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**RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY**

**PROSPECT**

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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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## INTRODUCTION

# INTRODUCTION TO ISSUE 27 | PROSPECT

By Laurie Moberg, Editor

“Take a step back; it’ll help you gain perspective and evaluate what is most important.” Many of us have probably heard this advice often.

Sometimes this advice can refer to a literal step. This fall, I spent time hiking at Frontenac State Park on the Minnesota side of Lake Pepin on the Mississippi River. As I was hiking along the bluff, I found myself watching my feet and the narrow path ahead of me. When I managed to take a step back, away from the bluff’s edge, I was able to lift my head and to see the whole landscape: the beauty of the autumn colors, rock outcroppings,

and expansive lake before me. It was startling to realize I’d been missing this expansive view in my (nonetheless valid) concerns over the daunting path in front of me.

Sometimes this advice to step back is intended more figuratively, a suggestion to pause for introspection or to consider a situation anew. By taking a step away from a challenging situation, we might be able to gain a new perspective. I find this a valuable action when confronting current uncertainties that might otherwise overwhelm me: climate change, elections, genocide. Rather



*Bluffs on the Mississippi River at Lake Pepin from Frontenac State Park, Minnesota.  
Image courtesy of Laurie Moberg.*



than repeatedly immersing myself in the data and stories of struggles that might lead to a sense of helplessness and despair, taking a step back helps me consider the layers of these challenges and craft a fresh vision for engagement. With this practice, I see the prospects for the future differently.

The articles in this issue of *Open Rivers*, called “Prospect,” speak to the multiple meanings of this word. A prospect involves taking in an extensive view as a way of seeing opportunities and, possibly, problems. A prospect also refers to looking forward with a vision of the possibilities for the future. For the articles in this issue, these two meanings of prospect intermingle; authors demonstrate how different practices—especially art—can reveal different ways of seeing the environmental conditions of our present and opportunities for envisioning the future otherwise.

Some of the content in this issue aims to disrupt dominant paradigms, offering an invitation to take in a more expansive prospect. Sigma Colón and Juli Clarkson explore how a variety of humanistic and artistic practices—including the creation of artists’ books—can compel us to see our relationships with water systems differently. They argue that visual art and humanities can compel us toward seeing rivers as creative and co-creators. Saloni Shokeen challenges a dominant understanding of a particular river: the Ganga. Its cultural significance, Shokeen argues, masks its material degradation even in the wake of widespread pollution that peaked during the second wave of COVID-19.

Other articles in this issue make obscured prospects visible through creative works. Jonee Kulman Brigham demonstrates how she uses art and community engagement to make hidden water infrastructures legible to youth through an experience of an Earth Systems Journey at Big Stone Lake. In “Fluid Impressions: Connecting Data and Storytelling in Iowa’s Watersheds,” a team of faculty and student authors create artistic content—from drone essays to murals to

StoryMaps—to facilitate aesthetic connections to the data of nitrate contamination. Their artistic works not only make nitrate pollution perceivable in a different, engaging way, but also implicate larger systems and institutions. The opportunities for artistic expression described in both these articles offer new forms for considering the material conditions of our waters and new prospects for addressing its material challenges.

Enticing us to see particular landscapes through their eyes, two authors offer us new prospects on long storied rivers. Vivek Ji gives us an encompassing view of the Narmada River in India, detailing both the changing landscape of the river and its sacred history as he explores it on his 3,000 km pilgrimage. Through essay, poem, and image, Laura Rockhold shows how language and places reciprocally shape each other. For her, visiting the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers became a different experience when she embraced its Dakota history and name: Bdóte.

While many of the articles implicitly speak to transformation and visions of the future, two articles address the idea of future prospects more explicitly. Kachina Yeager, Sage Yeager, and Shelley Buck discuss the ways that Owámnnyomni (also known as St. Anthony Falls) is being redesigned and reinvigorated as a Dakota space. Drawing on Dakota values and processes, Owámnnyomni Okhodayapi, an Indigenous-led nonprofit, has a vision for transforming this place into a site that honors its Dakota history and future. In her review of *All We Can Save: Truth, Courage, and Solutions for the Climate Crisis*, Marceleen Mosher explains that this collection of works on climate change aims to leave readers not with a sense of despair, but with an empowering sense of agency to take action; in short, with hope.

Reading these articles, I returned to the idea that these authors are offering us the prospect of seeing the conditions of our environment a little differently, widening our scope, and animating potentials for the future. They offer us the power

of art, of language, of being present in a place, and of hope. While none of these works alone can capture the complexities of our water systems and the ways they are inextricably part of our social systems, they each activate inspiring methods and forms of engagement with the environment

that might expand our view of what is possible and necessary. These articles, then, invite us to consider how the prospect of art, creativity, and connection can transform how we understand environmental conditions and how we create the future.

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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.