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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image of Asin-badakide-ziibi, the Baptism River, is courtesy of M. Baxley, Bear Witness Media.

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TEACHING AND PRACTICE

CENTERING WATER: PRACTICES OF COMMITMENT

By Boyce Upholt, Katie Hart Potapoff, Michael Anderson,
Britt Gangeness, Angie Hong, Coosa Riverkeeper,
Greg Seitz, and Andy Erickson



The Coosa River in Wetumpka, Alabama, after rain. This portion of the river is below the Jordan Dam. Image via Flickr by brian_esquire. [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0 Deed](#).

Water is part of our everyday lives. We depend on clean water for health and sanitation, for livelihoods and recreation, for habitats, histories, and futures. Since water is so important to humans (and nonhumans) in myriad ways, how do we demonstrate our reciprocal commitment to water?

Open Rivers asked several readers and friends of the journal to offer their own personal practices that demonstrate their commitment to water. As the collection of responses shows, there is no single action that proves attachment to water; instead, the behaviors, patterns, and meanings are innumerable and varied.

Several of the contributors discuss practices that foreground a personal connection to water as a critical component for inspiring commitment. Practices that demonstrate gratitude, teach our children, or draw our often busy and distracted minds to water—its differences and changes—can inform daily, lifelong behaviors and relationships with water. Some responses focus on practices of sharing expertise, knowledge, concerns, and data about water systems with others. These practices demonstrate both how invisible the challenges and stresses to our water systems can be and also how valuable it can be to mobilize collaborative action.

These practices are as different as their authors, but they share one thing in common: they center our attention on water. Water, this substance that can be so easily taken for granted as it pours out of a tap or falls as rain on trees and grasses and vegetables, also needs and deserves our attention. While they reveal the commitments of individuals, the examples here collectively compel us as readers to consider our own actions, our own habits, and our own ways of centering water. What do you do to establish a relationship with this vital material? How do you practice your own commitment to water?

Boyce Upholt

For me, a commitment to water requires knowing water—touching water. When I travel, especially for water-related stories, I try to find a moment to literally submerge myself in the local waterways.

Dr. Katie Hart Potapoff

As an artist-researcher, a fundamental element of my practice is uncovering ways to “make-with” the places I research and the materials found within. Water is one material that remains ever-present in the landscapes traversed during my field research. Whether it has been seasoned by the sea, is fresh from a mountain stream, or has become acidic in a bog, water offers its unique perspective to the interpretation of a place.

When conducting place-based research activities, I document my bodily engagement through video and sound recordings, as well as gathering water found in situ to paint and draw while on site. I also bring small amounts of gathered water back to the studio to create with as a way to remain connected to those initial encounters. The differing chemical makeup of the gathered water can shift the qualities of watercolor pigments in these documentative artworks, and even some of the visible particles of matter will continue to cling to the surface.

These simple but effective methods offer the opportunity to enter into dialogue with an other-than-human element already present within the landscape. Imbued with its own agency, I find myself on a continuous journey learning to “make-with” water.

Michael Anderson

Bathtime has become a special moment in my household. It starts when dinner finishes and our family of four piles into our close-quarters bathroom in south Minneapolis, Minnesota. Remnants of the day (and dinner) fly off as our two young kids settle into the bath. Usually, chaotic play ensues with splashing, laughing, and letting go. The water spills and sloshes all over while new memories form. At the center of it all is that sweet, sweet water. I sit back and watch, a silent witness to my kids' evolving relationships with water.

As bathtime comes to an end, we begin our small but meaningful ritual. We pull the drain plug,

and the water begins swirling down; we pause. What started with the adults is now led by our oldest. Her bright, 2.5-year-old voice pipes up while her younger brother watches, "Thank you, water. Thank you for cleaning our bodies. We love you, water." In those treasured moments, we reconnect, give thanks, and express love—all backdropped by our precious water.

Britt Gangeness

I track rain, hail, and snow at my home through the Community Collaborative Rain, Hail, and Snow Network (CoCoRaHS). I think of this practice as more than collecting data. As Robin Wall Kimmerer writes in *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013), "Paying attention is a form of reciprocity with the



*Morning swim at Shreve's Bar. From the Atchafalaya Rivergator Expedition of 2015.
Image courtesy of David Hanson.*

living world, receiving the gifts with open eyes and open heart” (213). This daily measurement is a practice that helps me notice and spend time with water. Despite recent dry years, Minnesota is getting warmer and wetter. The more I can see, feel, and touch this change the more I understand it and feel the joy, sorrow, and stress that water (or its absence) can bring.

Angie Hong

The two most meaningful ways I commit to water are through my work as an environmental educator and through the native plantings I’ve nurtured at my home in Stillwater, Minnesota. I’ve been working as a water educator in the Twin Cities east metro and St. Croix River valley for nearly 20 years and am lucky to be surrounded by local government partners, nonprofit organizations, community groups, and citizens that are passionate about protecting the environment.

We’re constantly finding new ways to connect with people—at workshops, community events, at their farm, at their school, or even through online platforms—and it is inspiring and gratifying to see people learn and then take action. And it’s making a difference too! We’ve been able to take more than 20 lakes off the state’s impaired waters list in the past five years, and we’ve got a few more anticipated “de-listings” on the horizon.

At my home, I’ve also worked to transform our urban yard into a place that supports wildlife and clean water. I’ve replaced all of the lawn in the front yard with native plants and veggies, created two rain gardens in the backyard, and replaced our backyard turfgrass with low-mow fescue. I feel like it’s important to walk the talk, but I also want to have personal experience with native landscaping so I can better answer questions and share my own experience when I meet new people who are interested in planting native.



Purple Prairie Clover in a rain garden. Image via Flickr by Erutuon. CC BY-SA 2.0

Coosa Riverkeeper

Coosa Riverkeeper believes everyone has the right to clean water. We work to answer simple questions like “Is it safe to swim?,” “Are the fish safe to eat?,” and “What can I do to make the Coosa healthier for my community?” to ensure the public is aware of issues that impact the river, recreation, public health, and property value. We serve over a million people in the Coosa River watershed who rely on the Coosa River for food, drinking water, livelihood, and fun! We utilize the power of The Clean Water Act to hold polluters accountable to their permit limitations and state and federal law by collecting our own data. We are grounded in science and policy to ensure everyone has the right to know what’s going on in the Coosa River basin. We do this through patrolling the waterways, advocating for our communities and their right to use our waterways, and educating the public through campaigns, town hall meetings, free fishing clinics, signage, and so much more!

Greg Seitz

I write about the St. Croix River and its watershed, from conservation and stewardship to history and humanity. I try to maintain a high level of curiosity and wonder, listen long and hard, and research carefully to share accurate and accessible information. I focus on solutions

to problems as a means of educating about the threats themselves, and I try to connect with anyone who cares about the river, no matter their political, cultural, economic, or other differences. This has been rewarded with more than 4,000 email subscribers and hundreds of financial supporters.

Andy Erickson

Every sixth grader learns about the water cycle (or should): rain falls from the clouds, seeps into the soil and into groundwater. Snow melts and flows into rivers, lakes, oceans. Water evaporates or transpires. Less known are the often invisible and highly technical water treatment cycles that have emerged in response to our urbanized and industrialized way of life.

I study how to mitigate the impacts of urban stormwater on our water bodies and our groundwater. My goal is to research new and better technologies to move water cleanly through constructed environments, especially in light of increasingly severe flooding and high levels of environmental pollutants. I am also passionate about educating and supporting stormwater management practitioners in Minnesota. Their jobs aren’t glamorous, but everyone who swims in or sips water is enjoying the beauty of their profoundly important work.

References

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. 2013. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions.

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About the Authors

Boyce Upholt is a freelance journalist based in New Orleans. He is the author of *The Great River: The Making and Unmaking of the Mississippi*.

Dr Katie Hart Potapoff (she/her), a fourth-generation Canadian-born settler, is an artist-researcher based in Scotland. Katie's practice considers the reflexive and attentive perspectives that emerge when elements of poetry, visual art, and theoretical writing are interwoven with place-based responses. <https://linktr.ee/katiehartpotapoff>

Michael Anderson says "The Mississippi River is my home and the source for this bathtime ritual story, as our water comes from it. Fifteen years ago, the River saved my life, and now I return the favor by connecting hearts, minds, and hands in care and action for the River."

Britt Gangeness is an environmental educator at the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency.

Angie Hong is the coordinator for Minnesota's East Metro Water Resource Education Program and shares nature-based adventures, environmental education, and conservation inspiration on TikTok and Instagram at @mnnature_awesome. Angie lives in Stillwater with husband Gary, son Charlie, dog Molly, and cats Teddy, Twilight, and Clover.

Coosa Riverkeeper began in 2010 after the Coosa River was named the 10th Most Endangered River in the US after the Coosa River witnessed the greatest modern mass extinction in the 20th century from the damming of the river. Coosa Riverkeeper works to protect, restore, and promote the Coosa River and its tributaries in Alabama.

Greg Seitz is the founder of St. Croix 360, an online publication dedicated to the St. Croix River and its watershed. He is a writer and river bum dedicated to connecting people and the river. In addition to publishing new stories every week on St. Croix 360, Greg also does freelance writing for other organizations and publications. Greg grew up in Stillwater, MN and today lives in May Township with his wife, Kate, two children, and a dog.

Dr. Andy Erickson is a researcher, engineer, and public speaker at the University of Minnesota's St. Anthony Falls Laboratory where he studies water quality in urban and agricultural watersheds, develops stormwater assessment and maintenance best practices, and designs innovative stormwater treatment technologies. Dr. Erickson hosts the popular Minnesota Stormwater Seminar Series and serves on numerous committees and boards, all of which share a commitment to water research and conservation. Dr. Erickson is the author of numerous scientific publications as well as "Optimizing Stormwater Treatment Practices: A Handbook of Assessment and Maintenance."