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RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

# CONNECTIONS IN PRACTICE

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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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INTRODUCTION

# INTRODUCTION TO ISSUE 23 | CONNECTIONS IN PRACTICE

By Phyllis Mauch Messenger

On April 12, 2023, the TRUTH Project, in partnership with the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council and the 11 federally recognized Tribes in Minnesota, published their final report titled “Oshkigin Noojimo’iwe, Naḡi Waḡ Peḡ tu Uḡ Ihduwas’ake He Oyate Kiḡ Zaniwiḡaç ye Kte.” TRUTH—Towards Recognition and University-Tribal Healing—is a collaboration among the 11 recognized Tribal Governments of Minnesota, the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council (MIAC),

and a core research team of three University of Minnesota graduate students and alumni with faculty support. TRUTH uses place-based, Tribally led research designed to tell the story of Tribal-University relations from an Indigenous perspective. This vitally important report has reverberated around the world. We encourage our readers to learn more about it [here](#), as well as in a review of the “[Place and Relations Capstone: Indigenizing Education](#)” article in this issue.



*Roxanne Biidabinokwe Gould is preparing some smoked fish at the water and ground breaking ceremony conducted by the Indigenous Women’s Water Sisterhood and the City of Duluth. The ceremony was held for an outdoor classroom on the Waabizheshikana Trail on the St. Louis River. Image courtesy of University of Minnesota Duluth.*

When *Open Rivers* launched in fall 2015, we made a promise to try to include at least one Indigenous voice in each issue. Since then, many issues have featured multiple Indigenous voices, including many involved with the TRUTH Report. Now, with Issue 23, “Connections in Practice,” a majority of the authors—faculty, staff, and students—are enrolled members or descendants of Tribes and Nations from throughout North America. They represent a growing cohort of university faculty and other professionals who work in two worlds, creating networks, honoring their traditional ways of knowing and being, while also nudging their non-Indigenous colleagues to expand their own worldviews.

In Issue 23, we intentionally focus on relationships and intersections among communities, environments, and places in teaching and learning at the University of Minnesota. We have called upon the scholars and community members who have taken the lead in the Mellon-funded Environmental Stewardship, Place, and Community Initiative. This initiative, called “MESPAC” for short, began in 2019 on the three UMN campuses that have American Indian studies programs. As Jennifer Gunn reports in the feature article about MESPAC, “Connecting Environment, Place, and Community,” a group of faculty began with the question, “What might the impact be if a major research university were to center Indigenous methodologies and approaches in humanities scholarship?” The answer is revealed in the articles in this issue.

The Gunn et al. feature highlights activities on each campus. At the UMN Duluth campus, on the shores of Lake Superior, Roxanne Biidabinokwe Gould, Wendy Todd, and their colleagues focused on water protection through creation of the Indigenous Women’s Water Sisterhood. At UMN Morris, which sits on the site of a former Indigenous Residential School, Becca Gercken and Kevin Whalen led a Decolonizing and Indigenizing Cohort to focus on Indigenous epistemologies and lifeways as they worked on curriculum development, community activism,

and institutional change. At UMN Twin Cities, various initiatives were carried out by faculty leads Christine Baeumler, Čhañtémaza, and Vicente M. Diaz, along with many colleagues. In a reparative justice project, Diaz led faculty and students in a three-year focus on building kinship with the Dakota non-profit organization, Makoce Ikićupi. Baeumler and international colleagues found many ways to decolonize place-based arts research. Further elucidation of these and other initiatives is found in a review column, “Place and Relations Capstone: Indigenizing Education,” by Susannah Smith and Carmen Petit.

Other articles in this issue discuss Indigenous ways of knowing. In “The Science in Indigenous Water Stories, Indigenous Women’s Connection to Water,” authors Todd, Northbird, and Towne present educational activities related to Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and their tribal communities’ relationship to water. In “The College Union: Where Tradition Meets Decolonization on Campus,” Simón Franco discusses how the UMN Morris campus union creates welcoming spaces for all using Indigenous practices. The Teaching & Practice column, “Teaching Indigenous Epistemologies at the University of Minnesota,” highlights a sample of courses across the University of Minnesota that integrate Indigenous ways of knowing. In a republication of Eve Tuck’s article from *The Conversation*, she discusses the enduring effects of harmful research with Indigenous communities and the potential of Collaborative Indigenous Research.

Several articles in this issue feature the perspectives of student authors. In the feature “Learning Together: The Humanities Futures Labs,” five graduate students discuss their experiences in designing and teaching Labs for undergraduates that foreground Indigenous ways of knowing. Doctoral student Florencia Pech-Cárdenas uses an event featuring Robin Wall Kimmerer and Diane Wilson as a starting point to reflect on her own life as a Yucatecan Maya woman in “Indigenous Wisdom: Re-story-ation to Resist,”

Resurge, and Inspire.” In “Data Science in Indian Country,” undergraduates Maudesty Merino and Nick Salgado-Stanley describe a summer working with researchers from UMN Duluth in collaboration with the Fond du Lac Band of Minnesota Chippewa on a project studying the effects of sulfur on Manoomin/Psiñ/Wild Rice.

In his foreword to our republication of “Where We Stand: The University of Minnesota and Dakhóta Lands,” Čhañtémaza states, “the main thing that we continue to focus on is the need for accountability and reparative action for land theft. Land acknowledgments are even more commonplace than they were in 2020,

but they are still often nothing more than nice words.” In the six or so years since the Institute for Advanced Study and other UMN programs have been offering land acknowledgments, we have striven to do more than offer nice words. We believe that the programs and initiatives discussed in this issue are a testament to those efforts. We will continue to support and be allies to our Indigenous colleagues, who are leading the way in foregrounding Indigenous ways of knowing and practices of environmental stewardship and justice within the humanities and other fields of knowing, as we also move toward institutional change.

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## About the Author

Phyllis Mauch Messenger is an archaeologist and anthropologist who has published numerous books and articles on archaeology and heritage. Prior to serving as an editor for *Open Rivers*, she ran the lab for an archaeology project in Honduras, organized teacher workshops and summer archaeology camps in Minnesota, and led college students on a service-learning experience in the Andes Mountains of Peru. Now she is looking forward to being in a canoe on Minnesota lakes and rivers with her young grandchildren.