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OPEN RIVERS :  
RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

# RIVERS & BORDERS



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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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INTRODUCTION

# INTRODUCTION TO ISSUE 25 | RIVERS AND BORDERS

By Laurie Moberg, Editor

On a map, the defined line of a river makes a compelling case for becoming a border. The line crisply delineates one space from another, dividing lands and creating distinctions between peoples, cultures, economies, and more. Certainly, these bodies of water have been adopted as borders with some frequency. A recent study published in *Water Policy* determined that

rivers currently make up 23 percent of international borders, not to mention creating borders at provincial, state, and local levels as well (Popelka and Smith 2020).

Yet on the ground, rivers defy this seemingly easy classification; in reality, they serve as fluid arteries of connection as often as they define rigid



*The Mekong River winds through six countries, across 2,700 miles (about 4,350 kilometers) from the mountains to the sea. Image via Unsplash by Parker Hilton.*

lines of separation. More than terrestrial borders, rivers complicate the fixity of borders. Rivers are routes of travel and trade and sociality, spaces of shared ecologies and cultures, and opportunities for mobility and change. Further, rivers transgress borders, demonstrating the permeability and even arbitrariness of these demarcations. Despite this, rivers as borders have real effects on the people and environments they divide.

The articles in this issue grapple with the complexity of rivers and borders in myriad ways. They draw attention to the harm these borders perpetuate, but also to the threads of connection they enable. The articles speak of historic conceptions, contemporary conditions, and future imaginings. They push for social awareness, reconfiguration of policy, and transformative engagements with place.

Some articles in this issue challenge the implications of long-standing political borders. Tim Hannigan explains how travel writers produce and reproduce a sense of absolute difference in their depictions of crossing the River Tamar, the historic boundary between Cornwall and England. Hannigan troubles these narratives, highlighting the ways that these framings do not align with lived experiences and histories. Similarly, Geoffrey Habron and John Roper demonstrate the ways that political borders obscure the experiences and needs of people in Bucksport, South Carolina. Situated between two rivers and subject to intensifying climate-related disasters, Bucksport residents navigate mismatches between their needs and the local, state, and national resources and policies that affect them. Julia Oswald Tilton traces several similar kinds of climate-related disasters across the U.S. in her review of Jake Bittle's *The Great Displacement: Climate Change and the Next American Migration*. Oswald Tilton explains that migration across borders—riverine or otherwise—is likely to increase with ongoing climate change and reminds us that we are all living into this unknown future together.

In the present, the intersection of rivers and borders can also spark contestation. In their photo essay along the Salween River, a river that creates part of the border between Thailand and Myanmar (Burma), Zali Fung and Vanessa Lamb show that this river-border is not fixed; instead, its fluidity and ambiguity allow the border to be both contested and constituted anew in everyday practices and in large-scale political agendas. Focusing on the Mekong River, another major riverway in Southeast Asia that crosses multiple borders and creates others, Stefan Lovgren explains the contentious prospect of determining the value of the river in monetary terms. Lovgren outlines both the difficulties of this endeavor, but also the potential importance for leveraging policy and action.

Policies and actions on borders and river-borders also have real effects on people's lives. For Isaac Espósto, the consequences of the border are physical and embodied. In their Perspectives column, Espósto details the ways that the history, practices, and policy along the U.S.-Mexico border inflict violence on human bodies and put strains on social and environmental connections. The effects intensify as climate change makes water even more scarce and the Sonoran Desert even less hospitable. Further east on the U.S.-Mexico border, Melinda J. Menzer demonstrates that the Rio Grande need not be understood as a border creating division, but as "a path across." She contextualizes her swim across the Rio Grande at the Amistad Reservoir as a way to draw attention to damaging and inhumane outcomes that can arise from these fluid borders and as a way to see borders differently.

The impetus to see river-borders differently reminds us that rivers are often arteries of gathering and connection, even across borders. Michael O. Johnston traces a series of transitions along the Upper Mississippi that ultimately led to the development of two interstate festivals that put the river-border at the center. In their Teaching and Practice column, Stephanie Januchowski-Hartley, Ioanna (Daphne) Giannoulatou, and

Merryn Thomas walk us through a series of activities they led to help people connect with rivers more broadly. They offer us a toolkit of resources for cultivating relationships with rivers through poetry and art.

The articles gathered in this issue demonstrate a variety of different relationships with rivers, carrying us to, along, and across many river-borders. Collectively, the articles here compel us to recognize both the real effects of borders and

also the unfounded assumptions, to respect the trauma these borders may inflict and the hope they may evoke, and to appreciate the political and social consequence of these lines as well as the potential for permeability and change. As we cross these borders like rivers, these articles ask us to consider: how do rivers and borders come together to shape our world and how could they do so differently into the future?

## References

Popelka, S. and L. Smith. 2020. "Rivers as Political Borders: A New Subnational Geospatial Dataset." *Water Policy* 22 (3): 293-312. doi: [10.2166/wp.2020.041](https://doi.org/10.2166/wp.2020.041).

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## About the Author

Laurie Moberg is the editor for *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, a digital journal of public scholarship published at the University of Minnesota (UMN) by the Institute for Advanced Study and UMN Libraries Publishing. She earned her Ph.D. in anthropology from UMN 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.