ISSUE 28 : WINTER/SPRING 2025

OPEN RIVERS : RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

MISSISSIPPI RIVER OPEN SCHOOL

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 courtesy of Michelle Garvey from her article in this issue.

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.

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ISSN 2471-190X

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THE (NON)TERRITORIALITY OF THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER

By Niiyokamigaabaw Deondre Smiles

The Mississippi River is one of the most defining features of Minnesota. It is a body of water that commands the attention of all who encounter it. I may be speaking hyperbolically but spending time in the state and not experiencing the river is challenging, to say the least. There are a multitude of different relationships that individuals have with the river, ranging from romantic to indifferent. Some view the river as a recreational space. Others view it as a tool for industry. No matter one's attitude, it is a space that we, as Minnesotans, can relate to. One form of space-making is known as territoriality, which has played an oversized role in how we relate to and treat the Mississippi. That is the central point of this essay, but I should digress for a second and explain why I care about the Mississippi.

It begins with water.

A view toward the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers from the area of Lock and Dam Number One on the Mississippi River in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Image courtesy of Niiyokamigaabaw Deondre Smiles.

I've always enjoyed water—enjoyed being in it and being near it. This led me to several water-based endeavors, including being an avid competitive swimmer. Even when I was not racing, I was usually found somewhere close to water, whether it was a local lake, a swimming pool, or even just spending too much time in the shower in the mornings when I'd get ready for school. This love of water has meant that I am almost always drawn to water and its associated spaces. As a child growing up in the Twin Cities, I always appreciated being near the various lakes or, more importantly, being near the Mississippi River.

When I was nine, I attended a family reunion at Minnehaha Park. It was the first family reunion I had ever attended, so I felt extremely excited to see my family members again and eager for the entire experience. Of course, there were all the typical activities that one does at a family reunion, such as barbecuing, playing sports, or just catching up with family members you haven't seen in a couple of years (or even longer). Something a little different appealed to me for entertainment on that day: I somehow developed the idea of tracing Minnehaha Creek from the falls to the point where it emptied into the Mississippi River.

A view upstream on the Mississippi River showing the Lock and Dam Number One. Image courtesy of Niiyokamigaabaw Deondre Smiles.

I managed to recruit a few of my relatives to come with me, and off we went, starting at Minnehaha Falls and following the well-worn paths along the creek. Before too long, we had gone off trail to follow the creek's shoreline, going over and under logs and through bushes and densely packed, leaf-abundant tree branches as we followed the creek's winding route toward the larger Mississippi. After what seemed like hours (but was probably no more than a single hour), we finally reached the point where Minnehaha Creek and the Mississippi River meet. I felt like a triumphant explorer, having led my merry band of fellow adventurers through the brush and the forest to our ultimate destination.

It is a memory that I have held onto and cherished ever since. Even to this day, it gets brought up in conversations with my relatives. "Hey, do you remember that time you led us to the end of Minnehaha Creek?" my uncle might ask me. I would answer in the affirmative.

In the intervening years, the Mississippi River and its broader ecosystem have undergone current-like oscillations between being a critical site of contemplation and relaxation for me and being a more mundane feature that happened to be part of the backdrop of my journeys to places near the Mississippi. I would be lying if I said I took specific note of the river when I'd drive over it on the

Lock and Dam Number One on the Mississippi River from Minneapolis, Minnesota. Behind the dam, you can see the Ford Parkway Bridge spanning the river. Image courtesy of Niiy-okamigaabaw Deondre Smiles.

I-94 bridge (or the many other bridges crossing it in the Twin Cities). But I remember the more introspective moments along the river, such as fall afternoons spent walking alongside the river near the campus of St. Cloud State University or at Lock and Dam 1, enjoying the changing fall colors of the trees and the stillness of the water. I remember whimsical moments, such as driving across the Mississippi bridge on Highway 2 on the Leech Lake Reservation and seeing young Ojibwe children getting ready to jump into the water on a warm summer day. And there have been emotional moments, such as reuniting with my mother at Minnehaha Park in May 2021. This was the first time we had met after over a year of not seeing each other due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We spent our time together hiking around and alongside the Mississippi, as I had done before. The gentle sounds of the slow-moving river and the sun shining through the trees were highlights of a wonderful day,

The Mississippi and its broader health have gained significance in my mind recently. In graduate school, I was introduced to a new term—*territoriality*, or how people and organizations lay claim to space. Joel Wainwright and Morgan Robertson (2003) introduced the term in reference to the late 1990s protests against the construction of Highway 55 (Hiawatha Avenue) through Minnehaha Park, a project which endangered a set of trees that were considered sacred to the local Dakota community. The authors showed the contested nature of the space. While the Dakota claimed relationships to the land and those trees through oral history, the state of Minnesota used historical maps (written by the state) and testimony from selected Dakota elders and knowledge holders to claim that the trees at the center of the controversy were not the sacred trees (Wainwright and Robertson 2003). Despite protests and direct action, the state built the road and the trees were eliminated. According to Wainwright and Robertson, the State of Minnesota asserted territoriality to the space, arguing forcefully that the need for an expanded road won out over the Dakota historical and spiritual claim to the land.

Colonial structures have been asserting their territoriality over the Mississippi River and its environs since the formation of the United States itself. If one were to look at historical maps of the territorial evolution of the United States, one would find that once upon a time (before the Louisiana Purchase), the Mississippi River marked part of the boundary of the United States. Then, once the "frontier" moved westward across the river, it marked the boundary of land cession treaty territories. In Minnesota, territories ceded by Indigenous peoples, including the Dakota, Ho-Chunk, and Ojibwe, to the United States under the Treaties of 1837, 1847, and 1851 used the Mississippi River as a boundary point.

This territoriality extends beyond simple political geographies; how the Mississippi has been treated from an environmental standpoint is a clear assertion of territoriality. There are several grievous examples of the state violently asserting its territoriality over the water and associated lands. One example is the placing of pipelines near the Mississippi and its tributaries, including the original and new routings of Enbridge's Line 3 pipeline, which had a massive spill over the Prairie River, a tributary of the Mississippi, in 1991 (Kraker and Marohn 2021). Another example is the construction of the Prairie Island Nuclear Power Plant near the Prairie Island Dakota community and next to the Mississippi River, a plant that carries the risk of contamination of the Mississippi River and its watershed through toxic nuclear waste.

The Métis scholar and scientist Max Liboiron makes the argument in their 2021 book *Pollution Is Colonialism* that we and the environment coexist in a set of relations—we can choose to be in good relation or bad relation to the environment. Liboiron asserts that we are not acting in good relation by viewing environments as places where we can place pollution (or polluting industries). What they mean by this is that much

as we might treat a relative poorly, we can also treat the land poorly and not think about the well-being of the land. The territoriality of how the Mississippi River has been viewed throughout Minnesota's history falls in the same category: it is considered a space to be controlled, claimed, and made to work for the supposed betterment and civilization of humanity. We can see this through the harnessing of the river to power the many industries that have called the Twin Cities home, such as flour mills or auto plants, or the current set of locks and dams that make the river navigable for boats.

But what if there is another way forward to relate to the river? What if we can create another form of territoriality? Or, better yet, how can we move past territoriality?

For me, the answer might lie back with the nine-year-old version of me, who viewed the river with such wonder, or with the subsequent versions of me, who regarded the river as a comforting presence at moments when I sorely needed them. I don't want to call this territoriality because I don't own the river—I wouldn't want to even if the opportunity arose, because to me, being in good relation with the environment (and by extension, the river) means ensuring that it can be a generative space for all. As trite as it may sound, we should think less about what the Mississippi can give us or do for us and more about what we can do for the Mississippi. To me, being in good relation means ensuring that we can preserve the river so that other nine-year-olds can lead expeditions along Minnehaha Creek to find its opening into the Mississippi River or so that young students can do all kinds of pondering along the river's banks. By rejecting pure territoriality, we can ensure that this space remains available for all to have their relationships with the water and the space. Rather than viewing the water as a resource to extract from, we can view the water as a calming, regenerative space. I argue this will give us the best benefit: a sense of well-being. I can't wait for the next time I spend time by the river again; it is something I will never take for granted.

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Recommended Citation

Smiles, Niiyokamigaabaw Deondre. 2025. "The (Non)Territoriality of the Mississippi River." *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 28. https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.12379.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.12379

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