

ISSUE 25 : WINTER 2024  
OPEN RIVERS :  
RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

# RIVERS & BORDERS



<https://openrivers.umn.edu>

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

ISSN 2471-190X

The cover image is by Parker Hilton via 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 are 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 Assistants:

Chi Kyu Lee: Master's Student, College of Liberal  
Arts and Institute for Advanced Study, University  
of Minnesota

Mikala Stokes: Ph.D. Candidate, Department of  
History, Northwestern University

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](mailto:openrvrs@umn.edu)

Web Site: <http://openrivers.umn.edu>

ISSN 2471-190X

## Editorial Board

Christine Baeumler: Art, University of Minnesota

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, Retired,  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Simi Kang: Gender Studies, University of Victoria

Emma Molls: University of Minnesota Libraries  
Publishing Services, University of Minnesota

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

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

Wendy F. Todd

American Indian Studies and Earth &  
Environmental Sciences, University of Minnesota  
Duluth

# CONTENTS

## Introduction

Introduction to Issue 25 | Rivers & Borders  
By Laurie Moberg, Editor ..... 4

## Features (Peer Review)

Socio-Ecological System of Flooding in Bucksport, South Carolina  
By Geoffrey Habron and John Roper ..... 7

A Fluid Border: The River Tamar and Constructed Difference in Travel Writing of Cornwall  
By Tim Hannigan ..... 31

The Backbone of America: A New River with the Same Ol' Bones  
By Michael O. Johnston ..... 46

Not a Border, But a Path: Swimming Across the Rio Grande  
By Melinda J. Menzer ..... 58

## Geographies

When the Border is a River: A Journey Along the Salween River-Border  
By Zali Fung and Vanessa Lamb ..... 76

## In Review

*The Great Displacement: Climate Change and the Next American Migration* by Jake Bittle  
By Julia Oswald Tilton ..... 87

## Perspectives

A Small but Ultimate Presence  
By Isaac Esposto ..... 94

## Primary Sources

How much is the world's most productive river worth?  
By Stefan Lovgren ..... 107

## Teaching and Practice

Creative Connections with Rivers: A Toolkit for Learning and Collaboration,  
Stephanie Januchowski-Hartley, Ioanna (Daphne) Giannoulatou, and Merryn Thomas ..... 115

GEOGRAPHIES

# WHEN THE BORDER IS A RIVER: A JOURNEY ALONG THE SALWEEN RIVER-BORDER

By Zali Fung and Vanessa Lamb

Rivers might appear to be a natural or even an expedient way to demarcate political borders. Yet rivers are always in flux as flows of water, sediments, and fish and aquatics shift with the rains and tides. For rivers to serve as borders, individuals, communities, and governments engage in a range of efforts, such as erecting walls, fences, or signs, underlining the reality that borders are actively constructed through contested sociopolitical processes and in everyday life.

The transboundary Salween River is shared by China, Myanmar (Burma), and Thailand.

It also serves as the political border between Mae Hong Song Province, Thailand and Karen State, Myanmar for 120 kilometers. The border continues along the Moei River, a tributary of the Salween, for another 386 kilometers, past Mae Sot (Thailand) and Myawaddy (Myanmar), which has long been a key migration point. At present, Thailand does not recognize this border as officially delimited, and various entities have positioned hydropower development as a way to “clarify the border” (Lamb 2014, 4). The river-border and surrounding borderlands are sites of migration, mobility, security, tension,



*Detail of boats on the Salween river-border with Thai flags. Image courtesy of Zali Fung.*

and contested political authority; these areas also sustain the livelihoods, culture, and everyday practices of the residents, most of whom identify as Karen, Shan, or Thai.

We, two geographers, took the photographs presented here in March 2022 during a research trip to and along the Salween River-border. We share them to illustrate that the border, particularly when the border is a river, is not fixed, rather it is lived and experienced, and shaped through nature, infrastructure, and everyday life. The first author (Zali) has been conducting research in northern Thailand since 2015 and in the Salween basin since 2021. The second author (Vanessa) has been visiting the Thai-Myanmar borderlands



*Photo 1. A man makes fresh flatbread on a charcoal stove. Image courtesy of Zali Fung.*

and the basin since 2006. Both authors are committed to conducting collaborative research with Salween residents and civil society actors, and plan to continue working in the region.

The first photograph is from our first stop on the journey. It is of a small tea shop in one river-border community. A middle-aged man and woman served samosas and spiced chai while preparing fresh flatbread on a charcoal stove. The dishes illustrate the diversity and range of food cultures along the river-border, the long history of trade in the region, and the connections between northern Thailand, Myanmar, and India.



*Photo 2. Chai tea, samosas, and flatbread served in a small shop in a Salween river-border community. Image courtesy of Zali Fung.*

At the river-border, boats are available to transport people and goods upstream and downstream, highlighting the importance of mobility and trade via the river and border. Many of the boats are fitted with Thai flags, which is notable given the marginalization of the border area and residents by the Thai state.



*Photo 3. Boats on the Salween river-border with Thai flags. Image courtesy of Zali Fung.*

Across the river-border in Karen State, a large sign recently erected reads “Welcome to Kawthoolei” (Photo 5). Kawthoolei refers to the Karen State that Karen people have sought to establish since Myanmar’s independence in 1948 and the commencement of conflict between ethnic groups, including the Karen and the Myanmar military. This sign and the conflict have changed over the years; in Vanessa’s previous visits, even as recently as 2019, this sign read “Welcome to Myanmar” attesting to the contested political authority of the border and borderlands. On February 1, 2021, the Myanmar military staged a coup which intensified state violence, human rights abuses, and conflict in Karen State and across Myanmar. The coup has also



*Photo 4. Boats on the Salween river-border. Image courtesy of Zali Fung.*





*Photo 5. "Welcome to Kawthoolei" sign across the river-border in Karen State, Myanmar (Burma). Image courtesy of Vanessa Lamb.*

restricted and (re)shaped longstanding cross-border environmental organizing along the Salween River (Roney et al. 2021; see also Fung and Lamb 2023).

Upstream, we visited a riverside village on the Thai side of the border (Photo 6). In the image, you can see a Thai flag fluttering in the wind outside. On the edge of the village, there is a concrete marker installed by the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand showing the anticipated rise in water levels if a proposed hydropower dam is constructed (Photo 7). These signs speak to a long history of proposed infrastructure development in which a series of dams and transboundary water diversions have



*Photo 6. View of a border village from the Salween River. Image courtesy of Vanessa Lamb.*



*Photo 7. A concrete marker installed by Thailand's Electricity Generating Authority shows the anticipated rising water levels if a proposed hydropower dam is constructed. Image courtesy of Vanessa Lamb.*

been proposed by the Thai and Myanmar governments since the late 1970s. These developments would directly impact riverside communities, the river, and the border. Following the coup, rumours emerged that Myanmar's military junta may pursue hydropower development along the Salween (Roney et al. 2021), however, any such plans are yet to be confirmed. Photo 8 shows the view from the village of the river during the dry season, and this looks vastly different during the rainy season when the river swells.

The bright flowers and awning are situated outside two of the main sites of activity in this village: the church and the office of a local



*Photo 8. View of the Salween River during the dry season from a river-border village.  
Image courtesy of Vanessa Lamb.*

nongovernmental organization (NGO) focusing on education. Many people who live on or along this river-border have experienced conflict—either nearby fighting or direct involvement. For decades, Karen residents have fled state violence and conflict between the Myanmar military and ethnic armed organizations, resettling in this village and elsewhere along the border, and further into Thailand. The work of residents to invest in the village is key to understanding the myriad ways that people and everyday life also matter to the variegated geographies of borders.

Efforts to fix the river-border in place entail a range of efforts by governments, consultants, NGOs, and residents; this includes mapping the river-border and erecting signs and fences. And, while this river-border may appear as a solid line on a map, we show some of the ways in which the flows and fluxes of the river-border—and how residents and others manage these dynamics—are a key part of daily life.



*Photo 9. Bright flowers outside the church and NGO office at the river-border village. Image courtesy of Vanessa Lamb.*

## References

Fung, Z., and V. Lamb. 2023. "Dams, Diversions, and Development: Slow Resistance and Authoritarian Rule in the Salween River Basin." *Antipode* 55 (6): 1662–1685.

Lamb, V. 2014. "‘Where is the Border?’ Villagers, Environmental Consultants, and the ‘Work’ of the Thai–Burma Border." *Political Geography* 40: 1–12. doi: 10.1016/j.polgeo.2014.02.001.

Roney T., K. Y. Lynn, R. Bociaga, and M. Jaffee. 2021. "China’s Salween plans in limbo in postcoup Myanmar." *Third Pole*, June 8. <https://www.thethirdpole.net/en/energy/chinassalween-plans-in-limbo-in-post-coup-myanmar/>.

## Recommended Citation

Fung, Zali and Vanessa Lamb. 2024. "When the Border is a River: A Journey Along the Salween River-Border." *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 25. <https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.10991>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.10991>

## About the Author

Zali Fung is a final-year Ph.D. candidate at the School of Geography, Earth, and Atmospheric Sciences at the University of Melbourne, Australia. Zali is currently a visiting Ph.D. scholar at the Rachel Carson Centre at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, Germany. She has also worked as a consultant for Greenpeace Australia Pacific and the New South Wales (Australian) Government in environmental policy.

Vanessa Lamb is an associate professor in the Department of Social Science at York University. As a geographer, she studies social, political, and environmental change with a longstanding focus on rivers and water governance in the fields of political ecology and political geography. Before moving to her current role at York University, she also held positions at the University of Toronto and University of Melbourne (she maintains an Honorary Senior Research Fellow position at Melbourne). In 2014, she completed her dissertation, *Ecologies of Rule and Resistance*, focused on the politics of ecological knowledge and development of the Salween River at York University’s Department of Geography. In addition to academic work, her professional experiences include policy analysis and research into the social dimensions of environmental and climate change with Oxfam, International Rivers, TERRA, and UN Women.