern Review*, and elsewhere. She's the author of a book on sustainable living, *The Human-Powered Home*, and best-selling textbooks on computer networking. She has served on the boards of The Driftless Writing Center and River Alliance of Wisconsin.

Eric G. Booth is an associate scientist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the Departments of Agronomy and Civil & Environmental Engineering. He holds a B.S. in environmental engineering from UW-Madison (2004), M.S. in hydrologic science from UC-Davis (2006), and Ph.D. in limnology from UW-Madison (2011). He is broadly interested in the intersection between water, land, climate, and humans. His research approach is transdisciplinary and highly dependent on collaborating with colleagues and partners from a wide variety of disciplines both inside and outside of academia. His disciplinary background has water as a centerpiece and includes topics such as hydroecology, impacts of climate and land-use change, urban stormwater management, wetland/stream restoration, water quality, groundwater hydrology, fluvial geomorphology, environmental history, agroecology, remote sensing, and computer modeling. His methods include biophysical field monitoring (ground-, satellite-, and drone-based), biophysical modeling, decision-support tool development, and surveys/interviews.

Rebecca Lave is a professor of geography at Indiana University. Her research takes a critical physical geography approach, combining political economy, social studies of science (STS), and fluvial geomorphology to analyze stream restoration, the politics of environmental expertise, and community-based responses to flooding. She has published in journals ranging from *Science* to *Social Studies*

of Science and is the author of two monographs: *Fields and Streams: Stream Restoration, Neoliberalism, and the Future of Environmental Science* (2012, University of Georgia Press) and *Streams of Revenues: The Restoration Economy and the Ecosystems it Creates* (2021 MIT Press; co-written with Martin Doyle).

FEATURE (PEER REVIEW)

FORMLESS LIKE WATER: *DEFENSORAS* AND THE WORK OF WATER PROTECTION

By Natalia Guzmán Solano

Editor's note: This feature article has been peer reviewed.

If you ask the cloud, “How old are you?
Can you give me your date of birth?”
you can listen deeply and you may hear

a reply. You can imagine the cloud being
born. Before being born it was the water on
the ocean’s surface. Or it was in the river



Defensoras and allies on retreat in Celendín. Image courtesy of Natalia Guzmán Solano.

and then it became vapor...sooner or later the cloud will change into rain or snow or ice. If you look deeply into the rain, you can see the cloud. The cloud is not lost; it is transformed into rain, and the rain is transformed into grass and the grass into cows and then to milk and then into the ice cream you eat...You can also see the ocean, the river, the heat, the sun, the grass and the cow in the ice cream. —Thich Nhat Hanh (2002, 24)

When Thich Nhat Hahn wrote about transformation and the continuation of our being beyond how we presently manifest in this life, he reminds us how we are already water. We continue through and in the plenty that constitutes us. Water is life. It is in us. It is us. Water also has a lot to teach us. Or, rather, there is much we might

learn from water. This is precisely how—or rather why—the “grammar of animacy” (Kimmerer 2013) works; in perceiving our relationship with water on these terms, we begin to notice water as animate.^[1] And so, I ask with Robin Wall Kimmerer: who among us is attuned to the ways of water? Perhaps *you* who have fished or farmed or lived with bodies of waters, becoming water’s familiar. You, who are coming into an ever-growing understanding that there is something wildly potent about this translucent, wet substance. Others among us simply know water as essential; a fact so basic to our existence that we might take for granted the great luxury of running the tap. Water, however, can also show us how to sustain water’s defense—and how we might protect our territories.

Agua Sí, Oro No / Yes Water, No Gold

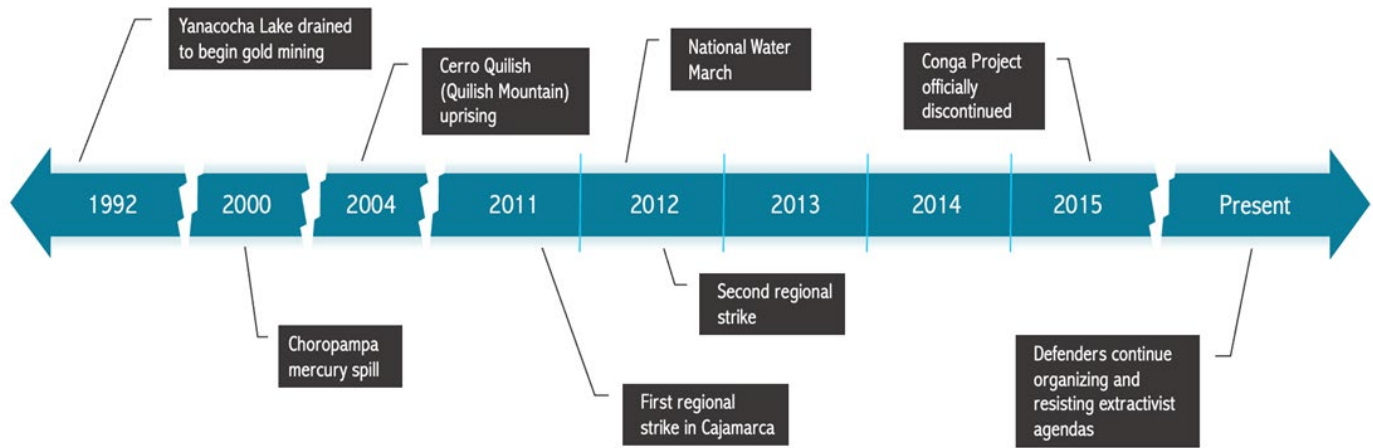
In this article, I write about *defensoras del agua y medio ambiente*, water and environmental defenders: the women participating in an anti-extractivist struggle in northern Peru. *Defensoras* (women defenders), *luchadoras* (women fighters), or *compañeras* (fellow or comrade women) are some of the ways they refer to themselves. I alternate between these labels, overwhelmingly deferring to the preference for *luchadora* in Celendín, a province of Cajamarca, Peru and stronghold of water defense.

The struggle to defend water against the expansion of a large-scale mining operation in Celendín’s headwaters mobilized a social movement against state and corporate forces attempting to expand the Yanacocha mine to nearby territory. The expansion sought to drain four alpine lakes, creating what would be the Conga mine, one of the largest gold mining operations in Latin America. The struggle, therefore, was and continues to be inherently about water: *la lucha del agua* (the fight for water).

The following timeline^[2] of pivotal events in the anti-Conga movement gets us started on common ground:

As a fight for water, this is primarily a struggle about protecting water and the integrity of the territory. Today, Cajamarca’s defenders remain active participants in a struggle that has shifted from mass mobilizing to strategic organizing among their bases. This ongoing anti-extractivist movement grew from standing against mining to opposing other large-scale extractive projects, such as dam proposals on the Río Marañón. The Marañón, the largest river feeding into the Amazon River, also traverses Celendín Province. Today, defenders face small-scale and illegal mining operations as added threats in this extractive zone.^[3]

Cyclical in nature, *la lucha*, as defenders call the struggle, goes through periods of mobilization, slowed reflection, and agitated action to further consciousness-raising and strengthen collective forces. As metaphor, water’s rhythms and



Timeline of pivotal events in the anti-Conga movement from 1992 to present day. Image courtesy of the author.

flow can reveal something about the nature of commitment to the protection of our territories. In the years that I have known luchadoras, they have talked to me about how participating in the struggle changed them. They attest to new abilities to offer opinions in mixed-gender spaces, to travel to meetings on their own (without their husbands), to lead activities, and to represent their organizations in national or international meetings. Defensoras have learned water's mutability, becoming formless, shape-shifting, but ultimately being of one substance as they carry on struggling.

In the flow of their daily lives, luchadoras become water. Defenders' practices of struggle are embodied as aqueous mobilizing—a condition permitting them to integrate the rhythms of their daily lives into the struggle. I look to the hydrologic cycle to elicit the patterns by which luchadoras *do* the defense of water and the environment. I want to note here that these metaphoric analogies to water emerge from a decolonial feminist lens where cycles and relational, changing forms run counter to Anglo-European scientific epistemologies. Women's aqueous embodiment critiques the hegemonic notion of linear time and (pre)determined object/subjectification that exist in present iterations

of colonial knowledge-based regimes of power. Water's ability to fill and expand, adopting the shape of its vessel without sacrificing integrity, is a key quality that defensoras manifest. Being like water demands a keen sense of adaptation. And water's flow—even when a trickle—can erode rock, filling crevices where few other substances could move through.

To "be formless, shapeless, like water," a concept martial arts icon Bruce Lee famously coined, signals strength and the cultivation of flow and intuition, all things that defensoras hone in the struggle. La lucha demands of defensoras constant movement and the ability to reshape themselves to occupy myriad spaces. The creation of the women's organization itself was evidence that luchadoras understood the assignment: change or be consumed and silenced by the masculinist spaces of the extractive zone. The heteropatriarchal capitalist systems of knowledge and power that structure the extractive zone inform both the geopolitics of mining and the mixed-gender defense struggle. Therefore, to enter masculine spaces of social organizing as fuller political actors, women united to form a stronger voice in a gendered terrain that required their participation and yet presented obstacles to their full participation.

In writing this piece, I was inspired by Alexis Pauline Gumbs's *Undrowned* and Joanne Barker's consideration of water from the location of Indigenous feminisms. Gumbs's intimate narrative of marine mammal life gestures at what is possible when we explore our nonhuman relations expansively. I owe much gratitude to her guidance in showing us this way. I write with confidence that we can learn of and from many worlds if we look closely enough, if we are still enough, if we are quietly listening. My treatment of defensoras' political practices converges with Joanne Barker's (2019) important contributions to reconceptualizing intersectionality and power through Indigenous feminist perspectives. Barker's consideration of water and confluence as an analytic aids us in arriving at more precise accounts for the territorialized locations of power and the nuances of racialization within colonial-imperial state structures. I follow, albeit from a different direction, North American Indigenous understandings of water's "mutability" (2019, 14). Water, Barker writes,

is not about the continuity of equation or sameness between its forms; it is about the continuity of perpetual movement and form-changing...Confluence understands the interdependence of life and human responsibilities for reciprocity and humility. (2019, 14-15)

Consequently, I attempt to articulate a new frame of reference for how we might (re)imagine the struggle to preserve our territories.

I write from my position as an independent scholar who lived over eighteen months in Cajamarca between 2014 and 2019, the bulk of which was in 2017 when I worked and communed with defenders as I did ethnographic research. At the same time, I write with and for the murmur of water's soft landing on the banks of Flushing Bay's wetlands, in the occupied territory of Munsee Lenape, Matinecock, and Canarsie Nations, in northwest Queens, NY. I live a ten-minute walk from Flushing Bay, a waterbody that many of us, including the grassroots group Guardians of Flushing Bay (GoFB), are attempting to reclaim and protect.

I have organized this text topically, jumping around spans of time from section to section, asking us to drift with a narrative not restricted by linear time but rather ushered by the flows of the water cycle. In some sections, I narrate the work of luchadoras' water defense by following Yovana, a luchadora from Celendín with whom I developed a deep bond. Yovana, a central figure by whom I tell some stories of water protection, is present through her multiple roles in varied contexts. Throughout this piece, I invite us to be open to the possibilities offered by an immersive text narrated through various styles, moods, and voices—sometimes human, sometimes nonhuman.

Evaporation

Of an energized existence,
nanoscopic frazzle.
In evaporating glory, evermore
ceaseless activity.
Through ever-changing watery contexts,
a constant motion.

Yovana's pace was indefatigable. Yovana, who was living in Lima in 2016 and returned to Celendín in March 2017, was committed to the movement despite any circumstances life presented her with. When I met Yovana in March, I didn't know that she was newly-expecting. What I learned in the months when I lived in Celendín and Cajamarca was how defense had become a part of life for luchadoras. Interwoven with Yovana's responsibilities as a mother, sister, friend, and daughter, was her identity as luchadora. This meant that Yovana, like other defensoras, managed to fit everything into her day. But perhaps more than others, Yovana sustained a fast-paced rhythm for months on end.

There were days when I met with Yovana at seven thirty in the morning, after she had already been up doing laundry and other household chores. Sometimes, I would accompany her to serve breakfast at her son's school.[4] After volunteering, we would return to our homes, meeting again later in the morning to run errands for either the women's organization or Jóvenes Organizados de Celendín (JOC).[5] A few weeks prior to the water martyrs' anniversary, in July, Yovana was running around town trying to secure locations for the new murals JOC intended to paint.[6] One Sunday morning, I received a phone call from Yovana to discuss the mural project. As we talked through our plans to begin painting, she casually mentioned having spent the night at the town

health clinic. Her doctor had released her to bedrest at home for several days. Yovana did not take her health lightly, but she held her activist work with an urgency and a sense that what she did also mattered for the future of her unborn child. An hour after we had spoken, we were meeting at the plaza to see about fundraising for mural repairs.

Yovana's unabating drive serves all causes that she takes on. This was how we painted three murals over the span of two days, from eight in the morning until five in the evening, in the last week of June. Although most of the painting was done by the artists who work with JOC, Yovana and I assisted them the entire time. In addition to assisting the artists, on the first morning we painted Yovana and I took a break to go to a compañero's radio show. Yovana was determined to appear on the show to publicly denounce the water utility company which was charging a disproportionately high fee for the same services her house had received in the past. After the spot on the radio show, we made it back in time to have lunch with the artists and resumed our mural work in the afternoon. Once finished with the day's painting, Yovana and I rushed to get ourselves ready for an evening meeting at the headquarters of the movement's organizational coalition in Celendín.

Evaporating water is abuzz with energy, bounding off itself. Absorbing and emitting heat. Luchadoras embody this aqueous movement, becoming water. Simultaneously being and doing like water, Yovana's dynamism was a force to be reckoned with. Hers was an energy that was infectious and, not in the least, remains a significant contribution to sustaining the struggle among various groups in Celendín.

Condensation

I am the dew drop, collecting. Merging with my sister droplet. Your life force attracts me. Mistiness that defies your grasp, teases your eyes. Are we woven lattice or

suspended in the air by our sheer will? We envelop the microgreens growing in the *jalca*.^[7] Drip. Click. Toc. Do you hear the sounds of our becoming?

Coalescing at the *Escuela*

See the video *Volver Volver, Yovana*.

Yovana, eight months pregnant, was lip-synching Ana Gabriel's "*Volver, Volver*," a romantic ranchera ballad. Her four-foot-eleven stature and her noticeable pregnancy did not stop her from performing in the *Noche Cultural* (Cultural Night) at the fourth Escuela Hugo Blanco in Celendín.^[8] Yovana was clearly having a good time. She playfully and repeatedly glanced back

at the evening's disc jockey, singing to him and exchanging complicit looks as she sang along to a song she clearly knew to the letter. "*Volver, Volver*" is a song about nostalgia and the yearning for a love lost but not entirely disappeared. Perhaps Yovana chose "*Volver, Volver*" because it is a favorite of hers. "*Volver, Volver*" could just as easily be referring to the anti-extractive struggle defenders have been participating in for nearly a decade. In dizzying madness, the singer oscillates



Jalca. Image courtesy of Isabel Del Pilar López for Instituto de Internacional de Derecho y Sociedad – IIDS.

between letting go and continuing to lovingly hope for a return. Sometimes the struggle can be that way, too.

Six years after the Conga mining conflict had erupted in Cajamarca, social leaders—environmental defenders and fighters—carved spaces to share and articulate their experiences, to learn from those experiences, and to apply theory to further their struggle. The conflict had taken a lot from Celendín, most significantly the lives of four of their own during the militarized suppression of a regional strike in 2012. It had harmed and maimed defenders physically and emotionally. Participating in the struggle required sacrifices that strained and ruptured family ties. And yet, the Escuela emerged and reinforced the ties of this new chosen family in struggle. The Escuela is a type of *encuentro* (meeting or gathering). An

encuentro, like condensing vapor, brings together defenders, essentially aggregating resistance from the various parts of the province to create a stronger front.

Regular organizational meetings do not provide the same kinds of opportunities to connect and create solidarity as *encuentros* and retreats. At times, routine meetings, whether at Celendín's organizational coalition or the women's organization, are precisely the location where worn nerves and strained relationships bear upon the integrity of the group. The underlying tensions brought on indirectly (or directly) from participation in the struggle exacerbate intraorganizational relations. As a result, organizational meetings may intensify these same tensions and do not necessarily provide space for reflecting on the issues and reparative strategies.

A retreat for luchadoras

If condensing vapor is formed through releases of energy that result in organized bonding, the energized pressure that flows through and out during *encuentros* allows bonds to form and strengthen among participants. Energy flows through *compañeros* and *compañeras* who have not seen each other for months, or years. *Encuentros* provide a contained space to debrief and reflect on the changing nature of conditions in the extractive zone, where vibrant ideas and exchanges gush in the coming together to resolve issues. *Encuentros* are not meant to be free of disagreement, but in fact channel energy where grievances may be aired and also where *luchadores* collectively brainstorm new solutions to present problems.

Like “Volver, Volver,” *luchadoras*' love for their territory has been an enduring commitment to the struggle even when it causes heartache and requires repairing damage. For *luchadoras*, *resentimiento* (resentment) can be a source of

strife among their group members. Disagreement about using their organization's funds to help *compañeras* in need contributed to much of the *resentimiento* between them. After the Escuela, a retreat was designed to provide *luchadoras* a dedicated space for themselves where the *compañeras* tried to work through some of these issues. Their commitment involved working through their misunderstandings in order to strengthen the organization.

That afternoon, at the post-Escuela women's retreat nothing was solved in reference to budget allocations and, more specifically, the precise goals for using the organization's limited monetary resources. But in removing themselves from their regular routines, *defensoras* gave themselves and each other the time to reflect and envision together. This vital collective practice and necessary stage of mobilizing functioned to repair and (re)build internal solidarity and cohesion.

Precipitation

We gather. United. Collected. We feel the temperature warming. You know what it's like to have want from thirst. The dry air of the preceding months attunes you to the subtle changes in the air. Moisture returns. We cloud, the sunlight. A harbinger of wetness that will soak the parched soil below. You will notice us by what now becomes visible.

I-we-I—in our luxuriously wet roundedness fall upon the ground. On your woolen outer layers. Our coolness on your skin betrays the warmth that brought us together to bear upon you.

A drop

Two

Five, twelve

Rhythmic drumming on your roof.

Rain is hard to ignore in the subtropical highlands; it beckons forth life from the earth. The rainy season starts in late November through April. The rapidly changing climate is extending rainfall into winter, lasting through May and even June. Lasting as long as it lasts. Rain is a reality that is hard to escape. February's Carnival is hard to decouple from the expectation of soaked costumes and wet parades.

On the night of World Environment Day, the women's organization coordinated an action in town. The organization held a vigil with *chocolatito* (hot cocoa) honoring the environment. Other groups, including local political parties,

had also held activities earlier in the day. But the *chocolatito* and the vigil almost were not. The women's organization initially had trouble choosing a date on which to hold it. Later, many tasks were taken on by Yovana when other *luchadoras* were unavailable to coordinate logistics.

Celendín's organizational coalition had been a passive supporter and although they lent a laptop for the projection, its leaders (all men) made no attempts to help organize video files or teach the *compañeras* how to project videos. Attendance by townspeople was low compared to past actions—partially due to the late announcement and lack of publicity. These complications appeared like boulders obstructing the flow of water in a river, at times creating backflows, eddies, or where the flow was great enough, water overflowed the boulder.

The vigil is representative of the actions *defensoras* organize in the struggle and the fluidity with which *luchadoras* move to see these actions through. To be formless like water looks like being resourceful. Adapting to the circumstances, the *luchadoras* reoriented their energies. With agility, *compañeras* shifted directions and resourced their materials to put the event on. If the first *compañera* whom they had depended on for firewood was not home, then they rushed to another *compañera*, a catholic nun and member of the women's organization, to ask for donated firewood. As soon as the firewood arrived, the *luchadoras* quickly got started on the hot cocoa. Meanwhile, I sorted through the laptop's folders to find the videos that a *compañera* wanted to project. Diverting, skirting, flowing around, under, or over, *luchadoras* embodied the aqueous movements of water in order to obtain their goal.

In this instance, aqueous mobilizing had precipitating effects, bringing to life actions that are felt, seen, and otherwise sensed in Celendín. Offering a *chocolatito* to observers, to warm and nourish them as they participated in the vigil, was a symbolic exchange. From a collectivist perspective, the provision of nourishment, as minimal as hot cocoa and a roll of bread, created a dialogue of reciprocity between everyone involved. From water's viewpoint, water was passing through, in the process of transforming itself. Water was, is, the *chocolatito*: an integral part of the vigil.

We persist as water, among other things, beyond our lifetimes. The water that defensoras continue to fight for made the *chocolatito* possible. Luchadoras offered it to their neighbors as the bounty that their territory was still able to provide—an “element” under constant threat in the extractive zone. If the vigil attendees looked closely, deep enough, in their cups they might see the mist off the *jalcas*, the clouds from the rainy season, the seeping groundwater of the Río Grande watershed. They might see themselves, too.



Vigil with “chocolatito.” Image courtesy of Natalia Guzmán Solano.

Percolation

I am the blood that courses through your veins. I become you, and I pass through you. You defend me and understand that you are defending your life through me.

When former president Ollanta Humala visited Celendín during his presidential campaign in 2011, he asked the people of Celendín if they wanted water or gold.

“Nosotros dijimos el agua, porque sabíamos que el agua es vida.”[9]

—Santos Huaman Solano

(Interview with the author in 2014)

Conciencia Ambiental / Environmental consciousness

The groundwork for the defense of water and territory was laid years before the Conga Project exploded into social conflict. The Rondas Campesinas (Peasant Rounds) along with provincial health promoters were important mobilizing forces in the region. Like the Rounds, art also occupies an integral role in the struggle. In Celendín, a series of murals were painted by

anti-extractivist activists in the years following the deadly strike in 2012. The first mural, painted by an art collective from Lima (Tomate Colectivo), depicted the timeline of the struggle. Starting with that mural, subsequent murals continue to be painted on street-facing walls of private homes, making the murals a hard-to-miss visual record of their history.



Mural painted by Tomate Colectivo. Image courtesy of Natalia Guzmán Solano.

Yovana is one of the co-founders of Jóvenes Organizados de Celendín (JOC), the youth art group that arose from the art activist intervention of Tomate Colectivo. By the time I arrived in 2017, JOC had painted at least four murals on their own with funds they had raised in town and, sometimes, with monetary support from ally organizations in Cajamarca and Lima. Over the years, weather and petty vandalism—sometimes by mining supporters—had worn the murals. In the weeks and days leading to the water martyrs’ anniversary, Yovana sped up to get murals in shape before the commemoration.

When we repaired the existing murals, and painted two new ones, I heard *compañeros* and *compañeras* refer to the murals as visible memories of the struggle. As public memory, they were reminders of the social and material costs of mining and the risks of environmental degradation. One of the newer murals I helped to paint showed Cornelio Falls, a waterfall located a couple of hours away, to emphasize the beauty of place in Celendín. Water is central to the murals,

overtly as with the waterfall, or subtly—through its omission—as signaled in another mural by the emptied landscape consumed by an open-pit mine. In this way, JOC hoped to educate *el pueblo* (the people) about their territory and what was at stake.

The steadied filtering of knowledge that creates awareness among *el pueblo* occurs as gradual percolation. If activity around the memorial anniversary picks up, like a rush of water making its way down a dry riverbed after rains—or when dammed water is released—the murals remain after the hubbub of activity. Yovana once explained: “cada mural habla de nuestra lucha y nuestra defensa por el agua.”^[10] Murals are a passive, but visible materialization of the struggle. They keep the struggle in the consciousness of town-dwellers and persist as a public record of what *luchadores* and the people of Celendín have gone through to stave off extractivist projects. Activism, art activism, then, is a trickle method adopted by *luchadores* to regenerate *conciencia ambiental*.

Pooling

“Bofedal: Turbera de altura, lugar pantanoso donde por acumulación y transformación incompleta de vegetales forman la turba, cuyos residuos se acumulan en el sitio. Almacenan aguas provenientes de precipitaciones pluviales, deshielo de glaciares y principalmente afloramientos superficiales de aguas subterráneas. En la zona se ha identificado grandes extensiones de bofedales que prácticamente son las nacientes de los ríos y quebradas.”[11]

–Inventario de Fuentes Hídricas Superficiales

en las Cabeceras de Cuencas de los Ríos Chirimayo y Chugurmayo (2013)

During the rainy season, water can flow at an uncontained rate. Mudslides and flooding are all possible. Lakes, creeks, and rivers benefit from the bounties of the rain. The Río Grande, which passes through provincial Celendín, is evidence of abundant water in the *bofedales*. The headwaters feed a growing current as the Río Grande makes its way down the watershed. The Río Grande eventually makes the Río Marañón, finally becoming the great Amazon.

Initiations and commitments: Yovana’s merging into la lucha

Yovana joined the struggle for water on November 16, 2011. Yovana’s mother, a vendor at Celendín’s market, had talked to Yovana about the upcoming mobilization in defense of water. When the anti-Conga movement started, Yovana had not paid attention to the struggle or to questions surrounding Celendín’s water sources. It was only upon joining mobilizations in 2011, and observing the magnitude of support in the defense of water, that it became her struggle. The mobilizations in the middle of November anticipated the broader general strike that the regional President of Cajamarca would declare at the end of the month.

Yovana continued participating in actions: “yo para salir, teníamos que sacrificarse con mi mamá porque yo tenía que levantarme a las cinco de la mañana. Cuatro de la mañana a hacer la limpieza de la casa. A lavar los pañales, la ropa, y hacer el fiambre.”[12] Yovana took care of the household while her mother attended to her market stall

between the hours of five and seven in the morning, when vendors were allowed to sell, before they, too, joined the daily mobilizations. And although Yovana did not attend university, she was invited by a group of students from the National University at Cajamarca satellite Celendín campus to join their protests. Yovana gives them credit for having taught her “*lo que es lucha*” (what struggle is), learning with them what it meant to unite and be part of a struggle.

The gravity of what was at stake for her people struck Yovana at that first mobilization in Celendín. She recalled to me, during an oral history interview, that compañeros talked about what the Conga project was proposing—to drain their lakes and mine at their headwaters. “Entonces yo me di cuenta que el agua estaba en peligro.”[13] Yovana was stunned by the presence of thousands of people at the mobilization; its magnitude impressing on Yovana the force of the struggle.

Convergence: A surge of mobilizing strength

People power the struggle, like the swelling of the Río Grande when the rains come. If the regional strikes epitomized the struggle at a local scale, the Marcha Nacional del Agua (National Water March) in February 2012 would signify the strength of the forces these provincial regions could muster in a spectacular national mobilization. The National Water March arguably remains one of the largest and most profound displays of support for the struggle. The march started in Cajamarca and ended in Lima. Along the way, town and city residents offered defenders food and drink. Communal kitchens were organized at each stop with provisions donated by locals. The march also set off similar actions and local marches in highland and lowland Amazonian cities alike.

Aída^[14], a luchadora from Celendín who participated with her husband, described the march:

Bueno, fue una experiencia bien...conmovedora, como la gente este como dice un río de agua por todas las partes. Se unen a nosotras por una sola causa y eso nos daba alegría. Nos daba más valor para seguir nosotros luchando, seguir adelante y no

dejar que estas mineras nos quiten lo que Dios nos ha dado, [que] son la naturaleza, que es el agua para vivir, que sin ella no podemos vivir. Oro hay, pero sin el agua no se puede. Morimos.^[15]

It was not coincidental that the National Water March slogan was “*Seamos Un Río*” (Let’s Be a River). Aída had felt this as she participated in the march. Like a swelling river, defenders and allies engulfed the streets in a peaceful demonstration of care, solidarity, and valor in the face of state-corporate mining interests.

Mobilizations such as the regional strikes and the National Water March are analogous instances of aqueous mobilizing—true to the essence of the struggle and its luchadores. Marchers were currents of water flowing through the streets. In Lima, the movement achieved this outpouring by uniting its efforts through a strong defense front supported by a sympathetic regional president that was assailed by a repressive central state. This was the accumulation of defenders who had created a strong foundation early on and people who had been galvanized by a threat to the integrity of water-life.

Conclusion

I pulled our focus to the hydrologic cycle to tease apart movement, qualities, and cyclical phases that actually take place simultaneously. Water evaporates as it percolates in the ground and condenses in the sky. Water may concurrently precipitate, percolate, and pool. Luchadoras may shape-shift, come together, and work feverishly at the same time. Yovana proved this best. Yovana, mother, sister, daughter, friend, and luchadora, seemed to fit everything in, and some things all at once. While not all luchadoras devote an equal amount of time to the struggle, they are creating lives that incorporate their commitment to the

struggle into their present lives, long after the height of the mining conflict passed. By comparing how women in la lucha enact their defense and the water cycle, I seek to reflect on how taking one water perspective helps us to connect various modalities and strategies of water and territorial defense. What sensibilities arise or desist when we embody water?

To fully consider this last question, I invite us to go beyond the metaphoric: we are already what we are looking for, or invoking Thich Nhat Hahn’s teaching, we are the changing cloud.



National Water March poster. Image from Comisión de arte y contracultura.

We have already been water, we are water, and we continue to be water. Just as Alexis Pauline Gumbs writes about the narwhal, the beluga, and the bowhead whale, but mostly about the Black body, “there are at least three ways to love you: as you were, as you are, as you will be. I love you. That means I choose all three” (2020, 22). To love water is to love ourselves, and coming to water’s defense means defending our lives. Defensoras intuit this and embody water in their aqueous mobilizing.

Defensoras have no issue claiming water as their particular purview. They claim as their own the capacity to nourish and be caretakers in community. The women’s organization in Celendín arose out of women’s need for a safe space from which to participate in the movement. Women’s agency entailed working through, around, and against barriers and silencing sustained by the colonial

legacy of territorialized ethnic, racial, and gender norms. Luchadoras’ discernment and response to the masculinist terrains of extractive zones—which includes mixed-gender movement and heteropatriarchal capitalist political spheres—led them to enact aqueous strategies from within spaces where they have greater sway.

The anti-extractivist movement in Cajamarca is as much a territorial struggle as a water struggle; in fighting to protect headwaters, defenders are fighting for self-determination in their territory. Corporate and state interests vie to make an extractive zone out of their territory. In some ways, these interests appear to have achieved that; Yanacocha is after all an operating gold mega-mine in the region. But water remains, remember. Transformed. People will come together, collect, and cleanse the territory as they run the course of water’s defense.

References

- Autoridad Nacional del Agua. 2013. “Inventario de Fuentes Hídricas Superficiales en las Cabeceras de Cuencas de los Ríos Chirimayo y Chugurmayo 2013.” Cajamarca, Peru: Ministerio de Agricultura. <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12543/41>.
- Barker, Joanne. 2019. “Confluence: Water as an Analytic of Indigenous Feminisms.” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 43 (3): 1–40.
- Gómez-Barris, Macarena. 2017. *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. 2020. *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*. Chico: AK Press.
- Hanh, Thich Nhat. 2002. *No Death, No Fear: Comforting Wisdom for Life*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Kimmerer, Robin Wall. 2013. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions.
- Lee, Shannon. 2020. *Be Water, My Friend: The Teachings of Bruce Lee*. New York: Flatiron Books.
- “Perú: Celendín Recordará a Mártires Del Agua Fallecidos En Protesta Contra Conga.” 2015. Servindi – Servicios de Comunicación Intercultural. July 2, 2015. <https://www.servindi.org/actualidad/134277>.

Footnotes

[1] There exist ancestral lineages of knowledge among Indigenous, Native American, and First Nations communities about relational kin engagements with water and other sentient beings. The relational ideas on water I present here, therefore, precede my time and thought.

[2] There is irony to including a timeline in an article that beckons us toward exercises in nonlinear temporalities. Reference to a timeline acknowledges a common, and dominant, language for understanding the placement of events through the passage of time. When integrated into the narrative in this way, plural worldviews begin co-existing in the text.

[3] My use of “extractive zone” references Macarena Gómez-Barris’s concept, which denotes spaces marked out to “reduce life to capitalist resource conversion” (2017, xvi).

[4] As a public school in the province, parents (usually mothers) volunteered certain days of the month to serve breakfast and lunch for their children’s class.

[5] Organized Youth from Celendín.

[6] During the second regional strike in 2012, state police and military killed five civilians in mobilizations in Celendín and Hualgayoc-Bambamarca Provinces. In 2015, Celendín’s municipal government announced “Día de la Dignidad Celendina” (Day of Celendín Dignity) to honor the four who died during the protests, naming them *mártires del agua* (water martyrs) (“Perú: Celendín Recordará a Mártires Del Agua Fallecidos En Protesta Contra Conga” 2015). In Celendín, townspeople regularly refer to the deceased from the protest as martyrs. Among luchadores, the families—especially the mothers and wives—of the martyrs are referred to as the *deudas* (debt), referring to what is owed to the families for the loss of their kin during the protest.

[7] Jalca is Quechua-derived term that refers to the moorlands of the ecological highland regions in the northern Peruvian Andes.

[8] The Escuela Hugo Blanco was established in 2016 as a learning space for movement members in Celendín Province to educate each other, train, and share experiences about issues related to their struggle. Held periodically, about every six months, escuelas are events with daylong workshops spanning over the course of two to three days. At the escuela, defenders engage in conversations or teach-in style presentations on topics previously agreed upon. With no fixed location, organizers rent spaces based on availability.

[9] “We said water, because we knew that water is life.”

[10] “Each mural talks about our struggle and defense of water.”

[11] “*Bofedal* [high altitude wetland]: High elevation bog, a marshy place where peat forms due to the accumulation and incomplete transformation of vegetation, whose residues accumulate on the site. They store water from rainfall, melting glaciers, and mainly from the surface outcrops of groundwater. Large tracts of wetlands have been identified in the area, which are practically the headwaters of rivers and streams.”

[12] “For me to go out, we had to sacrifice with my mother because I had to wake up at five in the morning. Four in the morning, to do house cleaning. To wash diapers, clothes, and prepare a cold meal.”

[13] “Then, I realized that water was in danger.”

[14] Aída is a pseudonym for a luchadora who preferred to keep her identity confidential in public references.

[15] “Well, it was a very...moving experience, how people were as you say, a river everywhere. They joined us for one cause and that brought us joy. It gave us more courage to keep on fighting, to move forward, and to not allow these mines to take what God has given us, [which] is nature, which is water to live, because without her [water] we cannot live. Gold is there, but without water we can’t. We die.”

Recommended Citation

Guzmán Solano, Natalia. 2022. “Formless Like Water: *Defensoras* and the Work of Water Protection.” *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 22. <https://openrivers.lib.umn.edu/article/formless-like-water/>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.9710>

About the Author

Natalia Guzmán Solano is an activist scholar and an ethnographer by training. A fugitive intellectual who was born in Colombia and grew up in Munsee Lenape territory (northwest Queens), Natalia is delighted to call New York City home again after living several years in St. Louis, MO. Natalia is the proud granddaughter of her ancestor, Argenides Rosso de Solano, and her paternal grandmother, Bertilda Franco. Natalia has used testimonio as her main artistic and scholarly practice to explore themes of gender and water protection. In her scholarship, Natalia has harnessed transdisciplinary approaches as a way toward reparative justice in the Academy. Natalia has contributed to programming in Washington University in St. Louis’s Prison Education Project, has been a guest curator for Alabama Prison Arts + Education Project’s *The Warbler*, and is currently faculty at Bard Microcollege in New York City. Natalia is also a member of the Western Queens Community Land Trust and supporter of Guardians of Flushing Bay.

FEATURE (PEER REVIEW)

WOMEN AND URBAN WATERWAYS IN KOREAN MODERNIST LITERATURE

By Anne Whitehouse

Editor's note: This feature article has been peer reviewed.

To understand and address our twenty-first century environmental crises, unraveling the nuances of river-human relationships in the urban setting is a crucial multidisciplinary endeavor. Not only are issues like climate change, air quality, urban heat islands, and urban biodiversity at stake in this work, but also

the well-being of urban human populations. We might begin to tease out some of these river-human interactions by asking the following questions: What kinds of unique relationships do humans have with rivers and streams in urban environments? How have these relationships changed over time? What benefits and damages



Women working at a laundry site at Ch'onggye Stream, circa 1930s.

are experienced by both parties? How do urban rivers impact human culture and society, and how do human institutions impact those urban rivers in return? How do we reimagine these river-human relationships in ways that are sustainable, reciprocal, and fulfilling?

Literature can be a versatile and illuminating tool to explore an ecological relationality that includes humans. The literary arts allow us to play out innovative thought experiments on the page, to attempt to reimagine the future of ecological relationships and landscapes, including urban waterways, in ways that are more sustainable, inclusive, life-affirming, or simply different from how they currently are (Buell, Heise, and Thornber 418). Perhaps even more importantly, literature has the capacity to probe ambiguity and contradiction in these relationships. In engaging such literary work, ecocriticism and the environmental humanities are well-situated to contribute to tackling the important work of understanding and transforming river-human relations in urban settings. Even historical literary negotiations of environmental and human interpersonal relationships can give us helpful insight into how we might reimagine our twenty-first-century environmental relationships with an eye towards intersectional issues of social equity and environmental justice.

Pak T'ae-wŏn's 1938 modernist novel *Scenes from Ch'ŏnggye Stream* (Ch'ŏnbyŏn p'unggyŏng, 천변풍경) is one thought-provoking example of these human-environment relationships in literature. *Scenes from Ch'ŏnggye Stream* provides an intimate portrayal of ordinary life for lower-class Koreans living along the Ch'ŏnggye Stream in a rapidly urbanizing and modernizing 1930s Seoul under Japanese occupation; it reveals how environmental, social, and political factors can mingle together to influence urban river environments and culture. In the novel, Pak puts neighborhood women at the center of streamside life, their gossiping while doing laundry in the stream being one of the few recurring images in an almost plotless story that loosely connects

an overwhelming number of characters. As the characters navigate the changes that come with colonially mediated modernization, they embody an innovative mixture of Korean traditions and modern opportunities that places value on social liberty and intimate relationships between family members and friends as well as between humans and the stream.

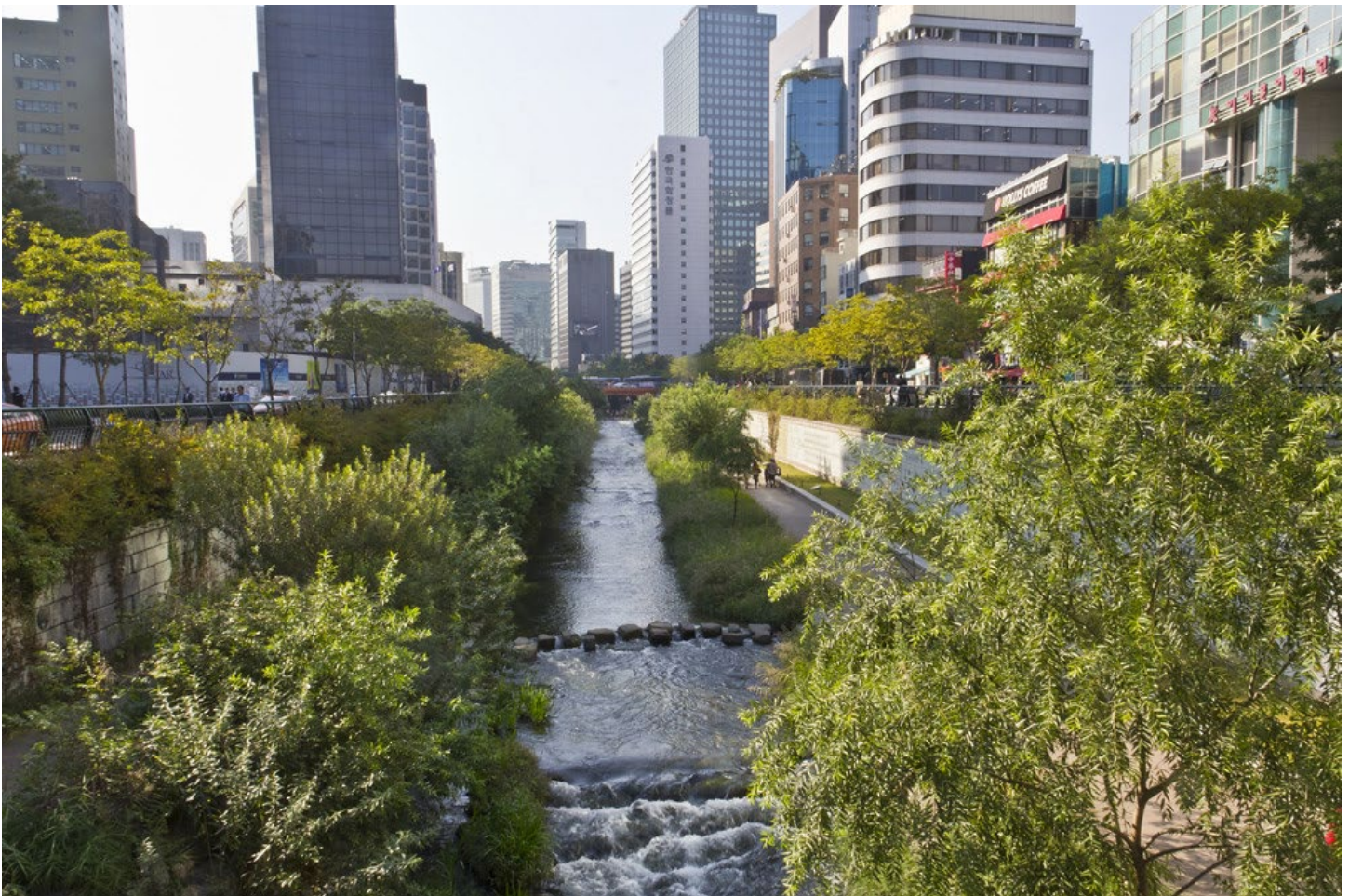
In drawing numerous parallels between women and Ch'ŏnggye Stream in the 1930s—a period of tremendous cultural change—Pak brings this administratively neglected yet culturally rich part of the city to life, emphasizing the multilayered dynamism of environmental and human relationships as well as drawing attention to a narrative of the stream and of Korean women that is full of nuance and complexity. Pak symbolically connects the novel's women and the stream as creators of gathering places where diverse characters build transformative relationships and meaningful communities in the bewilderment of a rapidly changing society.

In this piece, I use feminist ecocriticism—a discourse that draws connections between society's treatment of women and treatment of the environment—to illuminate these critical similarities between Pak's characterization of the female characters and Ch'ŏnggye Stream. I find feminist ecocriticism to be useful for reading *Scenes from Ch'ŏnggye Stream* because it has the capacity to unpack the intersectional nature of issues that connect the oppression of women, the exploitation of nature, and colonialism; it challenges dualistic thinking; it creates space for exploring the agency of the more-than-human; and it can effectively explore the “liberatory ideals” and “strategies of emancipation” presented through fiction and apply them to real-world needs and scenarios, generating “more hopeful ecological narratives” (Buell, Heise, and Thornber 424; Vakoch 3; Merchant 185). I will demonstrate how these ideas manifest through historical contextualization of the novel and close readings of a few passages from the novel.

Contemporary Context

The stream in question—Seoul’s Ch’onggye Stream—is not only central to Pak’s text, but particularly relevant to contemporary conversations about urban river restoration and daylighting. After decades of being buried under city streets and an elevated highway, Ch’onggye Stream was “restored” in 2003–2005. The restoration of Ch’onggye Stream—which flows through Seoul’s downtown and historic center—has often been cited domestically and internationally as an example of successful urban stream daylighting and of the creation of urban ecological space (Peterson). Urban planners and environmental engineers tend to esteem the Ch’onggye Stream restoration as an amazing feat

of urban revitalization, but many sociologists and other academics view the restoration more critically as, at best, having ambiguous impact. At worst, critics—notably including Myung-rae Cho, sociologist and former South Korean Minister of Environment—say the stream project represents an ecologically and historically vacant urban phenomenon that is more performative than it is restorative (Jeon and Kang 750; Cho). Some of the ecological criticisms of the project include the fact that a significant portion of the water in the restored stream is pumped in upstream from the Han River at great energetic and financial cost. Additionally, the streambed is mostly concrete and regularly cleaned, and the upstream half of



The “restored” Ch’onggye Stream, flowing through downtown Seoul. Image by Kaizer Rangwala, Flickr. (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Ch'ŏnggye Stream and its mountain tributaries were not restored at all, continuing to disrupt the connectivity of the Ch'ŏnggye Stream ecology with Seoul's mountains (Cho 161). Some therefore call for the re-restoration of Ch'ŏnggye Stream in a way that takes the river's natural ecology and historical legacy into greater consideration instead of prioritizing political and economic motives (Jeon and Kang 753).

Literary critic Dooho Shin challenges Myung-Rae Cho and other academics' vehement disapproval of the restoration project, instead focusing on how the project combines ecological sensibilities with the practical needs of the urban environment. He also suggests that the perceived dichotomy between development and environmental conservation/preservation is rooted in South Korean social dynamics between activists and the development-driven dictatorial government that was overthrown in the late 1980s (Shin, Dooho 92-93). Activism, including environmental activism, was effectively silenced during the dictatorships of the mid 1950s-1980s, so the status of all activists being implicitly anti-establishment and anti-government continues to the present day.

However, Chihyung Jeon and Yeonsil Kang point out that both the supporters and the critics of the Ch'ŏnggye Stream's restoration have one thing in common: "while the proponents of restoration and re-restoration debated the right proportion of nature, technology, and history to be used or displayed in the area, they usually glossed over the contemporary district as a *lived space of working people*" (756, emphasis added). Indeed, through the centuries of Seoul's urban existence, diverse people from the middle, working, and lower classes have made their homes and businesses near Ch'ŏnggye Stream. In the days before it was covered, Ch'ŏnggye Stream provided water for laundry and other needs, and it also functioned as a space for casual social gatherings and festivals. The region's

status as a place for the lower to lower-middle classes was solidified by its off-putting function as one of Seoul's open sewers; the severity of the stream's pollution reached a climax in the years after the Korean War as refugees and displaced people flocked there and built illegal shantytowns along Ch'ŏnggye Stream and industrial waste and dyes began to be dumped into the stream. Even when the stream was covered during the second half of the twentieth century, the region became a hotspot for South Korea's burgeoning industrialization through the establishment of tool and machine shops, secondhand and antique stores, and hundreds of street vendors. Some of the most memorable moments of the urban labor movement of the 1960s and 1970s occurred near Ch'ŏnggye Street, including the laborer Chŏn T'ae-il's self-immolation in 1970. While the stream's restoration displaced many of these markets and shops and gentrified the area, many tool and machine shops, secondhand bookstores, and antique markets remain along the stream's length and in the alleys today.

Pak T'ae-wŏn's portrait of the "lived experiences of working people" during the 1930s (as represented by the novel's cast of characters), though fictional, provides useful insight into an urban river landscape under conditions of colonial modernization (Jeon and Kang 756). Dynamics similar to those used in Japanese urban planning—which were implemented purposefully as an act of settler colonialism—are still used today with the effect of marginalizing different racial groups, economic classes, and industries in Seoul as well as in other parts of the world. We even see this in the Ch'ŏnggye Stream restoration project's forced displacement of the industrial manufacturers and shopkeepers who made their living near the covered Ch'ŏnggye Stream in the 1960s and 1970s; the restoration project involved a process of gentrification which both delegitimized and effectively destroyed their way of life (Jeon and Kang 756-758; Lim 192).

Historical Context

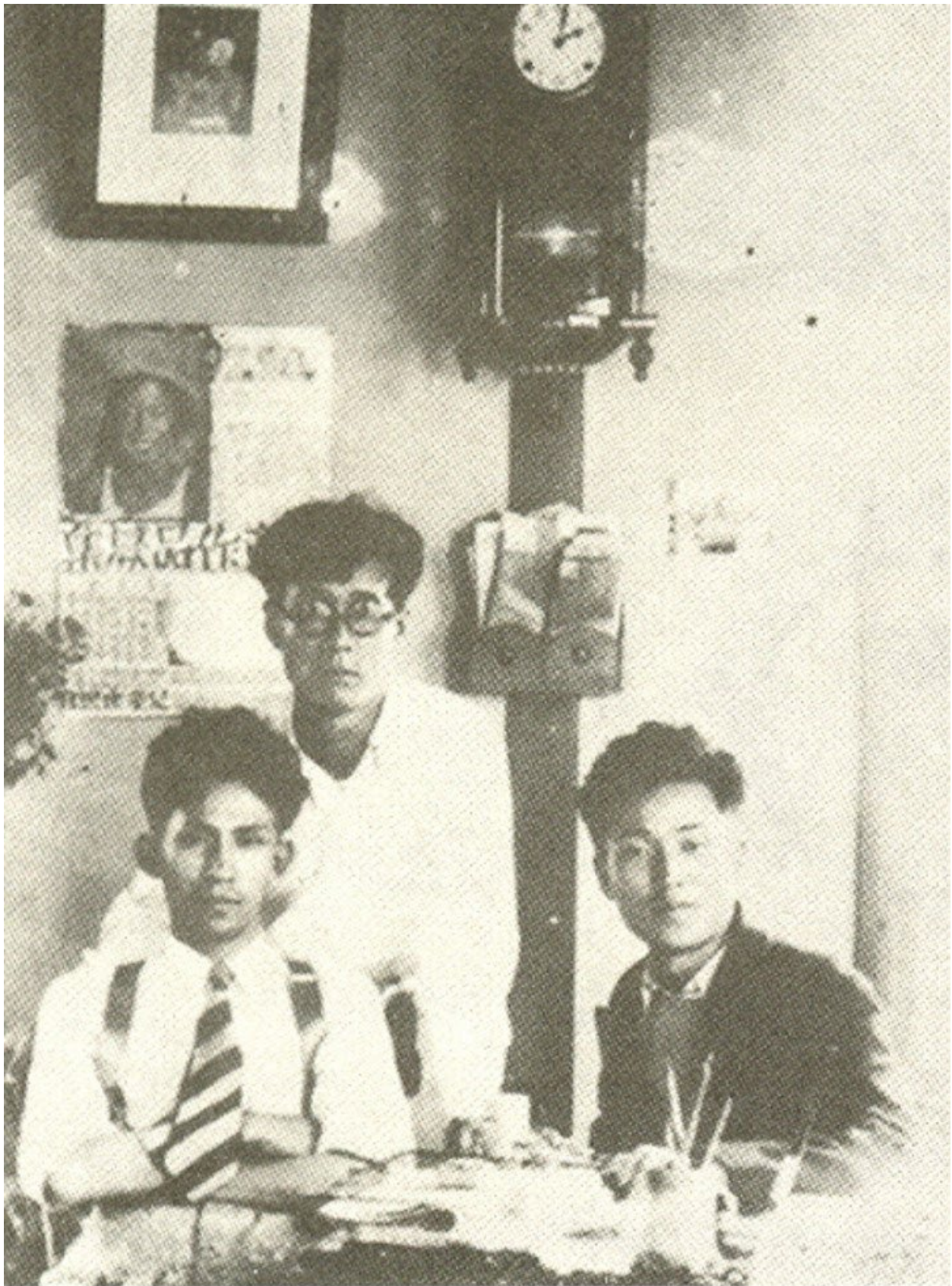
While the text offers insights relevant to contemporary conditions, my reading of *Scenes from Ch'onggye Stream* relies heavily on the novel's historical context.^[1] I offer here an overview of some relevant history regarding the colonial literary scene, urban spatial narratives, and Korean women. Literary scholar Christopher Hanscom argues that what unifies Korean modernist writers with each other as well as modernists from other parts of the world is “a common focus on language as a flawed medium of communication” (15). This crucial concern of form and style is also known as the “crisis of representation,” referring to a disillusionment with the capacity of the written word to accurately represent reality. ^[2] On top of this, Koreans were questioning and exploring transformations of a modernizing society under colonial rule, including what it means to be a woman with expanding opportunities and contested societal expectations, what it means to leave one's village to migrate to a rapidly growing city, what it means to work in a factory instead of taking up your father's occupation or being a housewife, what it means to be the first in one's family to attend school, what it means to choose one's spouse out of love, what it means to be a colonized subject of the Japanese Empire—the list could go on endlessly. It's no wonder Korean modernists felt a sense of crisis when trying to use language to make sense of this tempest of changes and transformations.

Under these conditions, literary modernism in Korea emerged as insular and linguistically experimental, and it has often been characterized as apolitical and purely aesthetic “art for art's sake” beginning with contemporary critics in the 1930s and persisting through the present day (Hanscom 9). The characterization of Korean modernism as apolitical, however, dismisses Korean authors' use of form to engage with the social and political issues of the time without necessarily espousing

leftist or nationalist ideologies. Recent scholarship indicates that Korean modernist texts are, in fact, socially and even politically engaged in their use of form and technique to respond to “colonial discourse, challenging authoritative attempts to present objective truth in a transparently communicative medium” (Hanscom 14, 18).

Enter Pak T'ae-wŏn, considered to be “one of Korea's leading modernist authors,” and who is known for his experimental techniques (Hanscom 39). In an interview, Pak's son, Daniel Pak, relates that his father “appreciated the cosmopolitanism of Japan [and] its openness towards Western ideas and literature, [but] he began to feel bitter about the Japanese colonization of his country” and he had a “determination to make his art an affirmative counterbalance to coercion and domination, in whatever forms it may take” (qtd. in Walsh 22-3, 44). Eventually, Pak took his Western-style and Japanese education and turned to his roots to write a novel about Ch'onggye Stream and the poor people living near it, and he relied heavily on his own childhood experiences living near the stream to craft his narrative (Walsh 31, 44). His novel, *Ch'ŏnbyŏn p'unggyŏng* (known in English as *Streamside Scenes* or *Scenes from Ch'onggye Stream*) was serialized in the literary magazine *Jo Gwang* (조광, *Morning Light*) starting in 1936, and compiled as a book in 1938 (Walsh 31; Poole 43).

Scenes from Ch'onggye Stream somewhat defies genre conventions and expectations of literary modernism, even departing from Pak's own style.^[3] Unlike Pak's other works, *Scenes from Ch'onggye Stream* does not center on a single protagonist, instead providing an “objective” and highly descriptive “panorama” of the urban quotidian in colonial Seoul (Hanscom 38). In his famous 1936 essay, literary critic Ch'oe Chaesŏ



Pak T'ae-wŏn (center, wearing glasses) pictured with fellow modernist writers Yi Sang (left), and Kim So-un (right).

compares Pak's style to the view of a camera:

[Pak] does not willfully manipulate the characters in accordance with some made-up story; rather, he moves or rotates his camera according to the way the characters move. Of course, this "camera" is a literary camera—it is the eye of the author. Pak was always careful not to have a speck of dust of subjectivity settle on the lens of that eye. The result, unusual in our literary world, appeared before us as a vivid and multifaceted representation of the city. (Ch'oe, qtd. in Hanscom 41).

While *Scenes from Ch'ŏnggye Stream* is certainly unconventional for modernist fiction and may seem to lack focus in its broad treatment of over fifty characters, the text does, in fact, focus on one central feature: Ch'ŏnggye Stream itself (Walsh 31). And, while the narrator in the novel is so unobtrusive and unknown that they almost entirely escape notice, there is still subjectivity in the gaze of the "authorial camera" that comes in the form of Pak's own familiarity with the neighborhoods around Ch'ŏnggye Stream as well as his human empathy for women in particular. In literature as well as in photography, it matters who is behind the camera.

Pak's "unfocused" mode actually facilitates reading the novel as a representation of the stream from a sympathetic observer rather than a fully objective one, crafting an image of streamside life that differed from Western and Japanese impressions and treatment of the stream and its denizens. During the colonial period, the Japanese government-general was heavily invested in modernization and transformations of urban space as part of the colonial project. Colonial control and transformation of urban space included "the symbolic deconstruction and reconstruction of Hanyang (Seoul)'s palace grounds" as well as "urban reforms" like "widening and straightening extant roads, expanding waterways for sewage, and refashioning domanical and religious spaces into civic parks and plazas" (Henry 28, 30). This

re-spatialization of Hanyang/Keijō/Seoul[4] was uneven, however, and the government general deprioritized public safety and sanitation issues in places where Japanese settlers were not interested in settling or that were considered strategically unimportant (Grunow 92). As such, the region near Ch'ŏnggye Stream, which during this period was "[an] overpopulated and unsanitary part of Keijō...inhabited primarily by indigent Koreans," was left relatively neglected (Henry 36). Plans to dredge the stream and improve the dangerous streamside roads were rarely or never implemented, despite the pleas of the residents (Jeon and Kang 741). While this neglect of regular maintenance led to more serious pollution of the stream that, despite its geomantic significance,[5] had functioned as an open sewer for hundreds of years, it also allowed the region to retain much of its spatial and cultural character, including "natural" neighborhood design and Chosŏn-era place names (Henry 23, 36-7).

Colonial and Western accounts of Seoul and Ch'ŏnggye Stream tended to paint the polluted stream and the lower-class people who lived near it rather negatively. In her 1898 book *Korea and Her Neighbours*, British traveler Isabella Bird Bishop relates her first impressions of Seoul during a late nineteenth-century trip. While she doesn't mention Ch'ŏnggye Stream by name here, it is highly likely that Ch'ŏnggye Stream and the women who do laundry there are the subject:

One of the "sights" of Seoul is the stream or drain or watercourse, a wide, walled, open conduit, along which a dark-colored festering stream slowly drags its malodorous length, among manure and refuse heaps which cover up most of what was once its shingly bed. There, tired of crowds masculine solely, one may be refreshed by the sight of women of the poorest class, some ladling into pails the compound which passes for water, and others washing clothes in the fetid pools which pass for a stream. All wear one costume, which is peculiar to the capital, a green silk coat—a man's coat with

the “neck” put over the head and clutched below the eyes, and long wide sleeves falling from the ears. It is as well that the Korean woman is concealed, for she is not a houri. Washing is her manifest destiny so long as her lord wears white. She washes in this foul river, in the pond of the Mulberry Palace, in every wet ditch, and outside the walls in the few streams which exist. Clothes are partially unpicked, boiled with ley three times, rolled into hard bundles, and pounded with heavy sticks on stones. After being dried they are beaten with wooden sticks on cylinders, till they attain a polish resembling dull satin. The women are slaves to the laundry, and the only sound which breaks the stillness of a Seoul night is the regular beat of their laundry sticks. (Bird 45)

In fairness, we might read Bird as responding to the reality of what she finds in late Chosŏn-era Seoul through her own worldview and experience, which were informed by Victorian notions of hygiene, the imperialist activities of her home country of Great Britain, and her experiences in Japan. Regardless, her account is rather disparaging of both the stream and the culture she encounters. However, in the very beginning of his novel, Pak describes a scene similar to Bird’s account, but with a remarkably different focus and tone.

March cold could crack a giant earthenware pot, the saying goes, and the icy wind sweeping occasionally across the stream felt even more frigid for this time of the year. However, on the bank of the stream where women gathered to do their laundry, the warmth of the midday sun kept their hands from becoming numb in the water.

“Why on earth has the price of herring gone up so much lately?” asked Ippuni’s mother, a diminutive woman, observing her communal washing companions while shaking the rough cotton sheets in the water. Her

freckled face was small, and her eyes, nose, and lips were tiny too.

“Why? How much did you pay?” asked Kwidori’s mother. She was a housemaid at a traditional herbalist’s household and seemed to be about ten years younger than Ippuni’s mother—barely thirty. She was vigorously pounding a pair of purplish gray pants on a stone with a wooden laundry paddle. She had a habit of turning her head slightly to her left to hide the scar on her cheek, a result of scrofula.

“I had to pay thirteen chŏn for such a puny thing. First they asked fifteen chŏn for it. Imagine! I bargained for one chŏn less, but they wouldn’t hear of it,” she exclaimed incredulously, mouth opened and resting her hands from shaking her sheets as she glanced at the woman sitting next to her.

“For heaven’s sake, why did you have to pay so much? My mistress paid less than eight chŏn for each of them, I heard,” a pockmarked woman across from them, Ch’ilsŏng’s mother, chimed in, while pounding full force with her paddle on her wash.

Looking down from above the stream, tough-featured Chŏmryong’s mother roared like a man. “What a pity! Can’t you figure out the difference between buying one piece and buying a bundle? Look, if a piece of herring costs only eight chŏn, even people like us could live on without eating rotting kimch’i day in day out.” (1-3)[6]

While Pak certainly does not shy away from describing the stream’s pollution later in the novel, he doesn’t mention it in these first pages, focusing instead on the season, the chilly stream, and the individuals whose hands work in its waters. The scene is full of energy and vivid imagery, and he identifies individual laundry women by their features, habits, and names. This intimate portrayal from a sympathetic former member of that

community holds power in representing a living community of human and more-than-human constituents on their own terms.

The stories of women in particular play an important role in Pak's novel, specifically within the context of colonial modernization. The late nineteenth century and early twentieth saw the introduction of foreign ideas about social and gender equality, many of which challenged the Neo-Confucian order that had structured Korean society for centuries. In colonial Korea, women were still subordinate in a patriarchal system that was reinforced by the colonial education system and law, but industrialization and urbanization brought unprecedented numbers of women into the workforce and many in Korean society began to experiment with modern ideas (Molony, Theiss, and Choi 196). In this time characterized by the simultaneous retention of traditional duties and ideas as well as the expansion of opportunities for Korean women, the Korean New Woman, or *sin yōja*, used her education to pursue new ways of living and cultivate selfhood. Discourse on the "New Woman" was particularly sensationalized by more conservative (and mostly male) commentators who expressed anxieties about what they saw as society's declining morality and the disruption of family (Molony, Theiss, and Choi 243-245). The term "Modern Girl" gave this discourse a particularly negative nuance in the creation of a foreign-derived, sexualized, consumerist, frivolous caricature. Colonial-era discourse on the New Woman and the Modern Girl was "filled with exhilaration, new hope, and possibility, but at the same time, there was an

overwhelming sense of fear and anxiety" as both male and female intellectuals reckoned with traditional ways and ideas along with exploring new ideas and opportunities (Choi 11, 73).

In *Scenes from Ch'ōnggye Stream*, Pak presents what might be read as a mostly hopeful perspective on the trajectory for women in the modern world, though tempered with a healthy dose of reality regarding the persistence of oppressive practices. Pak's characters defy the Modern Girl caricatures that pervaded popular culture and discourse as the women in the novel navigate the opportunities that modern changes bring them as well as the traditional customs and ideologies that linger in their communities and families. The characters' actions also defy traditional perceptions of women, challenging ideas about value and its connection to appearance and utility as well as class and gender roles. The characters' actions in relation to their behaviors in and around Ch'ōnggye Stream represent a similar challenge to received perceptions of the stream as filthy, unremarkable, and perhaps better off buried under the ground, out of sight. Instead, Pak's Ch'ōnggye Stream is vibrant, active, and at times unpredictable; the stream creates a place where people gather to work, play, trade gossip, and celebrate. The impact of this combination of the traditional and the modern is characterized by Pak's ambiguity as he neither fully endorses nor entirely condemns traditional values or modern ideas. Instead, his depiction of (primarily lower-class) women suggests an empathy for their situation caught in transition between social ideologies and practices.

Women and Stream as Community Builders in *Scenes from Ch'ōnggye Stream*

One of the novel's most fascinating characters, Kimiko, acts both as a unique community builder and as a connection between women and water. Kimiko is a café waitress who works at P'yōnghwa, a streamside establishment which

Pak describes as "unpleasant and dingy" and "vulgar" (24-25).[7] From her first appearance and throughout the novel, Pak emphasizes Kimiko's "unpleasing" appearance, heavy drinking habits, older age, and brusque personality

as being, at first glance, at odds with the role she plays in P'yŏnghwa and in the community. However, through his descriptions of Kimiko and the stream near the beginning of the novel, Pak establishes beauty and, more broadly, value as being in the eye of the beholder.

Some might wonder why the bar [café] would employ her as a barmaid [café waitress], an ugly, old, and blunt-mannered woman.... The fact that she was the favorite among customers...was no small mystery, although, who knows, in modern times, such attributes might be deemed attractive. However, she had one merit that no one else could match, and that was her generous personality. She admitted to everyone that she had neither parents, nor siblings, no one on earth she could call family, and since childhood had endured a harsh life. Therefore, she understood suffering, and she recognized it in others and sympathized with them to the point of trying to help them in their worst hours of need. This quality gained her a reputation as a good person. (25-6)

Likewise, when the boy Ch'angsu first arrives from the countryside, he finds Ch'ŏnggye Stream beautiful because of what it represents for him—Seoul, a place of opportunity and excitement.

The sights, the sounds—everything left a deep impression on the boy. The streamside scenes were never considered very marvelous or beautiful, but to the mind of the boy who had come up from the countryside for the first time, the place *was* beautiful and it *was* marvelous, for the sole reason that it was Seoul. (47, emphasis added)[8]

In these two descriptions, beauty is in what a person or a place means to people personally, not in their appearance alone. Ch'angsu finds Ch'ŏnggye Stream beautiful despite its pollution, and, despite her so-called ugliness, customers at P'yŏnghwa still seek out Kimiko for her

compassion and listening ear. As Pak's narrator muses in his description of Kimiko, perhaps the very qualities that people find attractive (in both women and streams) are changing in the colonial modern context. Kelly Walsh writes that Pak's novel "reflect[s] the contradictions of a traditional Confucian society and the desire for greater social liberation accompanying the process of rapid modernization" (27). Is a modernizing Korea a place where women who defy tradition like Kimiko, or where a polluted yet life-giving stream like the Ch'ŏnggye might actually be desirable, sought-after, or valued?

The development of Kimiko's character reflects a continued meditation on this question, and the way Kimiko builds a sense of family and community with other female characters indicates that increased social liberation is indeed part of Pak's vision for positive cultural change and community building that might come with modernity. Kimiko proposes to Kŭmsun, a young widow from the countryside who has recently come to Seoul, and Hanako, one of the other waitresses at P'yŏnghwa, that the three of them find a place to live together. Kimiko and Hanako would provide the financial support for their lives and Kŭmsun would care for household chores and meals. After Hanako and Kŭmsun eagerly agree to Kimiko's plan, the narration relates the following about Kimiko:

Since losing her parents, a young, homely, and poverty-stricken Kimiko had known no love, and to this day had never been the object of another person's affection or kindness. Her path had been lonely, and she would have continued to amble along it with her head bowed down to the end of her life. But now, she no longer needed to suffer life's misfortune alone, because she was gaining friends who would share everything with her, trusting and supporting one another with warm feelings and deep regard. *So the joy of living would surge in their hearts like a gushing spring.* As if she had been reunited with her long-lost family

and embraced by their affection, Kimiko's eyes sparkled, and she blossomed into a smile. (165, emphasis added)

Through Kimiko and her relationship with these two other women, Pak establishes the groundwork for his main counterexample to the novel's numerous unhappy and abusive traditional marriages—the joy and beauty of found family and platonic love. It is not coincidence that Pak compares the joy that Kimiko anticipates (and realizes) in her life with Hanako and Kumsun to a “gushing spring.” In linguistically linking the “joy of living” through Kimiko's scheme to a “gushing spring,” Pak not only connects the movement of water to joy, but he also draws a direct connection between Kimiko herself and Ch'onggye Stream. This highlights Kimiko and Ch'onggye Stream's respective roles in creating community, specifically enriching communities that provide places to gather to enjoy the camaraderie of fellow sufferers.

It is in this connection between Kimiko and Ch'onggye Stream through moving water—a gushing spring of joy—that an ecofeminist reading of the novel becomes particularly productive. Pak complicates the dualistic narrative of colonial modernity, which pits the traditional and the modern against each other, in painting a picture in which both traditional Korean culture (and

especially Confucian values) and modern changes are neither strictly vilified nor uniformly praised. Whereas most of the women in the story have only two (respectable) options for their lives—marriage or becoming a *kisaeng*[9]—Kimiko forgoes both and forges her own path, creating a community for herself and others that ends up being more fulfilling and loving than any marriage in the novel—indeed, probably bringing them more happiness than traditional society would have held for them anyway. She defies the modern caricatures of both the New Woman and the Modern Girl as well as the scorned occupation of café waitress, roles which mass culture made into scapegoats for all the ills of modernity as “destroyers of the Korean family” (Ro 733, 740). Destroying family being the last thing she desires, Kimiko builds her own unconventional family with the other lonely and downtrodden women she encounters. Using the liberties made available in modern society, Kimiko and her found family members create a life that, unlike many traditional families of the period, is full of love and security. In writing a character like Kimiko, Pak tacitly offers an alternative narrative to contemporary social discourse: that the changes and freedoms that come with urban colonial modernity might actually have the capacity to strengthen the institutions and values that premodern tradition holds dear.

The Agency of Ch'onggye Stream

To further understand the role of Ch'onggye Stream in the novel's community, we turn our attention to chapter 23, “A Landscape in the Rainy Season.” This chapter comes at the approximate midpoint of the novel, and it focuses closely on the weather and the stream as the subjects of the action in the chapter instead of as the backdrop for character-driven storylines. Centering Ch'onggye Stream in this scene and in the novel reinforces the importance of the stream in the narrative and roots the novel in place: in

an urban environment full of contradictions and ambiguous environmental interactions.

In this chapter, despite the inconveniences and damage that the rising stream has caused for the community, Ch'onggye Stream acts as the center of joyful community gathering even in its swollen and dangerous state. When morning breaks, “many spectators...[line] both sides of the stream, unmindful of the rain,” as a curious turn of events take place (176). The water level has now “reached up to the drainage pipes on the wall” of

the streambed, and myriad objects like “pieces of lumber, planks, straw hats, [and] things like that” are swept down the rapid and swollen current (176). Young men, bring long bamboo poles to the streamside and run up and down its length through the muddy streets, using the poles to attempt to retrieve various items swept up in the stream’s flow. Pak calls these young men “champions” whom the spectators cheer on in what has become “a sports arena for the entertainment of the people” (176).

It is in this chapter that Ch’onggye Stream feels the most alive, where its autonomy feels the most palpable. Using an ecofeminist perspective to read the stream as “an active subject, not a passive object” uncovers intriguing insights (Merchant 185). As a character, the stream is every bit as nuanced and complex as Pak’s human characters. The stream does not play a merely passive role in the community, does not simply receive pollution and provide water for laundry. The stream moves quickly, it rises, it carries objects from more affluent areas up stream. It is unpredictable and its behaviors do not always impact all community members the same way. Reading the stream as a character enables a fluid comparison with the female human characters of the novel, emphasizing the similar ways in which women and stream are underestimated and mistreated, yet vibrant and vital members of the streamside community.

Conclusion

Like the amalgamation of objects caught up in the swollen flow of Ch’onggye Stream, *Scenes from Ch’onggye Stream* emerges as, at first glance, a fluid and disorderly mess, a whirlpool of moments, scenes, and characters with no strong narrative to guide the reader to meaning. Indeed, *Scenes from Ch’onggye Stream* does not carry a didactic message that urges the reader towards any particular political, ideological, or moral ideal, as Pak’s contemporary

Through Ch’onggye Stream’s carrying of objects in particular, an interesting insight comes forward in reading the stream as a character instead of a backdrop. In reading Ch’onggye Stream as an agent, we might read this indiscriminate gathering of items and moving them downstream to the salvaging “champions” as a type of wealth or material redistribution, an equalizing of sorts in which anything and everything belonging to anyone, rich or poor, upstream or downstream, can be swept up in the stream’s current (Shin 106-9). As a force of nature, Ch’onggye Stream is ostensibly no respecter of persons, hence the carrying of objects of all kinds in its flow. However, if we read Ch’onggye Stream as a *member* of the lower-class community portrayed in the novel, then perhaps the stream *acts* in response to the issues of colonial modernity that the characters as well as the author deal with in the book. Just as characters like Kimiko sift through the options presented at the intersection of traditional life and colonial modernity and apply them based on circumstances and needs, perhaps the stream, too, literally gathers and redistributes *physical items* and re-presents them to its community for recycling and reinvention in a new context. Pak thus uses both Ch’onggye Stream and the novel’s women to navigate a modernizing world through salvaging ideals, practices, and ways of life, which is echoed in the structure of the novel itself.

critics observed. When considered within a twenty-first-century ecocritical framework too, the novel does not advocate for ecological conservation or preservation like many environmental novels do today; these are not among Pak’s goals with this novel. Despite this, one would be remiss to assume that *Scenes from Ch’onggye Stream* is politically and socially disengaged. While Pak doesn’t suggest policy or envision an ecotopian future, he most certainly interrogates



Remaining pillars from the old Sam-il Elevated Motorway in the restored Ch'onggye Stream. A cormorant is visible perching on the top of one of the pillars. Image courtesy of the author.

relationships among humans and between humans and Ch'ŏnggye Stream as he experiments with the opportunities, possibilities, and contingencies that impact those relationships, guided by a sense of empathy. It is this mode of relationship-focused environmental literature that makes *Scenes from Ch'ŏnggye Stream* an especially rich subject for feminist ecocritical study.

These kinds of stories and readings are helpful—even crucial—for addressing our own contemporary crises. 1930s Korean literary modernists were facing a crisis of representation and a struggle to imagine the future in the onslaught of colonial modernity; do we not also now struggle to imagine a future without apocalypse, a future with hope and meaning? Colonial modernity transformed Korea's landscapes, turned their society and culture upside down, and even cost many their lives. Our local and global twenty-first-century sociopolitical and environmental crises seem, in many ways, to differ more in scale than in kind.

The urban environmental questions and issues at play in the Ch'ŏnggye Stream's history are not unique to Seoul or to Korea; we find these questions at myriads of urban waterways across the world as our cities continue to evolve and adapt to this changing world and the changing ideas of the people in it. Many urban planners look to Ch'ŏnggye Stream's restoration as a successful example of how to do urban stream "daylighting." While the "success" of the project is debatable, environmentalists across the world would do well to pay attention to more than just

the restored stream's ecological integrity and look at the relationships between people and stream throughout history, including literary representations like *Scenes from Ch'ŏnggye Stream*. The human-stream relationship in the novel is certainly no utopian ideal, but the way the characters embody the changes of the time in their relationships with the stream and with each other is telling. Perhaps one of the messages a novel like Pak's gives us today is that urban waterways play critical roles in human communities and ways of life, and as such remind us to center relationality in our attempts to restore such waterways.

While the work of mitigating climate and ecological disaster remains crucial, the work of renegotiating our relationships with the natural world, with each other, and with the systems that we've grown accustomed to is also vital to moving towards a future that we would actually want to be a part of. A full return to the past or an indiscriminate embrace of the new will both surely fall short of creating a world of environmental well-being, social equity, and meaningful relationality. The task falls to us, in the midst of whirlwind changes and existential uncertainty, to create a future that, if not perfect, might still create space for joy, meaning, and the ability to thrive. When trying to make sense of a world full of bewildering changes and bleak outlooks, we, like Pak, might do well to start with the places and the people at the heart of what matters to us, with the relationships that, despite the chaos and destruction that rain down upon us, keep us afloat.

References

Bird, Isabella L. *Korea and Her Neighbours: A Narrative of Travel, with an Account of the Recent Vicissitudes and Present Position of the Country*. London: John Murray, 1898.

Buell, Lawrence, Ursula K. Heise, and Karen Thornber. "Literature and Environment." *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, vol. 36, Nov. 2011, pp. 417–40. doi:[10.1146/annurev-environ-111109-144855](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-111109-144855).

- Cho, Myung-Rae. "The Politics of Urban Nature Restoration: The Case of Cheonggyecheon Restoration in Seoul, Korea." *International Development Planning Review*, vol. 32, no. 2, Jan. 2010, pp. 145–65. doi:[10.3828/idpr.2010.05](https://doi.org/10.3828/idpr.2010.05).
- Choi, Hyaeweol. *New Women in Colonial Korea: A Sourcebook*. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Hanscom, Christopher P. *The Real Modern: Literary Modernism and the Crisis of Representation in Colonial Korea*. 1st ed., vol. 357. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013.
- Henry, Todd A. *Assimilating Seoul: Japanese Rule and the Politics of Public Space in Colonial Korea, 1910–1945*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.
- Jeon, Chihyung, and Yeonsil Kang. "Restoring and Re-Restoring the Cheonggyecheon: Nature, Technology, and History in Seoul, South Korea." *Environmental History* vol. 24, no. 4, Oct. 2019, pp. 736–65. doi:[10.1093/envhis/emz032](https://doi.org/10.1093/envhis/emz032).
- Lim, Heeji, Jeeyeop Kim, Cuz Potter, and Woongkyoo Bae. "Urban Regeneration and Gentrification: Land Use Impacts of the Cheonggye Stream Restoration Project on the Seoul's Central Business District." *Habitat International* vol. 39, July 2013, pp. 192–200. doi:[10.1016/j.habitatint.2012.12.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2012.12.004).
- Merchant, Carolyn. *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Molony, Barbara, Janet Theiss, and Hyaeweol Choi. *Gender in Modern East Asia*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2019.
- Pak, T'ae-wŏn. *Ch'ŏnbyŏn p'unggyŏng* (천변풍경, *Streamside Scenes*). Munhakgwa Chisŏngsa (문학과 지성사, Literature and Intellectual History), 2005.
- Pak, T'ae-wŏn. *Scenes from Ch'ŏnggye Stream*. Translated by Ok Young Kim Chang. Singapore: Stallion Press, 2011.
- Peterson, Garry. "Restoration of Cheonggyecheon River." *Seeds of Good Anthropocenes*. <https://goodanthropocenes.net/restoration-of-cheonggyecheon-river/>. Accessed 6 Nov. 2020.
- Pihl, Marshall R. "Engineers of the Human Soul: North Korean Literature Today." In *Korean Studies*, vol. 1. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1977, pp. 63–92.
- Poole, Janet. *When the Future Disappears: The Modernist Imagination in Late Colonial Korea*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.
- Ro, Sang-ho. "Café Waitresses and Disharmony: 'Erotic Grotesque' Aestheticism in 1930s Colonial Korea." *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences*, vol. 4, no. 4, Oct. 2012, pp. 729–756. <https://japss.org/japss-october-2012>. Accessed 26 Nov. 2021.
- Shin, Doocho. "The Cheonggyecheon and Sustainable Urban Ecology: (Re)Configuring Korean Environmental Discourse and Ecocriticism." In *East Asian Ecocriticism: A Critical Reader*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 91–110.

Shin, Hisup. "Uncovering Ch'önggyech'ön: The Ruins of Modernization and Everyday Life." *Korean Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2005, pp. 95–113. doi:[10.1353/ks.2006.0009](https://doi.org/10.1353/ks.2006.0009).

Vakoch, Douglas A., editor. *Feminist Ecocriticism: Environment, Women, and Literature*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012.

Walsh, Kelly. "The 'Modernology' of Pak Tae-Won: Glimpses of 1930s Seoul." *Situations*, vol. 5, Winter 2011, pp. 19–46.

Footnotes

[1] Because my Korean language skills are still developing as of this writing, I primarily use Ok Young Kim Chang's 2011 English translation of *Scenes from Ch'önggye Stream* in this piece. Where I have analyzed specific passages, I have read the original Korean and, in some cases, used my own translations to highlight Pak's word choice or tone. Additionally, while I cite many Korean scholars writing in English, my engagement with Korean-language scholarship is limited. I mention these limitations to highlight the importance of studying non-Western works; language barriers are a part of the reason for Anglo-American environmental scholarship's neglect of non-English-language texts. While ideally ecocritics will study foreign languages to expand the breadth and depth of their research (as I am currently doing and planning to continue), it seems unrealistic to expect that many currently active scholars will begin mid-career to learn new languages to advanced levels in a time frame that will be helpful for addressing contemporary environmental crises.

I hope to present this article as an example of how meaningful ecocriticism might be done—and perhaps even needs to be done—aided by texts in translation and performed by scholars without the requisite advanced foreign language skills. For my own prospective scholarly career, I continue to work diligently to acquire the language skills necessary to ultimately engage Korean texts entirely in their original language.

[2] Hanscom characterizes the crisis of representation that challenged Korean modernists in particular as informed by four different contexts, some of which are specific to time and place and others of which are not: colonization, the "broader constructivist worldview of modernism," the introduction of modernity, and the debates of the local literary community in East Asia (16). In this self-questioning literary scene, we find a group of writers who were born either just before or around the formal beginning of Japanese colonization (1910), and as such were raised and educated entirely within the colonial system. This group found themselves "caught between the state, global economy, and precolonial memory, and [they lived] the contradictions between nation and capital in a peculiarly fraught fashion" (Poole 11). In 1933, a group of modernist writers with some influence in Seoul literary circles formed a society called the Kuinhoe (구인회, "Group of Nine") (Hanscom 9). While membership changed over the society's three-year existence, among its ranks were the author of the seminal short story "Wings" (*Nalgae*, 날개) Yi Sang, modernist poet Chöng Chiyong, poet and literary critic Kim Kirim, short story master Yi T'aejun, and Pak T'ae-wön.

While the ideologies and literary modes of each of members of the Kuinhoe differed significantly, Pak's work as well as that of other members of the Kuinhoe was considered "part of the rise of what was perceived as socially 'disengaged' literature" as colonial censorship began to silence "socially 'engaged' realist literature," which in the colonial context referred specifically to leftist and proletarian

literature and writers who favored didacticism in their writing to advance socialist ideologies and Korean independence (Hanscom 2; Pihl 69). This understood dichotomy between modernists (socially disengaged, not realist) and leftist writers (socially engaged, realist) characterized the “contentious relationship between modernism and realism” that pervaded literary discourse during the period (Hanscom 8).

Several of contemporary Korean critics expressed opinions about the nature of the representational crisis that marked this “apolitical” modernist literature of the period. Literary critic Im Hwa lamented that the gap between the “ideal” and the “real” forced writers to either represent a character’s introspective inner world or describe the social context and environment but not both; the crisis of representation prevented modernist authors from “[unifying] these elements into what Im judged a coherent work of art” (Hanscom 26). Kim Kirim saw a connection between modernism and the urban subject, reflecting on how “modernists are the ‘children of modern civilization,’ born and raised in the city, taking up urban themes and subject matter,” in part because “sentimental portrayals of nature” could no longer captivate modern readers (Hanscom 28). We see this manifest in modernist style and word choice that animates the bustling energy and clamor of modern cities, including the sounds of “trains, airplanes, factories, and crowds” (28). Prominent literary critic Ch’oe Chaesŏ argued in a 1935 article that “for a true literary crisis to emerge... there must be a complete breakdown in the belief system that formerly held society together” (paraphrased in Hanscom 29). Ch’oe saw such a breakdown in 1930s Korea, a period of transition where traditional ideas were being left behind, but “a belief system befitting the new era [had] yet to emerge” (Hanscom 29). All of these observations from contemporary critics were explanations for the diffused meaning and lack of overt sociopolitical engagement in the literature of the period.

For further reading on literary modernism in colonial Korea, see Christopher Hanscom’s *The Real Modern* and Janet Poole’s *When the Future Disappears*.

[3] Pak T’ae-wŏn is “typically characterized as an experimental modernist, interested in the play of language and possibilities of style, and presenting the reader with anemic protagonists wandering the streets of the city and lost in self-contemplation” (Hanscom 10). Such a wandering protagonist is present in Pak’s more widely-read 1934 novel *A Day in the Life of Kubo the Novelist* (소설가 구보씨의 일일), which bears other aspects common to literary modernism like the “inward turn” and a stream-of-consciousness style. Pak often achieves this style in his trademark long sentences, once writing a seven-page short story in a single sentence and earning the nickname “our long-distance athlete Kubo” from contemporary Yi T’aejun (Poole 137-8). While *Scenes from Ch’ŏnggye Stream* does include some lengthy sentences, it is a notable departure from Pak’s typical style.

[4] The city known today as Seoul (literally meaning “capital”) has had multiple names over the centuries. During the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392–1910) it was known as Hanyang, Hansŏng, and/or Seoul. The Japanese name for the city during the colonial period (1910–1945) was Keijō (Kyōngsŏng in Korean). Since liberation and the establishment of the Republic of Korea, the city is known officially as Seoul.

[5] Old Seoul (originally known as Hanyang) was built according to principles of geomantic theory Fungsu or Pungsu-Jiri (the Korean adaptation of the Chinese Feng Shui). The valley is considered a propitious location because it is “encircled by four inner mountains” and Ch’ŏnggye Stream, which finds its headwaters in those mountains, runs eastward through the center of the old city (today’s downtown), and empties into the Han River, which flows in the opposite direction towards the sea.

The prominent depiction of the Ch'ŏnggye Stream in Chosŏn-era maps along with the city's surrounding mountains reflects the importance of the stream in the urban environment of Seoul from its very outset (Cho 149).

[6] From Ok Young Kim Chang's English translation of *Scenes from Ch'ŏnggye Stream* (2011); page numbers refer to the text in translation. All further quotes from the novel are also from the text in translation unless otherwise indicated.

[7] Even though Kimiko is ethnically Korean, she takes on a Japanese name for her occupation as a café waitress. Chang's translation refers to P'yŏnghwa as a bar, but it is called a "café" (카페) in Pak's original work, a low-class establishment of Japanese import. The female employees of these cafés were called waitresses, or *yŏgŭp* (여급) who served drinks and other refreshments and were expected to flirt with their male customers (Ro 732). They were not kisaeng or geisha, neither were they (legally) prostitutes, but they were a sort of sex worker in that they "commercialized [their] erotic womanliness" to perform the fantasies of their male customers (Ro 732). Many café waitresses adopted Western or Japanese names to "[stand] for the erotic fantasy which she presents to others: that is, she was an ethnic Korean woman, but pretended to behave like a non-Korean" (Ro 735).

[8] Translation by author; page numbers refer to Korean text.

[9] *Kisaeng* were female entertainers who catered to upper-class men (*yangban*) and historically were well-educated in musical and literary arts despite their low social position. They were not prostitutes, but they would flirt with the men they entertained and occasionally perform sexual favors.

Recommended Citation

Whitehouse, Anne. 2022. "Women and Urban Waterways in Korean Modernist Literature." *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 22. <https://openrivers.lib.umn.edu/article/women-and-urban-waterways/>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.9752>

About the Author

Anne Whitehouse has a master's degree in environmental humanities from the University of Utah. She was raised in Washington State by the Sammamish River, and she has found solace in walking along rivers and streams ever since. She enjoys writing creative nonfiction, reading, eating good food, and hiking. Anne is currently studying Korean in South Korea, where she lives near Cheonggye Stream. The main things she misses from home are her rough collie (Liesey) and tortilla chips.

FEATURE

WASHED UP

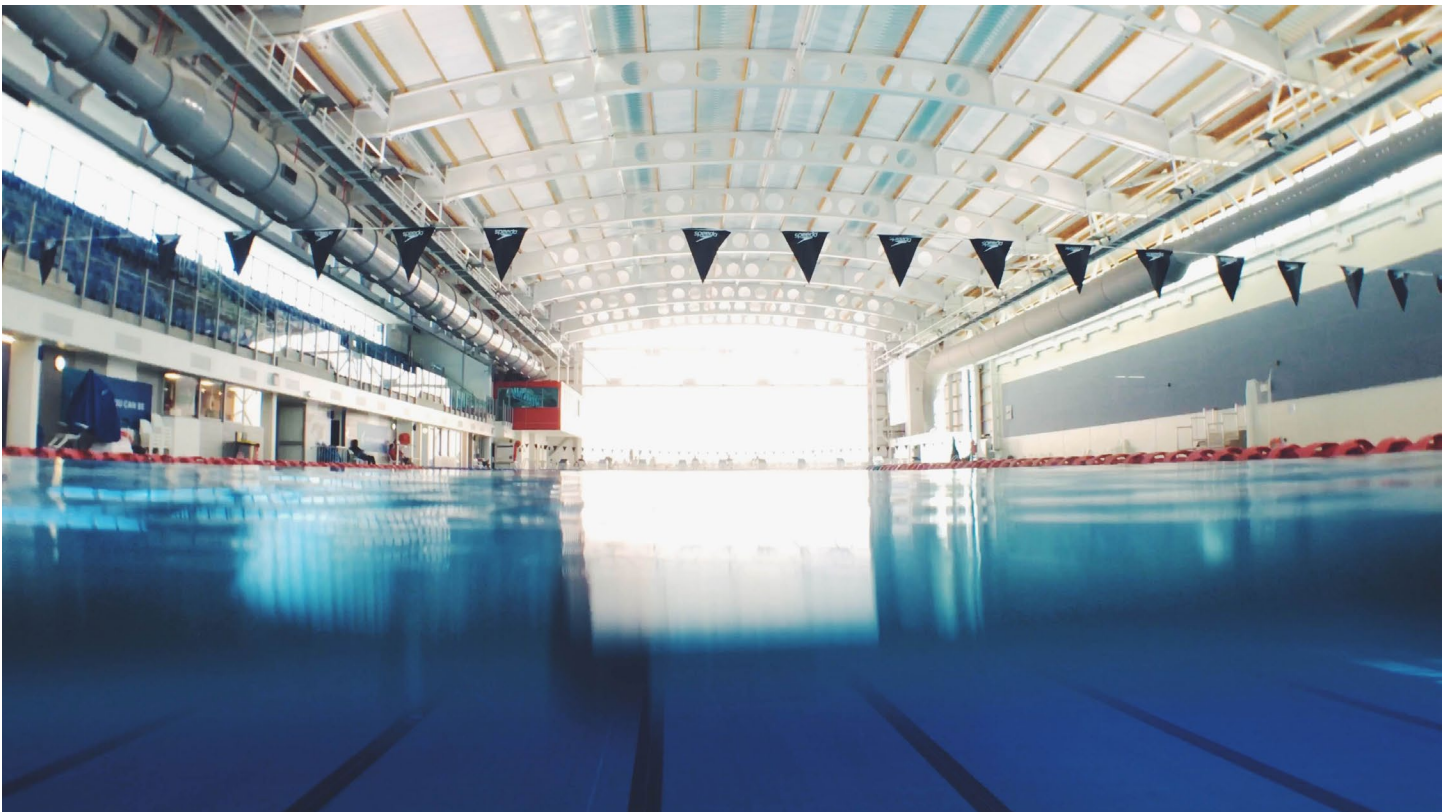
By Shannon LeBlanc

Trigger Warning: This article involves references to an experience with sexual assault that may be difficult or even traumatizing for some readers. Please care for yourself and your well-being.

Every summer in my childhood my parents took me and my sister to beaches in Maine, mountain lakes in our home state of New Hampshire, and our uncle's pool in Massachusetts just over the New Hampshire-Massachusetts border. Once the last towel was unloaded from the car, we'd rip off the clothing covering our bathing suits and race to water as if it was simply a mirage, wavering and threatening to disappear. It didn't matter that the Atlantic Ocean or lake or pool wasn't warm or that the

sand or concrete scorched the soles of our feet. Our mother's calls for sunscreen echoed unheeded somewhere behind us. What mattered was the flying right before the plunge.

As a child, I was restless and constantly propelling myself from one activity to the next. I lived for the moment where I was suspended in the sky, above the surface of the water and a surge of coolness. I yearned for times of slowness that felt, to my active body and mind, fleeting and rare.



Swimming pool at AUT Millenium training center, Auckland, New Zealand. Image by Artem Verbo on Unsplash.

But from the moment I hit the water, wrapped in its cool liquid blanket, my body obeyed: a jet of bubbles from the nose, quick snaps of ankles, the turning of palms. As Bonnie Tsui writes in her book *Why We Swim*, “Swimming is something that requires us to make our bodies a part of another body unlike ours, that of water” (228). In water, my muscles had the movement they craved and, once I was older and began swimming on a team, my racing thoughts were eased by the repetition of laps. In water, I felt safe and understood. In water, I was home.

My mother is petrified of deep water, which is a fear I’ve suspected developed after witnessing a near drowning when she was a child. As the story goes, a cousin almost drowned when my mother, her siblings, and a few cousins jumped into the Merrimack River—not known for its cleanliness or its calm waters—by the old Lowell,

Massachusetts mill buildings. I’ve imagined this cousin sensing the moment she had lost control, fighting and eventually escaping the current, crawling onto the muddy bank, wet and shivering and exhausted, coughing and sucking in air, happy for land and its solid foundation. My mother later told me that on that day near the Merrimack River she was young, and she didn’t know that the water was too deep, the current too strong, and her cousin too weak a swimmer. Tsui writes, “In America, the pool is a privilege” (123). What Tsui really means, though, is learning to swim is a privilege—one that my mother and six siblings didn’t have in their inner-city, working-class family. It’s a privilege I plan on giving my future children. It’s a privilege my mother made sure my sister and I had because she had not.

When she swims, my mother’s arms barely skim the surface instead of finding an angle that would



Training at the pool. Image by Leah Hetteberg on Unsplash.

enable her to glide forward. Her kicks are fast, but she doesn't have the endurance to sustain the momentum. She strains to keep her head above the water instead of placing her face onto the surface and turning her head to the side each time she needs to breathe. When I worked as a lifeguard and swim instructor during my teenage years, I learned to spot swimmers like my mother—the ones who are afraid of water's ability to support them. As an instructor, I learned that there's a lot of fear behind learning to swim, particularly among older individuals. At first, I didn't understand because I have never been afraid of water, of the buoyancy it creates, and back then, I didn't know its ability to pull you down. A bathing suit, to me, felt like a second skin. When I started teaching adult swimming lessons, the gap between my love and their anxieties became clear; "swimming stripped people down to their bare elements" (Tsui 146). These older, new swimmers were afraid because they did not know how not to be.

My mother's fear led to early swimming lessons for my sister and me. Once a week in the perpetual dark of New England winter, my sister and I jumped into a YMCA pool. In the humid air of the natatorium with its overwhelming smell of chlorine and harsh overhead lights, we treaded water and paddled and splashed from one end of the pool to the other. I loved these lessons. I behaved better for those instructors than I did any other adult or teacher in my life and I thought and talked about them all week. Eventually, I excelled through the levels until, by the end of eighth grade, there were none left. From there, it was either join the high school swim team or settle with my water-stained lesson completion certificate.

When I joined the high school swim team as a freshman, I knew the four strokes and how to do a flip turn because of my YMCA lessons, but I knew virtually nothing else about competitive swimming: practices were often held before sunrise or after sunset; there was an understood lane order of fast to slow or freestylers to

breastrokers; and pace clocks kept time during practice by ticking by the seconds, not minutes. I couldn't name a single famous swimmer, but I still loved water because it allowed me to compete with myself, which I enjoyed more than competing with others. I loved how in control I felt when I pushed myself to finish a set of laps under time, or when I made it through an entire practice without skipping sets. What really attracted me to competitive swimming was how it used sets and meets and times to make me more disciplined. Within this structure, I learned to control speed and times with my body through a series of minuscule movements—a slight internal rotation of my shoulder, a catch of the wrist to scoop water, an extension of an arm—that hardened my muscles. I told my body what to do, and it complied. I have longed for that control since quitting the sport.

Although my parents gave me an early start with swim lessons and summer outings, beginning competitive swimming at fourteen is unusual in a sport where serious, successful athletes peak at that very same age. My high school team performed abysmally because most of us were new to the sport, and instead we laughed, joked, and formed lasting bonds. Even my United States Swimming (USS) Team—a team I joined to improve my times at the recommendation of my high school coach after my freshmen year of high school and a team which was year round and won meets far more than my high school team ever did—still enjoyed close friendships and jokes. The community was enough for me back then: "Join a [swim] team, and you begin to appreciate the company you keep" (Tsui 181). Because of the fun I had, the friends I'd made, my love of the sport and its demands, and the desire to improve my times, I decided to swim in college.

Every swimmer that left my USS team after graduating high school and moving on to college swimming returned to practice during college breaks with more defined muscles and stories about training trips held in warm locations, about bonding with teammates, and about wild parties

once the season was finally over. Each story made college swimming—and college—sound like an adventure. “It’s so much fun. It’s like having a built-in family,” they’d all said as they jumped into their old lanes. All the current USS teammates who had taken over these spots in the graduates’ absences moved aside, some even dunking under lane lines to return to their old, slower lanes. “You should swim in college if you can,” these returning swimmers told me as I neared the end of my high school days. “You’ll regret it if you don’t.” I then watched as they pushed off the wall and disappeared underwater, arms eventually breaking through the smooth surface. When it came time for me to apply to colleges, I chose schools hours away from New Hampshire in states where I knew no one. If I was going to continue to swim competitively in college, I figured I might as well do it in a new place with new teammates. While I wanted a similar positive experience with college swimming as my USS teammates had, I desired my own experience.

When I packed my bags for a Division II college nestled in Pennsylvania’s Pocono Mountains, I felt lucky to have been granted a few academic scholarships and to have been accepted onto a team with mediocre times—times most college coaches said would have been unsuitable for competition. The itching in my muscles told me I couldn’t simply practice without the thrill of a personal best time and the knowledge that I’d worked for that accomplishment for months, sometimes even years. Swimming in college, I hoped, would extend the control I found as a child and adolescent. At eighteen, I was head over heels for swimming. I was convinced it loved me too.

But I didn’t anticipate how my love for the sport could change. My college teammates were loud, competitive, and more experienced with swimming in high stakes meets than I was; our opposition was intimidating, driven, and physically larger. I woke before sunrise each morning, stumbling to the pool with bleary

eyes and burning muscles. I realize now that I was unprepared for the physical and mental demands of competitive college swimming: “It is a punishing regime to sustain. The clock ticks. Lap after lap, the unchanging scenery” (Tsui 176). In the weight room, I lifted half-rusted dumbbells sized for men, and at night I returned to the pool, helping to stir the water into violent waves and currents. During sets I tried to focus, but my mind wandered away, thinking of the stacks of homework I had to complete or the studying I needed to accomplish. Often the doubts crept in too: *You’re never going to be as fast as the others. You started too late. Why is this set so hard? It’s because you don’t try hard enough.* “Back and forth, back and forth, staring down at the black line at the bottom of the pool. It’s a lot of time to think, and if you aren’t careful, fear can take over” (Tsui 172). I often felt like I was drowning.

Each day, I swam more than I slept, more than I attended class, more than I studied. I swam and ate and swam and studied and ate. My muscles stretched and pulled over bones, I lost weight, my hair thinned, and I had wild daydreams about filling a bathtub with lotion and sinking all my flaking flesh inside. My college teammates and I sought out free back rubs that would temporarily ease our knotted muscles. We rubbed against doorframes, chair backs, and tennis balls nestled between our shoulder blades and the floor. We begged each other for elbows against tender spots, clenching our teeth when the bone found the point of pain. I swam so much I dreamt of swimming, of the lap of water against pool sides, of a coach’s commands to push harder, of the scream of lungs during a race’s final moments. I was prepared for sore muscles and dry skin, but I was unprepared for college swimming and its focus on winning above all, above everything. Part of the reason for this shock was I had heard only positives about college swimming from my old USS teammates.

But college swimming was lonely. For the longer invitational meets, my teammates and I traveled

to neighboring states, bunked in hotel rooms, and ate energy bars the consistency of cardboard. We spent days wrapped in towels that never dried with headphones shoved over ears, waiting for our few minutes in a lane. Intensity hung in the air during these moments, saturating every sodden towel. Intensity was the shrill of an alarm set in another cold hotel room, and the weight of it filled bleachers, hotels, restaurants, and buses with a heaviness that made it hard for me to breathe, speak, or laugh. This tension weighed on me; I still liked competing with myself, but I never liked competition with others: “I couldn’t figure out how to control all the other stuff that went along with getting your body into the revved-up state required to slay your rivals” (Tsui 161). Uncomfortableness aside, I didn’t want to quit the team because doing so would mean I had fallen out of love with the only thing that had consistently calmed my mind and body. I wasn’t sure who I’d be without it.

At the end of that first season, college life—what I had missed for all those early morning practices and weekend meets—beckoned. “Party. Drink. Smoke,” college told me. For a while, I succeeded in hiding the naiveté that swimming and my upbringing had created; the parties of my high school years consisted of movie marathons in a friend’s basement and bowls of popcorn or candy placed on a scratched coffee table. Against the sound of the television, a parent’s steps creaked on the floorboards overhead. Occasionally, someone snuck swigs of beer or pulls on a joint, but, for the most part, we joked and laughed on old couches, sagging into worn cushions that smelled like cheap cologne and stagnant basement.

College frats, however, were loud. There were beats booming from towering stereo systems, and the air was damp with sweat created by the lack of ventilation and the friction of skin against skin and bodies connecting together on too-small dance floors. It was hard to see and breathe through the dense clouds of cigarette and pot smoke. I was eighteen and cocky, relieved to have a swim season behind me. I thought I could

handle college frat parties because I had handled the physical and mental demands of one season of a Division II swim program. On a frigid night at the very end of February in my freshmen year, I giggled and stumbled to the bathroom with a friend—my beer left behind in the hand of a stranger—and didn’t anticipate how my life would change.

The next morning in my empty dorm room (my roommate was away visiting friends for the weekend), I hunched over a trashcan and vomited the four beers I’d ingested the night before. For a few hours, I wondered how four drinks had made me so sick until I remembered the blue eyes, the offer to hold my drink at the party, the taxi ride back to campus where I rested my head against a broad shoulder, the cold linoleum of my dorm room floor, and hands that covered my mouth and silenced my attempts at the word “no.” I realized that something had probably been slipped into my drink and I had been raped.

If the swimming season hadn’t ended the previous weekend, I wouldn’t have been out the night before. Instead, my Saturday night would have been filled with homework or a quick movie break with other swimmers. There wouldn’t have been blurred memories of uneven fingernails tearing at my flesh, fingerprints bruised into my upper arms and inner thighs. In the following weeks and months and even years, when large parties and crowds made my chest constrict with a budding anxiety attack, or when I cut off flirtations before they became something more serious, or when I attended weekly therapy sessions that left me feeling emotionally empty, or even when I slept with someone in a drunken haze because it was easier that way than when I was sober, I couldn’t help but think: *if only it had been swim season.*

The mantra stuck for the remaining three swim seasons as I fought and waited for the fun to return, hoping to regain control over my body and mind, to regain the love of order and routine as I struggled against waves, nightmares, flashbacks, and loss—a loss so large it took me a decade to

reach its depths. I disregarded my body in ways similar to the rapist. He had used my flesh, resisted my swipes of nails and shove of palms, and I'd have to punish my body for its weakness, for being unable to stop him. At practice, I tore through sets until I was vomiting into a garbage can placed at the end of my lane. I barely ate or slept, yearning for a few minutes every day when I was in the pool and, therefore, in physical control. When the instinctive, mesmerizing catch of body in water eased the chaos in my mind, I pushed harder. I told myself that I deserved this continued tear of muscles, the stinging shock of cold liquid at 5:00 a.m., the memories I thought I could push away with every lap, sprint, and flip turn: "[Swimming] is an exercise in thresholds. How much can I take, how much distance I need, how far can I get from shore...at what point I desire to return" (Tsui 230). I told myself that swimming was still fun even though I knew that was a lie, yet I clung desperately to the sport,

hoping it would return me to who I was once before the rape. I swam even though my times suffered and my moods became erratic: one minute I was laughing and the next I was angry and yelling at innocent friends and the next I was crying. After these moments when I lost self-control, I isolated myself in the library, a college coffeehouse, or my dorm room, headphones in ears to block out the world. My teammates avoided me outside of practice and meets, and I spent a lot of time alone. I felt like I was drowning, and Tsui's words had never seemed more true: "Drowning is quiet and quick. Someone might notice—or no one might" (249). Although I'd told the head coach, Lisa, what had happened, I only sporadically accepted her offers of help or invitations to talk in her office. Still, I kept swimming for the brief flickers when a swing of hip, a glide forward, and a sharp inhalation took me away, took me back, took me past the pressure slowly building and begging for release. Swimming gave



Bondi Icebergs Pool at in Sydney, Australia. Image by Jeremy Bishop on Unsplash.

me an outlet, a façade of control over my body and mental state, and it would take years for me to realize that rape destroyed the remaining joy I held for swimming. Seventeen years after I was raped, I still regard swimming through a lens of nostalgia and regret.

After a series of races when I succumbed to fatigue and negativity, Adam, the team's distance coach, marched me over to the cool-down pool at a three-day invitational meet. Unlike Lisa, who preferred private chats in her office, Adam publically challenged me and my teammates with honest truths that often felt both inspiring and embarrassing. Instead of the usual "you need to get out of your head and pay attention" speech, he pointed at the diving well, told me to jump in, and demanded I play in the water and remember how to "have fun." I obeyed his orders, but a command to have fun wasn't fun; swimming wasn't fun.

I remember that the diving well was colder than the racing pool, and I swam downward until my ears pulsated in pain. Above, swimmers kicked and pulled, moving back and forth like obedient soldiers. I watched them before surfacing, inhaling the thick, chlorinated air. I continued to dive and surface until my toes were numb and my lungs ached. On my last attempt, I reached the bottom only for a moment before I kicked off, eager for air. I tried swimming a few laps from one wall to another, but my movements were uncoordinated and slow. I'd hoped for a moment of serenity, where my mind blocked outside distractions and anxieties, and I'd feel as excited to swim as I had during my USS and high school days. In the diving well, I joined the other swimmers, but I no longer became lost in the rhythm, in the art, of propelling myself through a world where, even for a moment, the outside environment was silent. It was no longer just me, the water, and my lane.

Even though I wanted to stop swimming, even though I daydreamed about turning in my bag and warm-ups embroidered with a Nike swoosh

and an American flag, I didn't quit the college team. Swimming doesn't allow you to quit mid-race, and this post-rape challenge, I told myself, was my mid-race. I didn't know how to leave and, in a way, I felt as though I couldn't because I was obliged to finish my four years as a college swimmer: I had made a commitment to myself, to a team and friends who expected me to return and fill a spot in races and on relays, and to my USS teammates who always said college swimming was "so much fun." So each winter morning I rose before the sun kissed the sky with pink. I hoisted my aching muscles out of the pool. I pushed off the blocks with pointed toes. I yanked off crushing latex caps, releasing waves of wet curls. I followed the outlined sets and the relentless tick of the pacing clock's second hand. I swam and swam because I did not know how to cope any other way. I swam until the last race in the last meet of my senior year of college, and then I shoved all my old gear in a backpack that I tossed into the darkest, farthest corner of my closet.

Two summers after my college swimming career ended, I went on an early morning coffee run in my hometown. I steered the car in a familiar direction: right at the light, up a potholed hill, and onto a side street where one of the town's swimming pools glistened in the weak sunlight. The baseball field adjacent to the pool was empty except for an abandoned glove hanging off a fence pole. On the edge of an evergreen tree line that separated the park and pool from a residential neighborhood, a man walked his dog, stopping when it paused to inspect and smell leaves and roots. I hadn't meant to drive there. All I wanted was a takeout coffee from my favorite local café, but my body remembered. I idled before twisting the key, silencing the engine, and exiting the car. The USS team I used to swim for was practicing. Behind the chain-link fence, I felt like an intruder.

From the other side, I watched the team begin a drill. The swimmers rose from the pool and beads rolled off their skin, staining the concrete with oval patterns. They were animated, lively, lining



Swimming pool. Image by Thom Milovic on Unsplash.

up behind high white starting blocks with an unspoken order: sprinters first, distance swimmers next, backstrokers, butterflyers, and breaststrokers last. Their muscles were defined, etched from countless training sessions. I looked at my rubber flip flops, cutoff jean shorts, and baggy red tank top. My shoulders were once broad, my abdomen was rigid, my hips were narrow, and my joints always ached. Now, my body felt deflated.

The summer sun rose higher in the sky, and I leaned against the hood of the car. No one saw or recognized me, and I felt simultaneously alone and accepted. Something in me responded to the short, shrill whistles; the barked commands; the familiar sound of water breaking, swallowing incoming bodies. The swimmers soared off the starting blocks with strained muscles; arms pointed with clasped, interwoven hands and bodies arced like ballerinas as they extended limbs toward the sky. I once knew how to fly this way. I once felt the wind against my wet body and prickles rippling over my saturated skin.

Tsui, a former competitive swimmer, says, “As an adult, I want to remember what it was all for” (184). I have tried to remember and to train again since I quit competing, but, when I have, my past swirls around me—all my regrets and shame rising with each head rotation and intake of air. In public pool lanes, I have searched for my eighteen-year-old self before the assault, as if by reinstating my old swimming routine, I can reenter her body and mend my past. Memories of rape no longer haunt my dreams or interrupt my waking thoughts, and I’ve learned through individual and group therapies how to cope and talk about rape and the sleeplessness, anxiety, and depression it caused and created. It’s only when I swim that I’m overwhelmed by the realization that rape ruined the physical release swimming once gave me as a child and beginning competitive swimmer; I’ve longed to return to what I know about water and swimming and how both “can be a portal to somewhere else” (Tsui 251). I imagine that I’ll keep trying to find a way

to regain this control, one of the last missing pieces, so I can make myself whole once more

Three summers after college, my arms protested when I tried to place them into correct positions, my leg muscles tensed into painful knots, and my lungs ached because of the humid air. After a few yards, I stopped at the shallow end to fix my cap that kept tugging upward and exposing the base of my hairline. An elderly man in the lane next to me watched, and I pretended not to know why he stared.

“You a swimmer?” he finally asked.

“I used to be.”

He studied my old competition suit, fitted cap, and racing goggles perched on my forehead. He wore a scratched pair around his neck and a faded race suit clung to his thin legs. He smiled, fumbling with his goggles.

“You still are,” he said.

He ducked under the water, pushed off the wall, and began to swim to the other end with well-tuned strokes. I watched the arc of his arms, the bubbles trailing his feet, the rhythm of his head from side to side when he rotated to breathe. At the other end of the pool, he curled into a turn with surprising agility.

As I have many mornings throughout my life, I found myself in the pool, in water as familiar to me as my skin, but the older man wasn’t right—I didn’t feel like a swimmer; I didn’t feel at home. I submerged, pulled off my cap, released my trapped hair, and surfaced. The tiled wall scraped my knee when I clambered out of the pool. My battle with the pool wasn’t over and I doubt it ever will be. I’d return in a few weeks, perhaps a few months, and try to start over and to swim again, inhaling, exhaling, pushing backward to move forward.

Works Cited

Tsui, Bonnie. 2021. *Why We Swim*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books.

Recommended Citation

LeBlanc, Shannon. 2022. "Washed Up." *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 22. <https://openrivers.lib.umn.edu/article/washed-up/>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.9737>

About the Author

Shannon LeBlanc holds an MFA in creative nonfiction from Emerson College. Her essays have appeared in *Catch & Release: Columbia Journal Online*; *What I Didn't Know: True Stories of Becoming a Teacher*, an anthology published by *Creative Nonfiction* and edited by Lee Gutkind; an "Albums of Our Lives" column on *The Rumpus*; as a Reader's Choice finalist in *Memoir Magazine's* #MeToo edition; and on *The Bangalore Review*. She lives in Louisville, Kentucky. You can follow her on Twitter [@ShaNini86](https://twitter.com/ShaNini86).

FEATURE

OPEN WATER

By Aizita Magaña

I woke up on the day of my swim full of apprehension. In the spirit of facing a long-held fear of drowning, I had agreed to an open-water swim in the east side of the San Francisco Bay. The bay—really a group of connected bays—is filled by water that flows from the Sacramento River from near Mount Shasta and the San Joaquin River three hundred miles away in the Sierra Nevada; these waters eventually merge with the mouth of

the Pacific Ocean at the span of the Golden Gate Bridge.

Several times prior to this, I had swum a short distance in the bay from the shore in Point Richmond at a place called Keller Cove not too far from where our swim would commence that day. Located north of Berkeley, Point Richmond, once the home to Rosie the Riveter and other war-time



A view of San Francisco from the bay from the water with just us and the seals. Image courtesy of Norman Hantzsche.

manufacturing, is now the location of a Chevron oil refinery. A dear friend from college, Jonathan Mayer, who swims often in Keller Cove and has taught swimming for many years, accompanied me on those swims. Although he has my complete confidence, every time I've entered the open water I've done so filled with some degree of fear. That being said, each time I've exited, I've felt exhilarated and maybe even a few millimeters further from my fear of swimming (and drowning) in open water. This is why I've returned for more.

Jonathan assures me that the swim today will be fun and an extraordinary experience. The plan is to board a boat (a small yacht), sail for an hour or so and dive into the middle of the bay. A group of about 12 swimmers will attempt anywhere from 1 to 11 miles and the free yacht ride will make a supervised open-water swim like this one, Jonathan says, a "rare opportunity." We will swim in two small groups or pods, he tells me, which is safer and, for me, is consoling news. Jonathan emails me that his swim goal will be eight miles and I write him back saying mine is to get in.

It has been said that swimming is the only sport in which the coach yells at you for breathing too often and where you aren't able to breathe at some parts of its practice. At what point you breathe while you swim, by what technique (and there are many), and just how much is still up for debate among coaches and swimmers alike. What is agreed upon is that if you want to swim confidently and comfortably, let alone competitively, you need to find a breathing pattern and method that is at least correct for you. I took lessons to learn how to swim and specifically swim freestyle, at the late age of 40-something. For me this meant I could swim to the other side of the pool without anxiously gasping for air. Learning to swim wasn't only a matter of getting fit; I had to learn to coordinate my movements without panicking. Almost twenty years after a near-drowning experience where I got caught in a riptide, I considered the aquatic journey of adult

swimming lessons, and its destination, finding my breath.

I learned to simultaneously keep my legs kicking, rotate my body, and take a breath. I gently turn my head toward the right and slightly upward so that my face leaves the water only long enough to quickly inhale. As I extend my arm in front of me and over my head, it creates a little arch where I catch a breath. Performed on dry land it might look like a person is smelling their armpit, but doing freestyle in the water, I feel like I'm flying. This took years of practice, and I am surprised every time I swim that I actually can. Beyond my regular swims, for several days before leaving for the Bay Area, I rehearsed the open-water swim in my mind and read online about breathing techniques. A rhythmic and balanced breath I know will be critical to how well I swim and also to staying calm.

There are many tenets of correct breathing while you swim and one is to breathe on alternate sides. Called bilateral breathing, you inhale and exhale in turn which doesn't necessarily mean switching sides every time you breathe. For example, you can swim one lap breathing on your right side and the next lap, breathing your left. The most common way is to breathe is every three strokes, or five or seven, swapping sides each time you breathe. Bilateral breathing is said to be more efficient because it contributes symmetry or balance to your stroke. The experts say breathing on only one side can make your stroke lopsided and keep you from swimming in a straight line. This is important especially in open water. It's also assumed that the repetitiveness of one-sided swimming will cause shoulder pain. Both of these things I have experienced, and though I've tried many times, I've never been able to breathe bilaterally. Not skilled at rotating my body enough to the left, it's then too far for my head to turn, so I stick to solely breathing on my right. Almost 10 years since my first lesson, I consider myself to be a barely competent swimmer, but still a happy one. My longest workout is equivalent to the warm-up many swimmers do, but still there are few

leisure activities I enjoy more. I love the feeling of water—how you are immersed but also held. I swim laps alone but the water accompanies me. It refracts light, amplifies some sounds while muffling others, and helps me leave my worries behind. When I pull at the water, it pushes back; it's not a fight but a dance. Surrendering to and being in sync with the water has made me a better swimmer and when I float, a reverie.

Knowing how to swim I feel confident and relaxed in the water which is a big change. But to be clear, this only refers to a swimming pool. Open water, including lakes, rivers, oceans, and bays, intimate me and remain daunting. But like my bay swims, I still work to embrace them. I'm drawn to

open water, but often too scared to get in. In open water there is nothing to stand on, grab hold or push off of. You can swim all day and never reach the shore or touch the bottom. There is there no painted black line like there is in a pool to guide you. You must look to the landmarks around you and the shore to see if you are generally going in the right direction, but the tides can override your best efforts if you get in at the wrong time or place. I joyfully swam for hours during the past summer in the warm, clear Pacific Ocean off of Maui, but I kept very close to the shore and had the sandy bottom always in plain sight. The water in the San Francisco Bay isn't anything like Maui and instead of beckoning, it deters you, rolling dark and green, murky and slightly polluted.



Some swimmers will go for the whole route. My goal is to get in. Map courtesy of the author.

It's the end of October and the weather on the day of our swim is perfect, with an unusually warm high of 80 degrees and clear, sunny skies. More important, the water temperature at 63 degrees Fahrenheit is close to the highest it will be all year. Hardly warm, water here peaks at 63–65 degrees Fahrenheit during the months of September and October. Jonathan, his 15-year-old daughter Hannah, her friend, and I arrive at the marina at close to 8:30 a.m. and are met by a group of ten others, including the boat skipper and owner, Gary Pursell, who stands at the helm. The boat is a beautiful 36-foot-long, white yacht named *Benaut* with two bedrooms, a kitchen, and bathroom below deck. "Huddle 'round," Gary directs us before we launch and we gather next to him at the back of the boat.

"There are three rules when you are out in the water today with your pod of swimmers," he says. "Stay together, stay together, and stay together." There are two other rules it turns out: you have to wear a bright colored buoy that snaps around your waist so you can be seen if you happen to get swept out by a current, and you can't flush any toilet paper in the boat's bathroom or it will clog.

I had planned to swim with Jonathan at my side, and the degree to which I trust him is the main reason I agreed to do the swim at all. But once we got sailing, Jonathan introduces me to his friend, Beth Miller, who will be swimming a much shorter distance, and encourages me to join her instead. I blurt out to Beth almost immediately how frightened I am to get in. I explain that the farthest I usually swim is a mile and I swim very slowly. Beth, who is about my age, has short, curly salt-and-pepper hair and muscular, tanned skin that reveals her love of open-water swimming. She quickly agrees that I should swim with her pod. She is friendly, speaks with a candid tone, and works, I learn, as some type of court-related counselor.

"Our pod will be slow," she says and will be made up of herself, me and three other women for a

total of five. "Whenever you want to get out, you can." I tell her about the near drowning experience I had in my 20s, and remarkably she tells me she too has a deep fear of getting in the water.

"During a swimming lesson as a child, a camp swim teacher who was frustrated with my hesitation to put my head in the water, forcibly held my face down," she tells me. I stare back at her in horror and disbelief.

"The experience has left me always feeling fearful before a swim." I'm impressed by her ability and willingness to swim—including in open water—after such a traumatic event and encouraged to have a kindred spirit on board who shares a former bad swimming experience. I also come to find that all four women in my pod have swum to Alcatraz, so over all I'm in great company. Additionally, we are to be accompanied by a kayak and a motorized raft called a Zodiac with two guys whose job it is pull you in if you need it. The bay's currents, I'm told, in specific spots of the swim make being swept out a real possibility.

Once we set sail, the Golden Gate Bridge is straight ahead and the Bay Bridge and San Francisco on our left. It's an amazing view and smooth ride, but I don't enjoy it. As I stare into the dark, green water, my feeling of dread grows and enthusiasm dwindles. The boat continues on as we veer to the north. We pass Mount Tamalpais and cruise under the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge, which connects the east bay to Marin.

"Whoever is getting in, you have about 10 minutes," Gary, the skipper, announces. The group of four women I will swim with starts to peel off layers of clothes and put on their gear. I join them and quickly and pull on my gear which is two swim caps, my short fins, and the goggles Jonathan loaned me that have far-sighted vision correction. "You need to see!" he exclaims along with the advice he always stresses when we swim which is to just keep breathing. "Imagine how

impossible it would be,” he says rhetorically, “if you were trying to run with your eyes closed while holding your breath?!”

This being the “warm-water” season, none of us wear wetsuits. Beth wears a colorful swim vest that zips up but no fins. I start salivating and feel like I might get sick. I announce to Beth that either I’m going to throw up or burst into tears.

“This is the hardest moment of the whole swim,” she says reassuringly, “right before you jump in. It’s going to be good after that.”

Beth is not alone in her thinking. Natalie Coughlin, who became the first U.S. female athlete to win six medals in one Olympics, said she loved swimming but hated getting in the water, and Nathan Adrian, an American five-time Olympic gold medalist, called getting in the

water “the worst part of every swimmer’s day” (NBC Olympics). Without delay, the four women including Beth, get in the water one by one, but I’m too anxious to see or hear them. I stand alone at the edge of the boat and it feels like a plank walk. The motor is off and the boat gently rocks. I look at the water below and the distance seems not like three or four feet but more like ten. There are people telling me to jump in and I think I hear Jonathan counting down. But their voices sound like they are coming to me through a long tunnel, drowned out by the much louder voice in my head questioning why I would choose to leave the safety and comfort of the boat for the water below. But I do jump, and just like that, in a blink of my eye I am encased in the coldest dark I’ve ever felt. Given the little bit of height I’ve jumped from, I sink deep into the water like a stone. As I stare frantically into the dark, green, murky water, all I can think is that I’ve made a terrible



Approaching the bridge with my pod. Image courtesy of Norman Hantzsche.

mistake. I am the swimmer Jonathan warned me not to be, who cannot see and isn't breathing. The breath in my lungs, acting like a balloon, helps to me to float upward as well as the salt water which is more buoyant than fresh water. When I surface, I am completely disoriented. I cannot see the other swimmers or catch my breath. Feeling lost and breathless, the last thing I want to do is put my face back into the water. I gasp and try to consciously inhale as I paddle clumsily. The proper term for what I was experiencing was a lesser version of cold water shock. The temperature of the water that day was more than 30 degrees colder than my own body temperature and my body responded by sending blood immediately to where it needed it most—my heart. Unprotected immersion in the range of water temperature that day of 63–64 degrees is only slightly dangerous. But swimming in water between 50 to 60 degrees and below can cause huge increases in your blood pressure and heart rate and a total loss of breathing control. The pool temperature range for Olympic swimming competition is 77 to 82 degrees and now I know why.

I hear a guy on the Zodiac raft yelling “swim to your pod!” and I attempt to manage my breath so that I can put my head back down and swim freestyle, but I can't. Swimming breaststroke, I manage to join the other swimmers but I feel like we aren't moving. A short time later I hear someone shout, “Back in the boat!” I look up and see the boat maneuvering closer to us and slowly we all get back in.

“A strong current going the other way,” Gary explains. “You were never going to get anywhere.” The boat travels about half a mile or so and we are given the okay to get back in.

Jumping back in is not nearly as intense, but the shock of the cold water has not dissipated. I resort again to swimming breaststroke so I can both breathe and see my way, and I quickly join my group and follow them from behind.

Beth stops several times to yell back at me, “Are you ok? Do you want to continue?” I give her the thumbs up, and we keep going. With more focus I get my legs kicking and arms moving. “Head down,” I tell myself. “Breathe; blow all the air out and make bubbles,” which is what I and every child are told repeatedly when learning to swim. In a matter of minutes, the water releases its choke hold and I am again in control of my breath. Although I have little sense of direction, I have acclimated to the water and, to my own surprise, I'm no longer cold. Out here, my chart-busting BMI works to my advantage, creating an internal wetsuit. It's a physical trait critical to survival in cold water that I happily share with seals, whales, and other mammals whose blubber protects them. Women generally have a higher percentage of body fat than men and it provides better insulation and buoyancy, which makes me consider how naturally adept women are in water (Hamilton (n.d.)). With the shock gone, my breath back, and the pod of women close to me, I put my head down and swim freestyle.

I think nothing of what's in the depths beneath me and become conscious of slowly relaxing into the water. I swim, I breathe, and I'm not cold. I feel good; I feel strong. I make more “ok” signs to Beth and to the guys on the Zodiac. I close my eyes and swim, just like I do in the pool. Even out here, miles from the shore, I have found my breath.

With the tide, my flippers, and the pod to guide me, I swim more than a mile before being waved back in. I am the last one to hoist myself out of the water using the steps on the back of the boat. Back on board, everyone puts on warm clothes including sweatpants and long, heavy swim jackets. One of the swimmers is visibly shivering and puts on a hat and socks. Perhaps it's the relief of being out of the water, but I don't feel the cold. I stay in my suit and warm myself in the sun.

“How was it?” Jonathan asks.

“I loved it,” I say. “But getting in was tough. Luckily,” I joke, “no one can hear you scream underwater.”

I thank Beth and the other women in my pod profusely for their support. Beth, who put on a wildly colorful pair of warm tights and body-length jacket over her swimsuit, congratulates me.

Several swimmers ask me if I’m going to get back in to swim under the San Rafael Bridge.

“I don’t know,” I reply honestly. I feel like I’ve accomplished my goal and stared some old fears right in the face.

“You’re a good swimmer,” Beth tells me. “You are a strong swimmer and you have a beautiful stroke.”

I’m flattered and really appreciate her saying this, but I feel that my stroke, while basically correct, is far from anything resembling beautiful. Back at home, lap after lap, I am constantly adjusting my reach, the curve in my arm, the position of my hands, and the rotation of my head. I try to stay conscious of inhaling through my mouth and slowly exhaling all my air through my nose before my next breath. But I often fail to extend my arms forward enough in the water before I begin to pull them back, which awkwardly cuts short my propulsion. My kick is also off, sometimes too much or not enough, where my legs then drag behind me. My grab of the water is also weak and finally, I’m not able to breathe on both sides. The repetition of swimming laps lends itself in the best and worst way to a never-ending inner monologue about my skill level, but regardless of my string of technical errors, freestyle is the only stroke I swim where I can create any rhythm or speed.

Evolution of Freestyle Swimming

Going back to the sixteenth century, breaststroke—not freestyle—was the preferred method to swim. Breaststroke looks similar to a swimming frog, where your arms and legs move together in wide scooping movements. The breaststroke, was swum originally with your head always held completely up and out of the water where you could breathe freely. During the eighteenth century when competitive swimming events were first organized in England, almost all swimmers competed doing breaststroke, and it was considered to be more graceful than other ways of swimming, which was favored over speed (Colwin 2002). Both Jonathan and I remember breaststroke and sidestroke (a one-sided version of breaststroke) as the only strokes our mothers ever did and we assumed it was to keep their hair from getting wet. Sigmund Freud is said to have favored the breaststroke to keep his beard dry (Sherr 2002).

Historical references to swimming outside of Europe, however, show the evolution of other strokes, including freestyle. Early colonizers from England noted that in the United States a style of swimming very different from breaststroke was being practiced by Native Americans. William Byrd II, the founder of Richmond, Virginia, wrote about learning to swim from their example: “Several of us plunged into the river....One of our Indians went in along with us and taught us their way of swimming. They strike not out both hands together but alternately one after another, whereby they are able to swim both faster and farther than we do” (qtd. in Colwin 2002, 14). This hand-over-hand stroke was also observed in the Mandan Indians, who were North American Plains Indians that traditionally lived in semi-permanent villages along the Missouri River in what is now North Dakota (Catlin [1844] 1973). Artist George Gatlin ([1844] 1973), on his travels through the American West, described it as “quite

different from...the usual mode of swimming, in the polished world” (97). Gatlin ([1844] 1973) further described the way they swam in a journal published in London in 1844:

The Indian, instead of parting his hands simultaneously and making the stroke outward, in a horizontal direction...throws his body alternately upon the left and the right side, raising one arm entirely above the water and reaching as far forward as he can, to dip it, whilst this arm is making a half circle, as it is being raised of the water behind him, the opposite arm is in a similar arch in air over his head, to be dipped in the water as far as he can reach before him, with the hand turned under, forming a sort of bucket, to act most effectively as it passes in its turn underneath him. (97)

The journal may have prompted a swimming exhibition in London that was held that same year, in 1844, where two Native Americans swam their early version of freestyle for the public to see. It was described as totally “un-European” by the press, which went on to say that the Indians “lash the water violently with their arms, like the sails of a windmill, and beat downwards with their feet, blowing with force, and forming grotesque antics” (qtd. in Sherr 2002, 60). It’s an apt description of how everyone swims freestyle today.

Almost 30 years later, twenty-one-year-old Englishman named John Trudgen won a race with a similar stroke. He “swam with both arms entirely out of the water, an action peculiar to Indians,” observed one person (qtd in Sherr 2002, 60). Trudgen is reported to have said that he learned the stroke from native tribes in Argentina. Regardless of its early aesthetics, by the first modern Olympic games in Athens in 1896, both European and American swimmers could see the necessity of going faster. In 1902, fifteen-year-old Dick Cavill, an Australian, performed another evolution of what was called the *Trudgen* but with his feet kicking. He said

he had seen a racer do the stroke, but that racer had learned it from Native people in the Solomon Islands (Sherr 2002).

In 1894, Archibald Sinclair and William Henry wrote an extensive book on swimming and described Cavill as “crawling” all over his opponents which may have led to the freestyle stroke to being referred to as the “crawl.” “The swimmer appears to be crawling over the water instead of being in it,” they wrote, “hence there is much splashing. It cannot be said that the action is graceful but it certainly is particularly speedy. Swimmers put their head down, keep their mouths shut and let their arms fly around” (Sinclair and Henry [1894] 1916, 89). There was no breathing technique that accompanied this, and early swimmers of the crawl swam as far as they could on a single breath, pausing to lift their head out of the water to breathe again.

Along with Native Americans, freestyle swimming is also assumed to have existed for ages among Polynesians and Hawaiians, born out of the necessity to swim quickly to catch a wave. It was in the early 1920s that Australian swimmer Cecil Healy forever changed the way freestyle is done and gave the swim breath its current significance. An Olympic gold medalist who helped to popularize surfing in Australia, Healy determined that if he wanted to use the crawl to swim a longer distance, a breathing technique was necessary. During his competitions, he began using the practice of turning his face sideways out the water to inhale and then exhale when his face was back in—a breathing technique which he said he had seen some version of being done by Native swimmers in Hawaii (Colwin 2002). It was noted that his new addition to the stroke, “raised eyebrows among classicists who perceived it to be ‘inelegant,’” but Healy went on in 1905 to swim what was then the fastest ever time in the 100-yard freestyle at 58 seconds (eleven seconds slower than the current record) (Lord 2020). He later wrote about his breathing method, emphasizing how important correct breathing is to being able to swim longer (Colwin 2002). “The head is

twisted toward the upper shoulder to facilitate the intake of air,” he wrote, “but the swimmer should make sure it is a twist only, for if the head is raised, the feet will unavoidably sink and break the balance of the body” (qtd in Colwin 2002, 19). It is instructive guidance which precedes the way Jonathan tells me to do the same—to simply turn my head in the water “like it’s a doorknob.”

Breaststroke, backstroke, and butterfly are still essential competitive swimming strokes but freestyle is now the most common and can be swum the fastest. Edwin Tenney Brewster, a science writer from Massachusetts, wrote a book in 1910 simply titled *Swimming*, which described freestyle as “the one stroke which is suited equally for speed and distance, for racing and pleasure, for the swimming-tank and the open sea” (47). Gradually methods and techniques emerged throughout the twentieth century and evolved into the current freestyle stroke. Today, in part due to the popularity of triathlons, there is a never-ending supply of instruction for proper freestyle swimming and breathing. I looked through many websites, read books, and received advice from Jonathan and the lifeguard at the pool where I swim. I eventually settled on a short YouTube video narrated by Robert Bowman who coached twenty-three-time Olympic gold medalist, Michael Phelps (The Swim Channel 2009). The coach intersperses a clip of Phelps swimming with a description of how he breathes. Like the hull of a ship, he explains, your head when you swim pushes the water forward and creates a split in the water called a bow wave. As Phelps turns his head it looks as if he is opening his mouth below the waterline, but he is actually taking his full breath inside the small dip of the bow wave. Out in the open water, however, a perfect bow wave, even one made by Michael Phelps, can be flooded by choppy waves which means you get a mouthful of water. Swimming in the ocean requires technique but also some tweaks and adaptations.

I have always believed freestyle is the standard of all distance swimming, but, to my surprise, two of

the four other women in my pod, including Beth, were swimming breaststroke almost the whole time. Beth tells me that it’s due in part to never being able to completely get past the incident where her swim teacher held her head down in the water.

“I prefer the breaststroke because I can see and breathe in a way that makes me feel more secure.” On that terrible day at camp so many years ago, Beth recalls that after her teacher let go of her head from under the water, he laughed. But the incident didn’t keep her from swimming, and she went on to become a junior lifeguard.

“I really love the water. Swimming,” she says, “is like having your body kissed all over.”

The other woman doing breaststroke during our swim was Leah Carroll. Fifty-seven years old, she has short brown hair and is very thin and petite. It was she I saw visibly shivering and struggling to get warm after her swim. Leah, who was born on the east coast and has lived in the Bay Area for more than 30 years, has only been swimming regularly for the last six. Leah and Beth are both regular swimmers at Keller Cove.

“With breaststroke and backstroke there is always enough air,” Leah says. “Your face is out of the water. When you swim freestyle, you have to force yourself to keep your face in even when you are running out of air.” Recently she swam to Alcatraz and managed to include freestyle.

“So, what would you tell people who aren’t going to swim competitively?” I respond, “Who are neither worried about how far nor how fast they go? To not just think about their breathing?”

“Yes,” Leah replies. “Do what you can do. Listen to your own body and just get as much air as you need.”

Leah and Beth are a mind-boggling revelation to me. Fear and love of the water don’t cancel each other out; they coexist. In the open water, I

can embody trauma and panic, new and old, but also healing. For Beth, open water is like a kiss, and for me it's a synchronous invigoration and centering. I had spent so much time researching swimming experts to get my freestyle stroke and breath right, but these women in real time showed me you can reasonably choose to do

breaststroke and not put your face in the water at all. Because of the invitation to swim in the bay and the opportunity to do it with the strong women in my pod, I realized that swimming in open water is as much about taking control as it is letting go.

Under the Bridge

More than an hour after I had finished my swim, Gary announces to those of us still on board that we are approaching the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge and if we are swimming this section, we

should prepare to get back in. For this stretch, only the boat would accompany us since the Zodiac and kayak were now trailing Jonathan's pod of swimmers who were well into their



In the shadow, following my pod towards the San Rafael Bridge. Image courtesy of Norman Hantzsche.

eight-mile swim. I watched nervously from the boat at one point as one of the swimmers in his group started to slowly drift away. Eventually, the Zodiac raft picked her up and took her out of the cross current she was stuck in.

The women in my pod kindly encourage me to join, telling me how amazing it will be to swim under the bridge. They all jump in, but I remain at the edge of the boat, still ambivalent. The bridge loomed ahead, massive and beautiful. This is somewhere I may never swim again I think, and I decide to get in. Suddenly, I realize that I've forgotten to reattach my hot-pink buoy, and I scramble to find it and then snap it on around my waist.

"Hurry, go now" someone on the boat says, wanting me to swim together with the other women

who are moving steadily farther away and toward the bridge. I jump in, and if it's even possible, the water feels colder now, maybe because I'm so warm from sitting in the sun. I swim hard to get warm and catch up. The boat leaves and sails ahead of us towards our agreed upon meeting place, a small island called Red Rock that sits right beyond the bridge.

I swim freestyle as fast as I can and before too long when I turn my head to breathe I see the dark shadow of the bridge hanging over me. Finally, I am right underneath it. I stop trying to catch my pod and instead take in the view. I was told earlier to swim backstroke to view the bridge's underside, but instead I float on my back for several minutes. I drift past the bridge's enormous concrete pylons and I can see and hear the cars zooming above. I wonder if the people



Pausing under the bridge with my pod. Image courtesy of Norman Hantzsche.

in the cars see me too and if they do, what they think? I wonder if they would they say I'm foolish or brave, or both. I am excited and astounded to be there but also slightly nervous. My eye catches water moving against the pylons which creates an illusion of a strong current, and it begins to trigger my fear of a riptide. It's time to get moving. Before I flip over and begin to resume swimming freestyle, I take a hard, last look up, trying to imprint this view of the bridge into my memory, quite certain I will never find myself here again.

Once I'm on the other side of the bridge, I switch from freestyle to breaststroke so I can get my bearings. San Francisco and the Bay Bridge are

in my line of sight, but my pod, not having taking time to float as I did, is off in the distance. I'm not even sure they know I decided to get back in. The boat is no longer nearby and has parked itself close to Red Rock, in between me and the group in which Jonathan swims. With all the other swimmers and the boat being equally far from me, the anxiety that began to surface under the bridge now fully erupts. Red Rock suddenly seems impossible to reach and I begin to panic, believing I don't have the strength to make it. My fear feels mostly existential. Only open water gives me this deep primordial sense of being alone, being weak and vulnerable. Diana Nyad, a marathon swimmer famous for her many long-distance swims and for being the first



*On the other side. Happy to be catching up with my pod and ready to get back in the boat.
Image courtesy of Norman Hantzsche.*

person to swim from Cuba to Florida without the aid of a shark cage, wrote that swimming is “the loneliest sport in the world” (qtd. in Kormann 2012). In a pool, I feel contained and safe but now I feel as if I may disappear at any moment. “In a pool,” Carolyn Kormann (2012) writes, “you’re staring at a line on the bottom; in open-water, you’re mostly staring into a murky, hallucinatory vastness.” Instead of pushing on, I stop and tread water. Once I stop the physicality of swimming and defer to my mind, I become even more afraid. I try to comprehend how big this body of water is, and how deep the water beneath me. This is the knowledge you have in open water that can liberate or terrify you, and for me in that moment it was the latter. I yell “hey,” just to hear my own voice but no one can hear me. Finally, I raise my hands in the air and do a weak wave. Immediately, the boat begins to circle back toward me.

“Are you ok?” someone on the boat yells out when they get close. “Do you want to get in?”

I yell back at them no and that I’m fine, which is both true and not true and they return to their prior position. My only option is to get back to swimming. Open water swimming allows for a cadence to my breath and stroke that can’t ever happen the same way in a pool—it’s the difference between running around a track versus running on a trail—and it is with this rhythm that I cease being afraid. I put my head down and stop thinking and start steadily swimming. The tempo of my breath, in very little time, begins to create order and make peaceful sense out of the incomprehensible vastness of the ocean. When

I jumped off the boat and into the water I disappeared, and with my breath I have reemerged—I exist. My swim breath forms a bubble around me, and I start to feel calm and protected. I turn my face up towards the sky and take in as much air as I need, just as Leah advised me to do. The farther I swim, the deeper I go inward and away from my fear of the water. Fifteen minutes or so later, together with the other swimmers, I finally reach Red Rock. I feel triumphant but equally relieved to get back on the boat.

As we near the marina, I thank Beth and Leah, my pod, and the others again for their support, for the amazing experience I’ve just had. Before she leaves, Beth tells me that this is one of her best open-water swims.

“I think it’s because I talked with you and told you my story,” Beth says, “It helped me.”

I am humbled by her comment and also full of gratitude. I think for women who have had a traumatic experience in water, open water can an additional sense of vulnerability but also the possibility of transcending the past. The women I swam with chaperoned my experience of a new inner and embodied confidence. They lent me so much encouragement, and in the end defied my ideals of what it means to successfully or correctly swim and breathe in open water; they simply pursued a sport they love with the breath techniques and strokes that suit them. If I ever return to the big, dark, cold, and open water of the San Francisco Bay, my method for swimming will be to just keep going, however far, in whatever way, and to breathe whenever I damn well please.

References

Brewster, Edwin Tenney. 1910. *Swimming*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Catlin, George. (1844) 1973. *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians: Written During Eight Years’ Travel (1832–1839) Amongst the Wildest Tribes of Indians in North America*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.

Colwin, Cecil. 2002. *Breakthrough Swimming*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Hamilton, Andrew. N.d. "The Fat Controller: Should Swimmers Fight Fat for Fitness?" *Sports Performance Bulletin*. Accessed August 1, 2022. <https://www.sportsperformancebulletin.com/endurance-training/fat-controller-swimmers-fight-fat-fitness/>.

Kormann, Carol. 2012. "Notes from Underwater." *The New Yorker*, August 3. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/notes-from-underwater>.

Lord, Craig. 2020. "Olympic Perspective: Cecil Healy, Aussie Swimmer No2, A Tale of Sportsmanship & Loss 108 Years On." *Swimming World*, July 11. <https://www.swimmingworldmagazine.com/news/olympic-perspective-cecil-healy-aussie-swimmer-no2-his-tale-of-sportsmanship-loss/>.

NBC Olympics. 2016. "Ever wonder why swimmers hate jumping in the pool?" Facebook video, June 26. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10154780691335329>.

Sherr, Lynn. 2002. *Swim: Why We Love the Water*. New York: Public Affairs.

The Swim Channel. 2009. "Freestyle Breathing with Michael Phelps, Katie Hoff, and Bob Bowman." August 17. YouTube video, 3:19. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KB4fJxMWX3U>.

Sinclair, Archibald, and William Henry. (1894) 1916. *The Badminton Library: Swimming*. London: Longmans, Green, & Co.

Recommended Citation

Magaña, Aizita. 2022. "Open Water." *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 22. <https://openrivers.lib.umn.edu/article/open-water/>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.9677>

About the Author

Aizita Magaña is a public health professional supporting the pandemic response in Los Angeles. She lives in Altadena and is researching and writing a book about the breath and breathing. She has received writing residency fellowships at the Community of Writers, Banff Centre for the Arts, and the Middlebury Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. She has a bachelor of arts in women's studies from the University of California at Berkeley, and a master of public health from the University of Michigan. Her work has appeared in *Dead Spin*, *Pandemics Journal*, and *The Huffington Post*. She currently swims at the Rose Bowl Aquatics Center in Pasadena, California and serves on their Committee for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion (DEI) and Community Outreach.

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>

About the Author

Caroline Fidan Tyler Doenmez is of Kurdish and English settler descent and was raised in the Mo-nadnock region of New Hampshire. She is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Minnesota, a visiting scholar in the Department of Native American and Indigenous Studies at Dartmouth College, and she currently holds the American Association of University Women (AAUW) American Dissertation Fellowship. Her dissertation research, based on fieldwork in Manitoba, examines the reclamation of birth by Indigenous doulas.

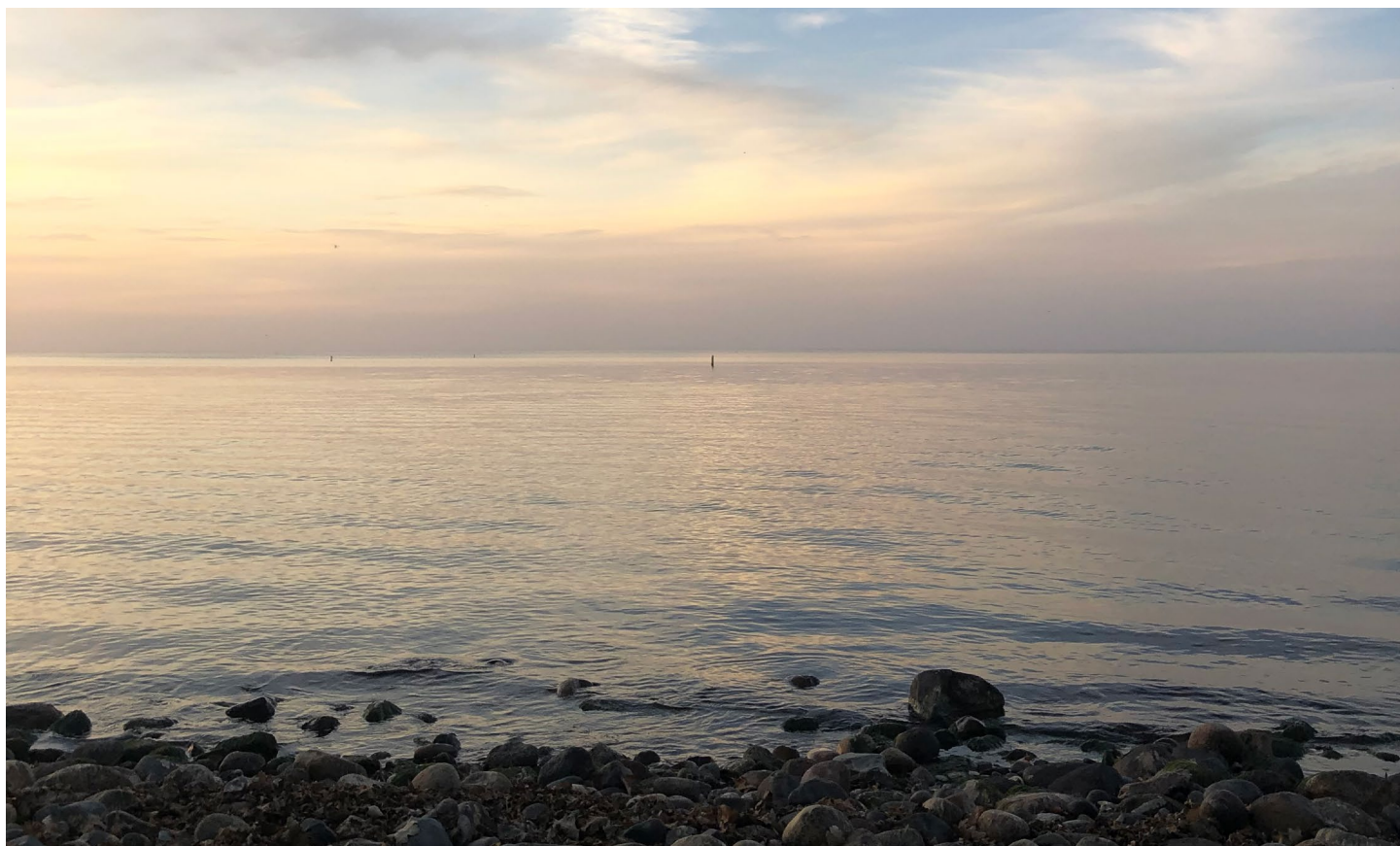
IN REVIEW

WE ARE ON DAKHÓTA LAND: A REVIEW OF DIANE WILSON'S *THE SEED KEEPER*

By Racquel Banaszak

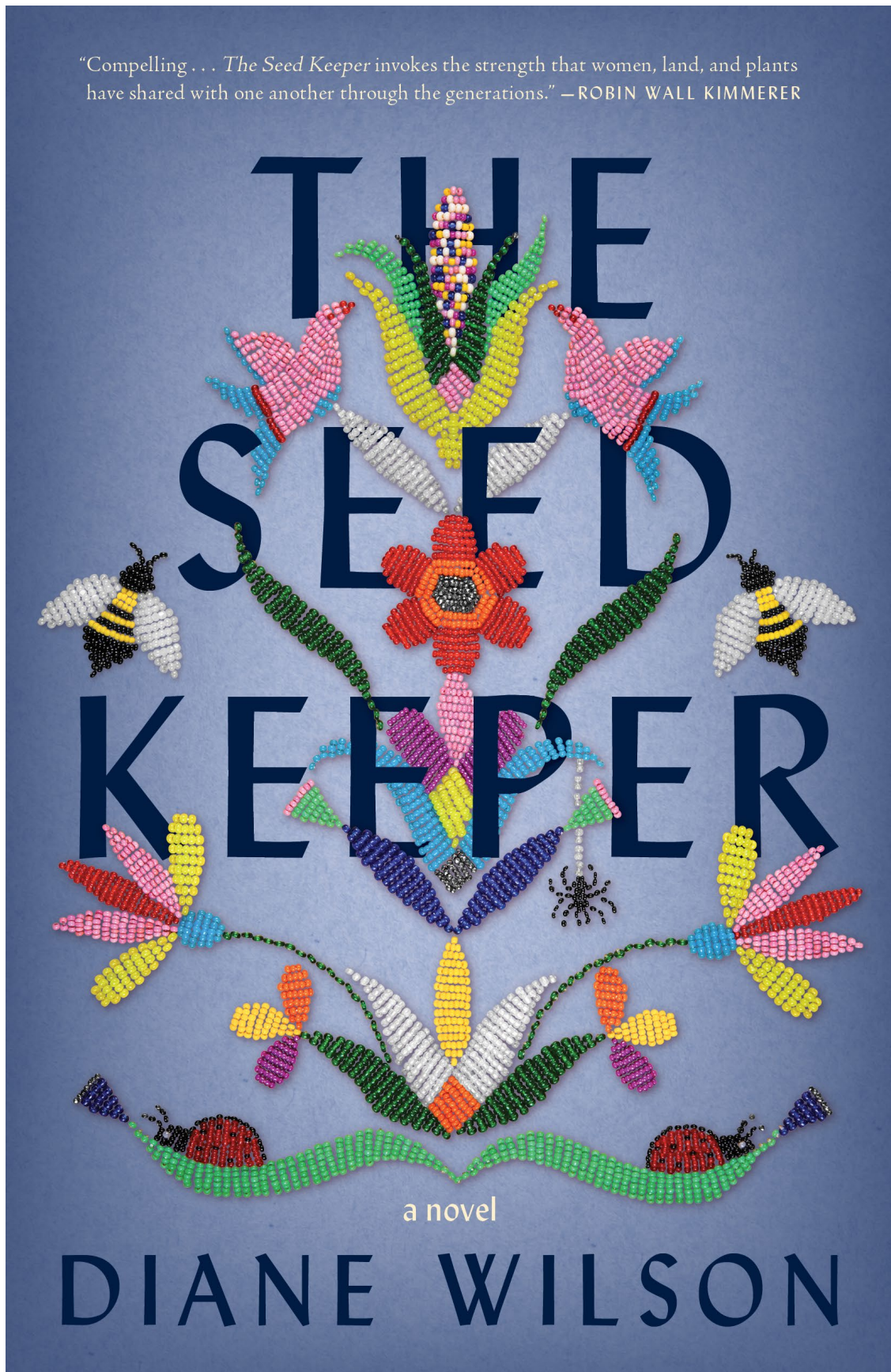
Diane Wilson's novel, *The Seed Keeper*, explores Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and understanding through multigenerational narratives of Dakhóta women. Each generation is inherently connected to the lands and waters of Mní Sota Wakpá (Minnesota River). Within each generation there lies a balance between holding on and letting go. Each must deal with its own complex issues brought about by settler colonialism and the effects of intergenerational trauma.

In her book, Wilson explores the struggle of being Indigenous in a settler landscape in a variety of ways. One generation is hiding for their lives while the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862 erupts around them. Another generation—born with dark hair and blue eyes—is navigating what it means to survive in this new world: the return of the people to the land, the children removed by government agents, generations scarred by the boarding school systems and the traumas that came with



*Bde Wakan/Misi-zaaga'iganiing (Mille Lacs Lake), a place my family always returns to.
Image courtesy of Racquel Banaszak.*

"Compelling . . . *The Seed Keeper* invokes the strength that women, land, and plants have shared with one another through the generations." —ROBIN WALL KIMMERER



"The Seed Keeper" by Diane Wilson, published by Milkweed Editions, 2021.

them. Another generation is raised by non-Indigenous families. *The Seed Keeper* weaves together the generations and what they've had to survive in order for the future generations to exist. As an Anishinaabe mother, educator, and artist, I understand that I am a link between my ancestors and future generations. I am obligated to all my relatives, past and present, human and nonhuman. I did not always understand these responsibilities, but they have always been with me.

I was born far from my ancestral homelands, in the land where the prairies meet the mountains on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming. It is an undeniably beautiful place full of big skies, sagebrush, and distant mountains all around. Despite this beauty my family missed the familiar green grasses, rustling oak trees, and flowing waters of Mní Sota Makhóche, otherwise known as Minnesota. Similar to the book's Dakhóta family, mine too made the decision to move back closer to the land that we know not just in our minds, but in our spirits as well.

In the novel, Wilson examines what it means to be a person of this land in eloquent, beautiful, and at times heartbreaking ways. As Indigenous people, the land and water define who we are, but we are also defined by those who hold power over them. We have been marred by the legacies of war and capitalism, land cessions and broken treaties, forced removal and genocidal policies, assimilationist agricultural practices and education systems, and disruption of family structures and languages. It is all this and more that we must contend with if we want to hold on to that which makes us Indigenous—our relationships to the land and water.

"An Indian farmer, the government's dream come true." (p. 9)

Throughout *The Seed Keeper*, readers are reminded that there are Indigenous ways of knowing and settler understandings. We are

initiated into the life and thoughts of Rosalie Iron Wing, the book's main protagonist. She is a Dakhóta woman who marries a settler man whose family has occupied the very lands in New Ulm, Minnesota that were stolen away from her family following the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862. In spite of the forced exile, boarding schools, and foster care, she is seemingly lucky to be able to live on her ancestral lands. However, always lurking in the background is the underlying question of who the land really belongs to—Dakhóta people or settlers.

While she carries Dakhóta knowledge of the land, plants, and animals with her, she is often at odds with her husband's settler knowledge that is continually shaped by capitalism:

She has a garden.

He has a farm.

She nourishes the land with her songs.

He feeds it chemical concoctions.

She greets the bird relatives.

He talks to his church community.

She returns to the water and wonders about its health.

He continues his ways, even if it hurts the water we all depend on.

These differences have been shaping the lands for generations.

Settler colonial policies have been shaping the lands for generations.

Generations of Indigenous people have been shaped by settler colonial policies.

Even after the Dakhóta people were starved, hurt, and removed from their homelands, they



*Bde Wakan/Misi-zaaga'iganiing (Mille Lacs Lake), a place my family always returns to.
Image courtesy of Racquel Banaszak.*

continued to be the people of the Mní Sota Wakpá. But when the U.S. government tried to take the children and turn them into Americans, it marked a new turning point.

The book parallels the experiences of many Indigenous families, including my own, who were put through American education systems that forcibly changed our way of relating to each other. Many were removed from their families and given new memories. Like my maternal family, those who kept the old memories alive struggled in this new world filled with hunger pains and cold houses. Those who were given new memories of how to live in this world turned the land into farms with houses, like my paternal family. These are the stories of letting go and holding on that pervade Wilson's narrative.

The old memories are filled with the language and lifeways these lands know. The new memories are spoken in languages these lands do not know. In *The Seed Keeper*, these differences are at odds with each other when their future generation is born of both Dakhóta and settler blood.

"[My father] had been trying to warn me about exactly this moment, when a child's heart was a stake." (p. 186)

Rosalie struggles with what to call her child. Should she call him by a Dakhóta name or an American name? Her internal struggle is soothed in his early years before he goes off to school; they get to be a Dakhóta mother and her child, sharing in the gifts of their plant and animal relatives. Wilson opens up glimpses



Harvesting medicine with my child. Image courtesy of Racquel Banaszak.



Bloodroot blooming in the spring. Image courtesy of Racquel Banaszak.

into the wonders of life between a mother and child—stories of the plants and the changes of the seasons. They rejoice in the stories of their ancestors like the mouse people and beans. They gather plants in the forests along the river—wild ginger, bearberry, hog peanut, and bloodroot. They offer *čhaŋšáša* (traditional tobacco) and are reminded of the gifts of the plant and animal relatives that allow them to live.

Rosalie's struggles intensify when her son becomes a part of the American education system. Schools are sites for the kinds of social problems she experienced, such as being called derogatory names and having to decide how to respond. The names still hurt her, decades later, and now her son has to contend with them as well. There are the problems with curriculum, with whose stories are told and whose are not. There are microaggressions. There is the unwavering reality of being Indigenous in a settler society.

These are hard facts Indigenous people must contend with. As Indigenous people, it makes us uncomfortable to be who we are in our own bodies. Sometimes these struggles define too much of who we are. Some days it hurts more than others. What do we hold on to? What do we

let go of? Sometimes it breaks us and sometimes it pushes us.

“People don’t understand how hard it is to be Indian,’ Carlos said. ‘I’m not talking about all the sad history. I’m talking about a way of life that demands your best every single day. Being Dakhóta means every step you take is a prayer.’” (p. 335)

No matter what, Rosalie Iron Wing will always be Dakota, an Indigenous woman of her ancestral lands. She returns to the Mní Sota Wakpá throughout her life. It is the same water her family has always lived along. It has always been their grocery store, their classroom, and their play area.

As we walk on the lands of Mní Sota Makhóche, we must remember that this is Dakhóta land. With every step we take, we are walking on the same places where Indigenous people have lived, eaten, drunk, raised their children, and dreamed since time immemorial. With this knowledge is mind, *The Seed Keeper* reminds us what it means to walk along these lands as an Indigenous person.

Recommended Citation

Banaszak, Racquel. 2022. “We Are On Dakhóta Land: A Review of Diane Wilson’s *The Seed Keeper*.” *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 22. <https://openrivers.lib.umn.edu/article/seed-keeper/>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.9686>

About the Author

Racquel Banaszak (Bad River Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe) is a visual artist and educator based in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She currently attends the Master of Heritage Studies and Public History program at the University of Minnesota. She earned a graduate certificate in Native American Studies from Montana State University (2018) and a bachelor of science degree from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design (2012). Her work focuses on Indigenous histories, representation, and Indigenous Education for All.

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.

ISSUE 22 : FALL 2022

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.

ISSUE 22 : FALL 2022

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.

Recommended Citation

Vue, Lee. 2022. "Water Memories: Exploring Our Relationship With Water." *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 22. <https://openrivers.lib.umn.edu/article/water-memories/>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.9694>

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.

PRIMARY SOURCES

WOMEN & WATER: INSPIRATION AND RESOURCES

By Racquel Banaszak, Caroline Doenmez,
Caroline Gottschalk Druschke, Becky Jacobs, Shannon LeBlanc,
Phyllis Mauch Messenger, Lee Vue, and Anne Whitehouse

Note from the Editor

Over the past two issues of Open Rivers, we have focused on a single overarching theme: Women & Water. Yet even over two issues, we are only beginning to explore the myriad and complex ways women and water are intertwined.

With this awareness in mind, we asked authors from both issues to share a resource on this broad theme of women and water that they find provocative or inspiring. The collection of responses below offers resources ranging from a Facebook group to artwork to texts to lectures,



*“Niimaamaa” sculpture in Winnipeg by artists KC Adams, Jaimie Isaac and Val Vint (2018).
Image courtesy of Caroline Fidan Tyler Doenmez.*

all of which help these authors confront the ongoing challenges of the work they do with water professionally and personally. We hope this list might spark your curiosity and enrich

your own understandings of the entanglements of women and water.

—Laurie Moberg, Editor

Racquel Banaszak

Nitamising Gimashkikinaan—Indigenous Perinatal and Lactation Support Group

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/nitamising.gimashkikinaan/>

The relationship between pregnant and lactating mothers with their children mirrors the relationship between mother earth and the nourishing waters that support all life.

This support group is dedicated to Indigenous pregnant and lactating people, doulas, and supporters in order to restore support systems for Indigenous first foods, breastmilk. Indigenous breastfeeding practices have been impacted by colonization including access to safe drinking

water. The relationship between the health of our bodies and the health of waters and lands is inextricably connected to the health of our people. Indigenous breastfeeding is Indigenous food sovereignty.

The knowledge and support this group has given me has helped me to understand the role of women as water protectors and life givers. We must nourish the patriarchy so we can survive and carry on in our future generations.

Caroline Fidan Tyler Doenmez

“Niimaamaa” sculpture at The Forks in Winnipeg by artists KC Adams, Jaimie Isaac, and Val Vint. <https://www.theforks.com/attractions/niimaamaa>

I encountered this sculpture on my very last day of fieldwork in Winnipeg. It was early spring of 2020, and I was walking around an area called Niizhoziibe (meaning “two rivers” in Ojibwe) at The Forks. The sight of her soaring silhouette made me stop in my snowy tracks. I have held onto the image of this sculpture ever since, because she gives such vivid and eloquent form to the connections between women and water that are central to my research, which engages the Anishinaabe concept of women as “water carriers.” This term speaks to women’s abilities to hold new life, as well as their specific connections and caretaking responsibilities to bodies of water.

This sculpture, called “Niimaamaa” (“mother”) exemplifies these themes through the fluid,

rippling outline of her heavily pregnant body, as well as her location at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. Indeed, the artist statement explains, “Her pregnant form signals that she is a water carrier and she is positioned to gaze towards the horizon between the water and sky. Within the hair strands, the waterways of the Assiniboine and Red Rivers are traced, and seven-sister constellations marked to honor the sky and water worlds.”

The sculpture was created in 2018 by artists KC Adams (Anishinaabe, Inninew, and British), Jaimie Isaac (Anishinaabe), and Val Vint (Métis). Standing at an impressive height of 30 feet, Niimaamaa can almost see over the treetops to the memorial for missing and murdered



*"Niimaamaa" sculpture in Winnipeg by artists KC Adams, Jaimie Isaac and Val Vint (2018).
Image courtesy of Caroline Fidan Tyler Doenmez.*



*“Niimaamaa” sculpture in Winnipeg by artists KC Adams, Jaimie Isaac and Val Vint (2018).
Image courtesy of Caroline Fidan Tyler Doenmez.*

Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people nearby. Both figures, existing at this significant meeting place of two rivers, signal a sense of something rooted in place and enduring, but also something open, porous, and transformative on the edges of the earth, air, and water.

Niimaamaa is positioned over a pathway, so that you walk through her. If you pause underneath and look up, you are confronted with your own

wavery reflection in the bright pieces of metal that line the inside. You realize, then, that you are fleetingly a part of the sculpture, too; you are the one being carried. In this way, you're being asked to think about what gives you life, and in what ways you can give and protect other forms of creation. How can you honor the sources of your being and caretake the lands, waters, and relations that carry and sustain you?

Caroline Gottschalk Druschke

Johnson, Lacy M. 2022. "Lessons from Houston: Remembering and Reimagining Life with Floods." Metcalfe Institute's 2022 Public Lecture Series. The University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI, June 13.

We were aware of Lacy Johnson's work with the Houston Flood Museum when we were launching Stories from the Flood in 2018 and 2019. Associate professor at Rice University, Johnson's Metcalf Institute lecture offers a powerful and personal account of the differential

impacts of flooding on the people of Houston. Johnson touches on power, inequity, empathy, and vulnerability. Her work offers a shining example of collaborative and creative response to increasingly frequent and increasingly devastating floods.

Becky Jacobs

Bandora, Patricia Mhoja. 2021. "Dying for a Pee: Empowering Residents in Cape Town's Informal Settlement." *Place Journal* (December). <https://placesjournal.org/workshop-article/dying-for-a-pee-empowering-residents-in-cape-towns-informal-settlement/?cn-reloaded=1>.

This journal article drew my attention to the issue of gender inequality and access to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) in the context of the

shocking murder of a young woman in a public toilet in a South African informal settlement.

House, Sarah, Suzanne Ferron, Marni Sommer, and Sue Cavil. 2014. "Violence, Gender and WASH: a Practitioners' Toolkit Making Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene Safer Through Improved Programming." *Humanitarian Practice Network* 60 (February 12). <https://odihpn.org/publication/violence-gender-and-wash-a-practitioners%C2%92-toolkit-making-water-sanitation-and-hygiene-safer-through-improved-programming/>.

This widely distributed toolkit is designed to provide resources to help readers understand the gendered power dynamics involved in WASH and how these dynamics can contribute to violence.

The toolkit goes on to offer suggestions for how people can minimize vulnerabilities and provide victim support.

Shannon LeBlanc

Yuknavitch, Lidia. 2011. *The Chronology of Water: A Memoir*. Portland, OR: Hawthorne Books and Literary Arts. <http://hawthornebooks.com/catalogue/the-chronology-of-water>.

Tsui, Bonnie. 2021. *Why We Swim*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books. <https://www.workman.com/products/why-we-swim/paperback>.

While different in genre and approach, both of these publications have made me think of the history behind water and our use of water for recreational and competitive purposes. When I was a competitive swimmer and when I swim leisurely now, I'm entering into a tentative agreement with a powerful natural element. I may promise to use its buoyancy to stay afloat while it may promise not to drown me. There is a matter of trust that's extended, and I also accept a lack of control over my body depending on the state of water and my

place in it. I find this understanding both liberating and terrifying. Both books discuss the trust humans have with water and the evolution of that trust on historical, societal and personal levels. The authors also speak to the problems that arise when water becomes an oasis for the elite and a mirage for others. Swimming has often been a privileged space for me, and it's not one that I consider often enough when I jump in, unafraid of what may lie beneath the surface.

Phyllis Mauch Messenger

Jensen, Anne. 2017. "Threatened Heritage and Community Archaeology on Alaska's North Slope." In *Public Archaeology and Climate Change*, edited by Tom Dawson, Courtney Nimura, Elías López-Romero, and Marie-Yvane Daire, 126-137. Oxford: Oxbow Books. https://youtu.be/nmGLs05_C50.

See video [Threatened Heritage and Community Archaeology on Alaska's North Slope](#).

Messenger, Phyllis Mauch. 2019. "Libraries Burning." *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 14. <https://openrivers.lib.umn.edu/article/libraries-burning/>.

Archaeologist Anne Jensen excavates ancient coastal sites in Alaska that are being exposed by increasingly strong storms and thawing permafrost. She lives in Barrow and works for Ukpeavik Iñupiat Corporation, one of the largest corporations owned by Alaska Natives. She calls the ancient material that, until recently, has been frozen in time a "tissue bank" that can help us understand climatic cycles over millennia. Her dedication to working with local communities seeking to salvage their history is palpable and has stuck with me since hearing her speak at a 2018 Society for American Archaeology

Annual Meeting ("Salvaging Heritage and Data from Walakpa: A Case Study of the Walakpa Archaeological Salvage Project"). This and other articles by Jensen are referenced in my Open Rivers article, "[Libraries Burning](#)."

Jensen's work is intimately connected to the needs and wishes of the local communities with whom she has worked for years. With them, she has watched the effects of climate change on shorelines and ancient sites. She has had to change her ways of working to meet the increasing pace of shoreline erosion and the thawing-freezing cycles that have affected those sites.

She not only seeks to engage the local community in the salvaging of their heritage, but also to educate the archaeological community in methods of working with Indigenous communities. She has been an early leader in alerting archaeologists to the growing impact of the changing climate

on archaeological sites around the world. Anne Jensen has been an inspiration to me, and I am glad that I could shine a light on her work. She exemplifies how her profession—archaeology—is closely tied to the effects of changing water patterns.

Lee Vue

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. 2015. *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions.

Johnson, Ayana Elizabeth, Alex Blumber, and Frankie Myers. 2021. “The Tribe that’s Moving Earth (and Water) to Solve the Climate Crisis.” Produced by Lauren Silverman. *How to Save a Planet*, February. Podcast, 43:51. <https://gimletmedia.com/shows/howtosaveaplanet/5whko6o/the-tribe-thats-moving-earth-and-water>.

Tolber, Makshya. 2022. “Becoming Water: Black Memory in Slavery’s Afterlives.” *Emergence Magazine*, February 17, 2022. <https://emergencemagazine.org/essay/becoming-water/>.

These three pieces each provide deeper, more humanizing understandings of water and its value to humankind and this planet. Some of the

resources also emphasize the role that identity plays in how we shape our relationship with water.

Anne Whitehouse

Pak, T’ae-wŏn. 2011. *Scenes from Ch’ŏnggye Stream*. Translated by Ok Young Kim Chang. Singapore: Stallion Press.

The resource that has been most influential on my thinking about women and water is Pak T’ae-won’s 1930s Korean novel, *Scenes from*

Cheonggye Stream, which is the subject of my [article](#) in this issue. However, there are two other resources that have also inspired me lately.

“Drown Your Tears”

See the video [“Drown Your Tears.”](#)

“Drown Your Tears” is a musical number from the Korean production of Frank Wildhorn and Jack Murphy’s musical adaptation of Victor Hugo’s novel, *The Man Who Laughs*. The Korean title is 눈물은 강물에, which roughly translates to “Tears in the River,” and the Korean version is translated by Kwon Eun Ah.

This musical number focuses on the female members of a troupe of poor, outcast carnival

performers. Prior to this musical number, Dea—a character who has been blind from birth—has just been through a traumatic experience that has left her shaken and even more terrified of the world. On a quiet evening by the river, the female performers wash their clothes and talk together, and two of the women try to encourage Dea and lift her spirits. They tell her to let the river carry her tears away and wash away her sorrow, assuring her that tomorrow will be better and that the trials and pain she experiences in life are temporary and will pass. At the song’s climax,

the women bring Dea into the (shallow) river and let her hands go, encouraging her to stand on her own. At first Dea is afraid and uncertain, but then she finds joy as she touches the water of the river and joins the other women in dancing in the river's flow.

I find "Drown Your Tears" to be a beautiful and moving representation of female relationships and community that arises at the communal gathering place of the riverside laundry site. The

moving water is an important part of the interaction between Dea and the other women here, a metaphor for their sharing one another's burdens and finding solace in each other. Being in the water is also a way for Dea to physically interact with the world again in a way that feels secure. The unbridled joy of all the women as they wash the dirt from their clothes and the pain from their souls is truly delightful to see.

Adele. 2015. "River Lea" 25. London: XL Recordings.

See the video Adele - River Lea - Live at Glastonbury.

"River Lea" (2015) adopts a haunting tone and a heavy rhythmic beat as Adele sings about the way her toxic connection to the nearby river from childhood impacts her current choices and relationships. She sings, "When I was a child I grew up by the River Lea / There was something in the water, now that something's in me." Alluding to the industrial pollution of the River Lea, she describes that "something in the water" as having contaminated her own body and even harming those around her enough

that she "[stains] every heart that [she uses] to heal the pain." The image "the reeds are growing out of my fingertips" illustrates the deep and uncomfortable connection she has with the river, evoking a sense of environmental horror. She is separated from the river physically, saying that "[she] can't go back," but that the toxicity of the river will be something that she carries with her for her entire life. There's a sense of helplessness that the river's influence will continue to leak into her relationships and cause her to hurt others, but she also expresses a sense of power in accepting her relationship with the river. This song continues to be one of my all-time favorites.

Recommended Citation

Banaszak, Raquel, Caroline Doenmez, Caroline Gottschalk Druschke, Becky Jacobs, Shannon LeBlanc, Phyllis Mauch Messenger, Lee Vue, and Anne Whitehouse. 2022. "Women & Water: Inspiration and Resources." *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 22. <https://openrivers.lib.umn.edu/article/women-water-inspiration/>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.9755>

About the Authors

Racquel Banaszak (Bad River Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe) is a visual artist and educator based in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She currently attends the Master of Heritage Studies and Public History program at the University of Minnesota. She earned a graduate certificate in Native American Studies from Montana State University (2018) and a bachelor of science degree from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design (2012). Her work focuses on Indigenous histories, representation, and Indigenous Education for All.

Caroline Fidan Tyler Doenmez is of Kurdish and English settler descent and was raised in the Mo-nadnock region of New Hampshire. She is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Minnesota, a visiting scholar in the Department of Native American and Indigenous Studies at Dartmouth College, and she currently holds the American Association of University Women (AAUW) American Dissertation Fellowship. Her dissertation research, based on fieldwork in Manitoba, examines the reclamation of birth by Indigenous dou-las.

Caroline Gottschalk Druschke is a professor of rhetoric in the department of English at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she also serves as Chair of Water@UW, an umbrella organization that connects water scholars across the UW-Madison campus and across the state. Gottschalk Druschke's research, teaching, and community work are centrally focused on the questions of how people change rivers, and how rivers change people.

Becky L. Jacobs is the Waller Lansden Distinguished Professor of Law at the University of Tennessee College of Law in Knoxville, Tennessee, near the Tennessee River. She teaches and writes in a number of interconnected areas, including environmental and natural resources law, the built environment, and infrastructure; conflict resolution; public health law; trade and transnational/global business issues; gender and the law; and development issues. She often approaches these topics from an anthropo-legal/socio-legal perspective, exploring the motivations and conditions that animate societal responses to, and society's influence on, the development of the law and adopting the intersectionality necessary to interrogate human/ecological interactions and interdependencies.

Shannon LeBlanc holds an MFA in creative nonfiction from Emerson College. Her essays have appeared in *Catch & Release: Columbia Journal Online*; *What I Didn't Know: True Stories of Becoming a Teacher*, an anthology published by Creative Nonfiction and edited by Lee Gutkind; an "Albums of Our Lives" column on *The Rumpus*; as a Reader's Choice finalist in *Memoir Magazine's* #MeToo edition; and on The Bangalore Review. She lives in Louisville, Kentucky. You can follow her on Twitter [@ShaNini86](https://twitter.com/ShaNini86).

Phyllis Mauch Messenger is an anthropologist and archaeologist who has published numerous books and articles on archaeology and heritage. In addition to editing for *Open Rivers*, she is currently completing a novel about a young female archaeologist working in the 1980s on a salvage archaeology project in the Sulaco River valley in Honduras. She spent time during summer 2022 watching her three-year-old grandson learn to cast and canoe on lakes in northern Minnesota, on the edge of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, her favorite place in the world.

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.

Anne Whitehouse has a master's degree in Environmental Humanities from the University of Utah. She was raised in Washington State by the Sammamish River, and she has found solace in walking along rivers and streams ever since. She enjoys writing creative nonfiction, reading, eating good food, and hiking. Anne is currently studying Korean in South Korea, where she lives near Cheonggye Stream. The main things she misses from home are her rough collie (Liesey) and tortilla chips.

TEACHING AND PRACTICE

FISHER WOMEN AND JOB INSECURITY IN WEST AFRICA

By Ifesinachi Okafor-Yarwood



African woman carrying fish in a basket on her head on the local market in Assomada, Santiago. A large number of West African women rely on the blue economy to survive. Maa-ikeZaal/GettyImages.

West Africa's fisher women are experts at coping with job insecurity – but policymakers are using their resilience against them

All along West Africa's coastline, women play a vital role in the fisheries sector as processors, traders and distributors.

But they face many challenges – like job insecurity, a lack of finance, availability of fish and child care – and they're also vulnerable to shocks, like the COVID pandemic.

Simplistic assessments by government and non-governmental organisations will often praise their resilience in facing these challenges. But this masks the dangers inherent in some of their coping strategies, as we've shown in a recent study documenting their experiences in West Africa during COVID.

Women are adept at coping because they have to be. Compared with men, women carry a disproportionate burden of ensuring food is on the table for their families. This is because they're the ones at home whilst the men are at sea. Women will therefore often diversify their income sources to support their families.

Their ability to cope or adapt in times of adversity should not absolve states or governments of the responsibility to address the sources of their hardship.

Although there is an awareness by West African governments of the need for policies that benefit both men and women, countries across the region are failing at addressing their root challenges.

Challenges women in fisheries face

The main challenge is that women find themselves excluded from policy making and their contributions are largely undervalued by government and financial institutions compared to men who are counted and supported due to their contributions as fishers. Yet women are big contributors to the sector.

As the direct contact with the end-users, women are at the top of the value chain. The women traders pre-finance fishing activities, are the owners of boats, and purchase outboard engines, food for the crew or fuel for fishing trips. Though often invisible to the casual observer, women are the power behind fishing enterprises and the settlements along rich fishing grounds.

These dynamics produce gendered vulnerabilities. For instance, social expectations render women invisible and increase their earnings

gaps. Specifically, women's fisheries work is often perceived by policy makers merely as an extension of their household responsibility. These activities may include book keeping, gear repairs, and provisioning for fishing trips.

As a consequence, women are excluded from financial, and other, support from state institutions. This limits their livelihood security and makes them particularly vulnerable to disruptions threatening their already precarious livelihoods.

New challenges they face include the depletion of fish stocks due to climate change, pollution, over-fishing and illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing.

These challenges will affect men too, but women feel the impact more because their income are

dispelled on their families and they do not get support from the state.

They're also vulnerable to shocks. My colleagues and I examined the impact of the COVID restrictions on fisherfolk and saw how lockdown measures, travel restrictions and border closures all affected fish processing and trade.

Women weren't able to sell as much. The movements of fisher people were disrupted, so

there wasn't as much fish available. And fish spoiled because of curfews, market closures and because there were fewer women allowed at processing sites. Men were also affected by these disruptions but because they dominate the at sea activities, their disruptions were mostly restricted to labour and production.

The fisher women found various coping strategies.

Negative coping strategies

Fisher women find ways to cope with their challenges but some strategies – like those employed during the COVID pandemic – can bring negative outcomes.

One of these is the practice of “sex for fish” or “sex for finance”. We found that women engaged in sexual acts in exchange for buying fish on credit or in exchange for money.



Ortetha Sampon, 40, sells fish in Wa`terside Market next to West Point in Monrovia, Liberia in 2014. Photo by Morgana Wingard. (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

This practice is not new and there are worrying health implications – like rising HIV/AIDS infection rates within fishing communities. Fishing communities in Africa have HIV infection prevalence rates 4 to 14 times higher than the national average, due to transactional sex.

Another coping strategy in Ghana was to involve middlemen and use technology. Women dispatched parcels of fish to customers via taxi or

public minibuses. They would get paid through mobile money before sending the fish. They managed to get the fish to their customers, but their profit was halved as they had to involve a third party.

Women shouldn't have to resort to coping strategies like these. In a time of adversity, the things that make them vulnerable must be addressed.

Supporting women

There are several steps to take.

Women need support in the form of finance and subsidies. They should also be included in fisheries related policy deliberations and their views represented. For instance, they must be supported when fishing bans link – to conserve fish stocks – are introduced.

Government must invest in infrastructure to help transform the sector. Investments would include an integrated cold chain to keep fish fresh, potable water supply to allow good hygienic practices, and innovative smoking facilities, so fish can be preserved and sold in a different form.

In addition, greater priority must be given to women's digital skills training. This would ensure

that more women take the advantage offered by technology to reach more potential customers and at an affordable rate.

Ensuring that women are not left behind requires access to affordable credit. For instance, establishing and supporting financial organisations – such as credit unions, banks and cooperatives to provide credit at affordable rates to women.

The government should also support women with easier access to markets. One of these markets should be the the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Women already benefit from trans-boundary trade, and ensuring that they can cross borders to sell their products without disruptions will introduce them to new markets and increase their income.

Learning from past experience

Policymakers can also learn from some of the fisher women's more positive coping strategies.

Something we saw in several countries is that women coped by coming together, seeking out partnerships and opportunities. In Ghana, for instance, women formed community village savings and loan associations with the support of the West Coast Women Ambassadors, a civil society organisation.

The aim of these associations was to bring financial services closer to members. They also acted as a rallying point for initiating community development activities such as business education.

Because the association was well-organised, and presented as a group, the women were able to secure a loan from the Business Advisory Centre. This is a state public agency that provides business advice, training services and marketing avenues to small business enterprises.

They also partnered with Conservation des Espèces – a marine conservation NGO which focuses on protecting marine turtles and their habitats. In exchange for cooperation from the women's groups and their networks, the NGO will provide them with a cold room and ice factory. Cooperation included discouraging turtle poaching and encroachment on their habitats and helping the NGO to monitor turtles by reporting on sightings.

Romanticising women navigating adversity as strong, resilient and having supernatural abilities to endure disruptions takes attention away from the failure of the government to identify and address the source of their adversity.

Importantly, by addressing the root challenges of women, those of men will also be dealt with as the challenges are cyclical and interrelated.

This article is republished from The Conversation under a Creative Commons license. Read the original article.

Recommended Citation

Okafor-Yarwood, Ifesinachi. 2022. "Fisher Women and Job Insecurity in West Africa." *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 22. <https://openrivers.lib.umn.edu/article/fisher-women/>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.9790>

About the Author

Dr Okafor-Yarwood's research to date has generated critical insights around the blue economy, environmental justice, human security, maritime governance, and security. She brings a critical lens to the concept of sustainable development in relation to the management of marine and other natural resources and challenges the dominant assumptions on the areas of security, environmental justice, and maritime governance.

Her multidisciplinary research combines empirical (indigenous epistemologies), doctrinal, historical, and theoretical analysis to investigate the complexities that shape environmental justice, maritime and natural resource governance and security in Africa.

She is continuing to advance the understanding of sustainability as a question of resource management, environmental justice, and the disproportionate effects of depleting resources on security, poverty, and inequality.

EDITORIAL

THANK YOU

By *Open Rivers* Editorial Staff

For seven years, *Open Rivers* has shared provocative and meaningful articles with our growing audience based on the research, narratives, perspectives, and practices of our expanding network of authors. Even as the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted all our lives, we've continued to publish new issues. Our last six issues include content that queries our relationships with the natural as relatives, imagines the possibilities of our futures with water, considers the shifting flows of rivers as a guide in uncertain

times, engages with rivers as shapers of both socialscapes and landscapes, and explores the myriad, complex ways that women and water are entangled in beautiful and troublesome ways. Together, these issues engage, inspire, and challenge us as readers.

We are privileged to be able to share this variety of powerful work with all of you and we are grateful to our authors, readers, peer reviewers, board members, partners, and staff for making



Between the Altai Mountains and the Khovd River, Ölgii is the capital of the Bayan-Ölgii Aimag province in western Mongolia. Image by Lightscape on Unsplash.

this possible. We especially appreciate the collaboration of our partners at the University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing and the University of Minnesota Institute for Advanced Study and the support of the Mellon Foundation. In addition, as we welcome new editorial board members this fall, we offer our heartfelt thanks to our outgoing board members, many of whom

have served since the journal's start in 2015. The labor, attention, and contributions of so many people help this journal maintain its integrity and bring you the thoughtful and stimulating work you've come to expect from us. Thank you all, readers and contributors alike, for being an invaluable part of our *Open Rivers'* community.

Contributors

- Wren Almitra
- Mollie Aronowitz
- Charmaine Bailie
- Racquel Banaszak
- Jay Bell
- Tammy Berberi
- Helena Beutel
- Eric G. Booth
- Kate Brauman
- Juliet Burba
- Čhantémaza (Neil Mckay)
- Sara Černe
- Margaret Cogswell
- Agléška Cohen-Rencountre
- Ayooluwateso Coker
- Adam W.Coon
- Tamara Dean
- Christine Taitano DeLisle
- Vincente M. Diaz
- Michael J. Dockry
- Caroline Fidan Tyler Doenmez
- Laura Donkers
- Evelyn Dsouza
- Jean Eells
- Trinity Ek
- Bonnie Etherington
- Tom Fisher
- Andrew M.Freiman
- Britt Gangeness
- Tia-Simone Gardner
- Michelle Garvey
- Becca Gercken
- Veronica Cadavid Gonzalez
- Mark Gorman
- Caroline Gottschalk Druschke
- Roxanne Biidabinokwe Gould
- Jennifer Gunn
- Mahin Hamilton

- Katherine Hayes
- Eleanor Hayman
- Marijke Hecht
- Barbara Heitkamp
- Margot Higgins
- Angie Hong
- Fayola Jacobs
- Becky L. Jacobs
- Colleen James
- Katie Johnston-Goodstar
- Jabari Jones
- Simi Kang
- Daniel F. Keefe
- Michelle King
- Tania Kovats
- Rebecca Lave
- Shannon LeBlanc
- Clement Loo
- Nenette Luarca-Shoaf
- Joyce Lyon
- Amanda Lyons
- Aizita Magaña
- Samantha Majhor
- Miriam Mallalieu
- Ruth McCabe
- Henry McCarthy
- Scot McFarlane
- Monica Siems McKay
- Brianna Menning
- Sayanangshu Modak
- Mary Modeen
- David Morrison
- Ciara Healy Musson
- Kathryn Neurnberger
- G.-H. Crystal Ng
- Patrick Nunnally
- Ifesinachi Okafor-Yarwood
- Teresa Opheim
- Kristin Osiecki
- Alexandra M. Peck
- Sarah Peele
- David Naguib Pellow
- Francisco Pereira Da Silva
- Laelcio Pereira Da Silva
- Elan Pochedley
- Katie Hart Potapoff
- Louise Ritchie
- Jim Rock
- Anindita Sarkar
- Christina Schmidt

- Tyler Seidel
- Linda Shenk
- Yvonne P. Sherwood
- Virajita Singh
- Susannah Smith
- Wendy F. Smythe
- Robert Snikkar
- Douglas Snyder
- Natalia Guzmán Solano
- Bob Sterner
- Mary Beth Stevenson
- Victoria Bradford Styrbicki
- David Syring
- Jennifer Terry
- Wendy Todd
- Jennifer Tonko
- Abby Travis
- Tropical Rivers Lab
- Emily Ury
- Moira Villiard
- Lee Vue
- Natalie Warren
- Arthur Watson
- Waziyatawin
- Mark Wedge
- Lark Weller
- Valerie Were
- Kevin Whalen
- Anne Whitehouse
- Carrie Moberg Wilder
- Shimira Williams
- Kelly Wisecup
- Jiao Xingtao
- Pei-Lin Yu

Recommended Citation

Open Rivers Editorial Staff. 2022. "Thank You." *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 22. <https://openrivers.lib.umn.edu/article/thank-you-3/>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.9819>