

A hand wearing a black sleeve and a brown watch holds a clear glass bottle with a faceted stopper. The bottle is partially filled with water and has some sediment at the bottom. The background shows a wide river under a clear blue sky, with a sandy bank and some bare branches in the foreground.

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OPEN RIVERS : RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image is courtesy of Michelle Garvey from her article in this issue.

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PRIMARY SOURCES

PERCEPTUAL ECOLOGIES OF SOUND AND VISION AT MARY MEACHUM FREEDOM CROSSING

By Sam Pounders

In the Midwest of North America, as in many places, settlements accumulate below confluences where the modern riparian condition unfolds as a series of complicated petrochemical corridors, wildlands, estuaries, and beaches filled with building debris. The edge is a jumbled ecosystem of products and byproducts guarded by a thicket of ruderal shrubs, grasses,

vines, and brick rubble. Touching the water of the Mississippi River in the city of St. Louis, Missouri, where I write from, can take some effort and insider information. The larger context of my river experiments lies between the last locks and dam (Lock 27) north of St. Louis and the Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Field Station at the end of Arsenal Street in south St. Louis.



Detail view of viewfinder image observing the edge condition along the Mississippi River below Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing, 2023. Collage courtesy of Sam Pounders.

Vessel: A utensil for holding something, as a vase, bowl, pot, kettle, etc. [1]

The *Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, by Ursula K. LeGuin, posits that the earliest form of human technology was a vessel or a recipient: “A leaf a gourd a shell a net a bag a sling a sack a bottle a pot a box a container. A holder. A recipient. The first cultural device was probably a recipient.” [2] Le Guin, writer of science fiction, extends the definition to fiction as a vessel for stories, words, and ideas. If a vessel can be literal or symbolic, it can be many things. In fact, perhaps that which a vessel typically carries, say water, is a vessel itself. Water would be a cosmic vessel of wisdom and memory. Water moves across time and space indefinitely recreating itself. In a physical sense, water is what connects us more than land. The waves that lap at beaches in Mexico are

the same waters that rain down from skies into the Great Lakes, and they are the same waters that we feel as tears of happiness or grief. Water is a memory keeper. Water itself is a vessel.

The projects discussed here center the river as a vessel of memory and wisdom, one which may be hard to touch or interact with. Therefore, the approach leans into perception. These projects rely on a sensorial inclination towards landscape. Perception is the tool that accrues intimacy with a place. These projects are like desire lines, where the journey towards the source produces a new frame for what it means to arrive at the destination.

Sound Gathering

Standing along the Mississippi River, north of the old port of St. Louis and just south of the mighty confluence with the Missouri River, one can hear much besides water. Deep and high-pitched frequencies are filled with beeps, scrapes, horns, wind whipping, crunching leaves underfoot, and tires on gravel. Although I stand a mere 100 feet from the river’s edge, I cannot detect the wet splash of water with my eyes closed. Behind my lids, I imagine that bubbling underworld with characters large and slippery like the morose channel catfish and the dinosaurian paddlefish, silently drifting under the brown veil of shining river, which does not appear shy but cannot be heard. My ears are curious and angle toward the source, seeking to land on the playful tones of something wet and powerful.

I understand sound as not only a textural quality of environments but as a perceivable analog for the many unseen or unnoticed things at play in a given place. Sound often delivers wisdoms about

the true shape of forms around. I have developed an exploratory practice for site analysis called Sound Gathering, a tool for understanding a site’s non-visible character, a language of textures and environment. For some time, in the Middle Mississippi north of the city of St. Louis, I have collected field recordings at a specific location known as the Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing. These sounds, archived and arranged, paint a sonic landscape of a special riverine site: the only nationally recognized Underground Railroad site in Missouri and west of the Mississippi. It is also the historic location of a floating school where enslaved Black children were educated in the middle of the river.

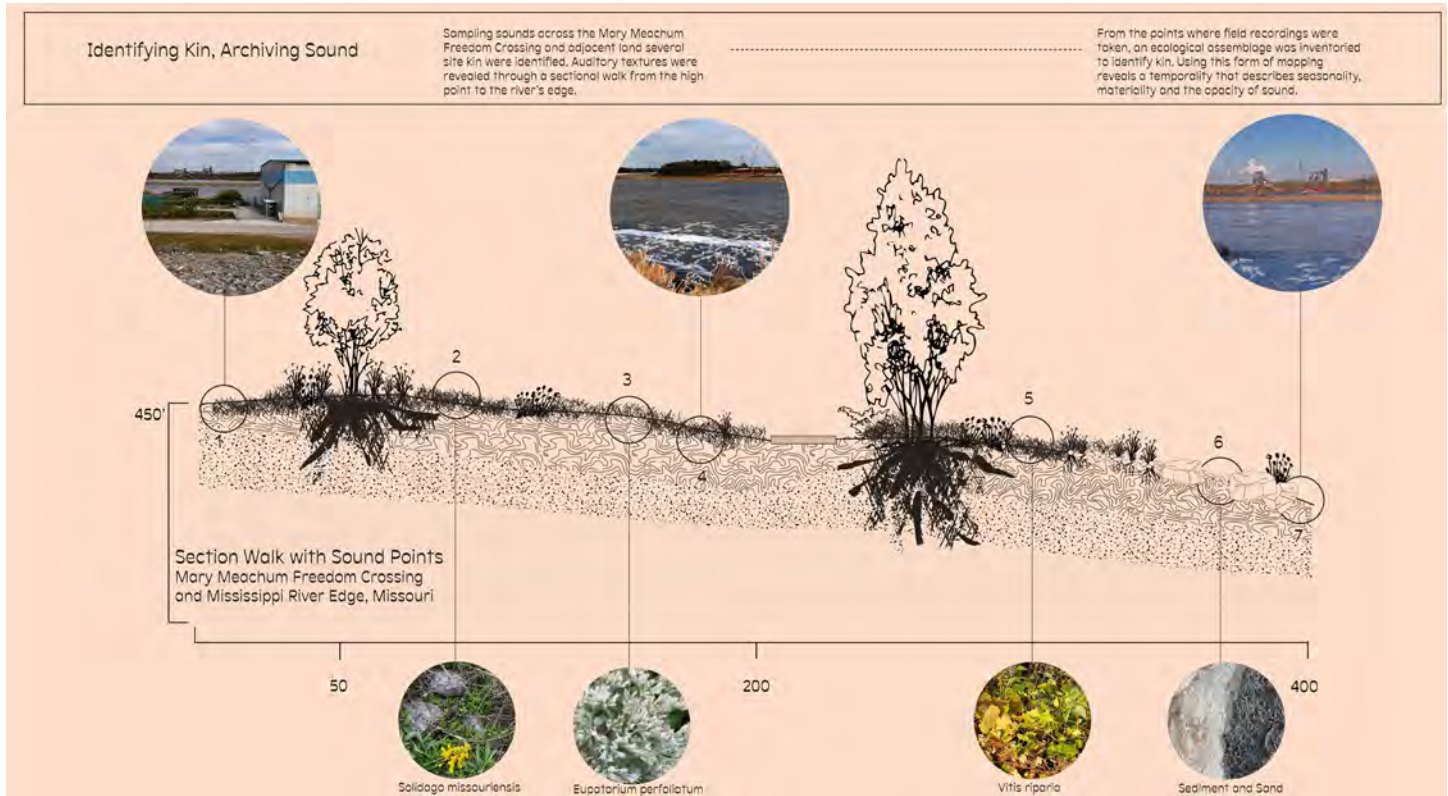
This sample of Sound Gathering addresses and engages the riparian edge of the Mississippi River’s plant, sediment, rock, wind, and water forms as sonic kin. Sound Gathering paints a portion of the assemblage of a site. A mosaic of new knowledge about relationality emerges from

listening. The process of sound gathering creates space to witness kin and creates an interpretive opportunity for the listener.

I gathered sounds across the Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing and adjacent land by taking a sectional walk from the high point along a frontage road to the river's edge. The frontage road is used primarily for maintenance and access to the industrial nodes near the river, including a railroad, shipyards, an industrial soap factory, and water treatment plants. From this starting point, we hear wind and industry, the crunch of brittle grasses and gravel. The tone of the field recording changes as we draw closer to the water. The wind begins to whoosh instead of whip, and we feel the dampening of sound but not yet the actual tone of water. Birds in trees, fishermen sitting in peace, mice squeaking in tall grasses. The river is like a drum, a long conduit for reverberation.

Listen to a riparian cross section composition gathered and mixed by Sam Pounders.

My Sound Gathering process is as follows: about every 30 feet I take a sound map of a small area along my walk, which involves two to five minutes of listening with a sensitive field recording microphone. Along the walk, I drop a pin in my phone at each stop so I can collate sounds and collection points on a map. In the same location, I collect an ecological assemblage of plants, rocks, exoskeletons, fluff, and trash. These things are collected physically or with a snapshot of the camera if they do not want to be removed from their home. The plants found in this Sound Gathering are goldenrod (*Solidago missouriensis*), boneset (*Eupatorium perfoliatum*), riverbank wild grape (*Vitis riparia*), and several species of grasses (Poaceae). The plants intertwine complexly with one another and with other materials on the site, creating a site-specific sonic palette. This form of mapping reveals a temporality that describes qualities native to a place. Is it possible it only sounds like this right here?



A section of the Sound Gathering walk along Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing depicts the plant life encountered in this riverine landscape. Image courtesy of Sam Pounders.

In the Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing Sound Gathering shared here, sound assemblage points were taken on the Missouri side of the river proceeding toward the river's edge. This march towards the river cannot be extricated from the across side, known as Illinois. In the time that this location was an Underground Railroad stop, the focus would have been on what lay on the other side: Illinois, freedom. Today I witness that sounds are sent and received between banks, sloshing back and forth in the watery middle. To conduct the impossible would be to walk into the river, tracing along the basin of the riverbed to

the other side, catching sounds every 30 paces in a slow prayer procession to the sediment.

Sound Gathering is an embodied practice of audio mapping. In the process of gathering sound, I discovered that each microsite was a pleasant moment to view the river. These points were sonically textural and variable from one another. My body corrects towards the river, eyes set on the opposite bank; I yearn to cross and consider the legacy of that desire. Human and nonhuman kin float, sail, swim, and blow across. Connecting embodied sound and vision, I seek to look closer at the crossing, to provide a trip to the other side.

Viewfinding in the Middle River

A visit to the Middle Mississippi River may prove difficult if we want to touch water or hear its

babble. There are many industrial buffers along this portion of the river and few accessible trails



Viewfinder image of the historical floating schoolboat that was used to safely educate enslaved children in the middle of the Mississippi River, located at the Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing. Collage courtesy of Sam Pounders.

to its shore. Perhaps next to an access point is a culvert gushing industrial waste from the nearby soap factory, creating a poisoned slurry of pink bubbles on the olive-green waters. Such

is the case next to the Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing. This site is a historically significant feature of the North St. Louis waterfront, although it is not widely known by the public. In



Viewfinder placement near the Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing along the Mississippi River. Collage courtesy of Sam Pounders.

1847, this was the location for the Candle Tallow School run by Mary Meachum and her husband, John Berry Meachum. To safely educate enslaved black youth, they taught classes on a boat in the middle of the river. The shores of Missouri and Illinois come closest here at the Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing, providing the safest passage to freedom in the St. Louis area.

Approaching the river proves to be difficult near the Freedom Crossing as at many places along the Middle River. In my desire to enable a riverine connection for myself and other visitors to the Freedom Crossing, I imagined the use of viewfinders, such as the ones seen at national sites of interest with grandiose landscapes. In a previous exploration of the site, I gathered



A viewfinder placed at the top of a service road. Collage courtesy of Sam Pounders.

sounds to explore with my ear first. As I spent a few thick minutes listening to each micro-site along my walk, I dropped into the riverine story being told in sound, smell, peeks of the river, and the waxing and waning views of the other side.

Viewfinding locations in this hypothetical site installation are determined by Sound Gathering and accessibility. With a viewfinder, visitors can visually visit the other side of the river, positioned

intimately in thickets of riparian ecologies. Installed across the site and pointed across the river, the viewfinders are placed in areas of high textural auditory presence. The purpose of installing viewfinders is to immerse ourselves in riverine understanding. We can see the complexities of industry, rough ruderal ecologies, the presence of invisible pasts, the condition of fresh water in the middle of the country.



View from the thicket, 2023. Collage courtesy of Sam Pounders

Viewfinding lets one see as seeds float across on wind and on water. Or witness woody material floating from one side to the other, sharing in a depository flow of matter. Across the way from the Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing, Illinois' bank is less steep and foxes walk along the edge. The landscape appears as a mild-tempered floodplain yet committed to industry. The line of water is rarely accessible on either side. Industry and fences on the Illinois side, a four-foot-deep wall guarding steep, eroding bluffs on the Missouri side. Missouri's land is guarded by the military's Army Corp barracks walls while Illinois lies unguarded and open, a floodplain left to flood despite the capital sunk in production at the river's edge. The Mississippi River north of St.

Louis is striped like a skunk's tail, one side of the water's flow carrying sediment from the Missouri River confluence, a gradient down the center in aerial photographs. The line seen from the heavenly gaze of satellites is not visible standing on the banks of the Mississippi. Instead, we see the ochre-green hue of the river with its curling undertow whispering caution and carrying on. Viewfinding on the edge is an opportunity to commune with the liminal space between land and water along the middle Mississippi banks.

The river's edge is a record of the water's fluctuation, a path of markings, of exposure and concealment, of the river's force and tranquility. The swell overtaking land, and the fall revealing



Viewfinder image observing the edge condition along the Mississippi River below Mary Meachum Freedom Crossing, 2023. Collage courtesy of Sam Pounders.

new shapes in arrhythmic terrestrial syncopation. Along the edge, changes are frequent. What is the river trying to teach us? Those that reside in this intermediate zone are brave and resilient, like sediment guarded by washed up fallen trees, covered in wild grapevine, anchored by burdock and pokeweed.

If the “recipient,” to use Ursula K. Le Guin’s language quoted above, or an individual—perhaps a storyteller—is an extension of this early cultural device, then their physical body is a vessel of wisdom and memories. To pass on memory is a curatorial process. Memory changes with its dispersal. Reverberations of sound convey a



*Viewfinder image observing Illinois from the Missouri side of the Mississippi River, 2023.
Collage courtesy of Sam Ponders.*

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sonic picture of a site. Viewfinding is another storytelling device, and in this case, both seek to see the river as a vessel, a keeper of memory, and a connection across the complex ecologies of perception.



*A view of industry along the Mississippi River on the Illinois side, 2023.
Collage courtesy of Sam Pounders.*

Footnotes

[1] *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, "Vessel,". Accessed February 1, 2025, <https://www.yourdictionary.com/vessel>.

[2] Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (Ignota, 2019).

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About the Author

Sam Pounders is a landscape designer, horticulturist, multidisciplinary artist, and researcher interested in land stewardship and process-driven ecological design. Directed by an interest in the physicality of regenerative and justice-oriented futures, Sam utilizes analog and technological mediums to create places for embodiment in gardens, landscapes, and outdoor venues.