

ISSUE ONE : FALL 2015
OPEN RIVERS : RETHINKING THE MISSISSIPPI



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<http://openrivers.umn.edu>
An interdisciplinary online journal rethinking the Mississippi
from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy

FROM WASHINGTON BY 33 261 LOOKING UP STREAM

The cover image is of spring flooding at the Bohemian Flats in 1897. Image Courtesy of the Hennepin County Library.

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FEATURE

KNOWING THE MISSISSIPPI

By Sharon Day, Bernard Williams, Christopher Morris,
Conevery Bolton Valencius, Craig Colten

We asked a diverse group of river people to respond to the prompt “How did you come to know the Mississippi River? What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?” We present below a few of the responses, in no particular order.



The Mississippi River north of Minneapolis, where the river has gentle shores, before it enters its only gorge in south Minneapolis. Image courtesy of National Park Service.

Sharon Day

Executive Director, Indigenous Peoples Task Force, Minneapolis, Minnesota

*How did you come to know the Mississippi River?
What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?*

For the past 25 years, I have lived in Highland Park on the south shore of the Mississippi River. I have walked my dogs along Mississippi River Boulevard in the twilight hours when the light on the river is sublime. This area is the only gorge on the river and is frequented by eagles, blue heron, ducks, and many other creatures. Since June of 2013, I have held a water ceremony

down in Hidden Falls near the river's edge. I have walked this river, with the water walkers, from the headwaters to Fort Jackson, Louisiana and have been kissed by the river when I poured the water I gathered at the headwaters into her mouth, two months later. I love this river and I believe she loves me. There is little in life more exciting than to see what is around the next bend.

Bernard Williams

Visual Artist

*How did you come to know the Mississippi River?
What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?*

Much of what I am sharing here was developed in 2011 during a six week residency in New Orleans as an artist-in-residence with A Studio in the Woods (ASITW).

My residency at ASITW was a unique experience for me. As an artist who regards the industrial urban landscape of Chicago as one of my fundamental inspirations, working in the woods and on the banks of the Mississippi River have provided a load of meaningful material from which to respond. My work in New Orleans involved translating forms found in nature into sculpture and architectural structures. The river became an immediate subject of interest, with its fantastic history of jumping and meandering, its history and continuing role as a major trade route, and its status as a feared liquid body or tomb that

snatches life from even the most robust human soul.

Getting Onto the River

Early on during my stay, I was taken with newspaper reports of a young man losing his life in the river. His name was Brian Reed, the brother of NFL athlete Ed Reed. I also encountered numerous other stories of the river taking lives. The lives lost to the river suggested a new headline for me to pursue: "Man Survives a Brunt with the River." This became a subtext for my sculpture project concerned with invisible root systems and the river's meandering history. I do not mean to diminish the personal anguish that has occurred around river deaths. I considered inserting names or symbolic elements to suggest or memorialize

the lost, then I decided to mount the river myself, to risk the river. I wanted to somehow get closer to this body of water, the great Mississippi. I really wanted to get *into* the waters of the river, but I settled for getting *onto* the waters in my own makeshift raft. Getting onto the river with the sculpture and the raft became a sort of meditation on all the mentioned aspects of the river: the invisible undercurrents, early riverboat traffic among flatboats, keelboats, and steamboats delivering cargo of all types, the fantastic meandering routes, and the river's appetite for consumption.

Building a Raft - The Neutrino way and others

I decided to float my sculpture on four large truck tire inner tubes, after finding good on-line information on the process, and realizing the affordable economics of it all. Until a few days before the event, I planned to float on a foam-based structure, inspired by the techniques promoted by Poppa Neutrino and his raft ideas laid out on his website. Though I did not follow

the Neutrino way exactly, the Neutrino spirit was highly motivating for my project. I believe the Neutrinos, who sailed an enormous scrap-built raft across the North Atlantic in 1998, speak to the human condition as we all seek some stable relationship with the natural environment. The Neutrinos have spent long periods of time living on the water, not only sailing. The Neutrino way offers up a format to rethink traditional lifestyles, pointing toward a closer relationship with our natural space, and the possibility of radical departures in any number of areas through the application of pathways such as reuse, refusal of status quo, alternative methods of housing, mobility, energy use, insistence on pursuing ones personal dreams, and more.

Ghost Trails

The sculpture I produced during the residency is most heavily influenced by the graphic line work of the Harold Fisk maps from 1944. In these maps, Fisk attempted to chart the movement of the Mississippi River over a span of hundreds and



*Ghost Trail on the River, Bernard Williams.
Image courtesy of the artist.*

thousands of years. The maps contain a network of moving lines that wiggle violently on top of one another and appear to produce echoes of earlier movements. My sculpture takes on a sampling of the Fisk line work and develops into a structure of its own. With paint and pencil I have added more map material, including numbers (many of which remain mysterious to me), names of local streets or highways or parish names. Consequently, the sculpture holds references to recent geography and ancient geographics.

The title, *Ghost Trails*, is a reference to invisible river routes, the routes no longer taken. There is some soft echo of these old routes etched in the soil. Some are visible, others require an informed eye. The white color I have chosen for the sculpture references ghosts, but seeks an opposite

affect of high visibility in relation to the natural setting. The sculpture invites engagement. One is able to actually pass through it or pause within its swirling lines. The sculpture rested temporarily on the grounds at ASITW to speak of my river performance, inviting poetic reflection on the river, on the tangle of the forest, and the complexity of our relationship with the environment.

Riverside Chat

In one of the images you see pictured here, I sit in a chair facing a small audience. We collectively ponder one of the Harold Fisk maps which I have enhanced and enlarged. It is a moment to sit, ponder, share, and speculate about our relationship to the place. I'm reminded of a river baptism, which some churches perform at the



*Riverside Chat, Bernard Williams.
Image courtesy of the artist.*

water's edge. The potential and need for spiritual and mental conversion is suggested. An awakening is called up. A convert is symbolically altered by new knowledge. That convert is myself, stirred to new awareness by the complex beauty and enlightening revelation of the river's meandering

and liquid thought revealed in the Fisk maps. My short residency at the river exposed my fear and alienation from the water. I gained new appreciation for those who study and teach about the river.

Christopher Morris

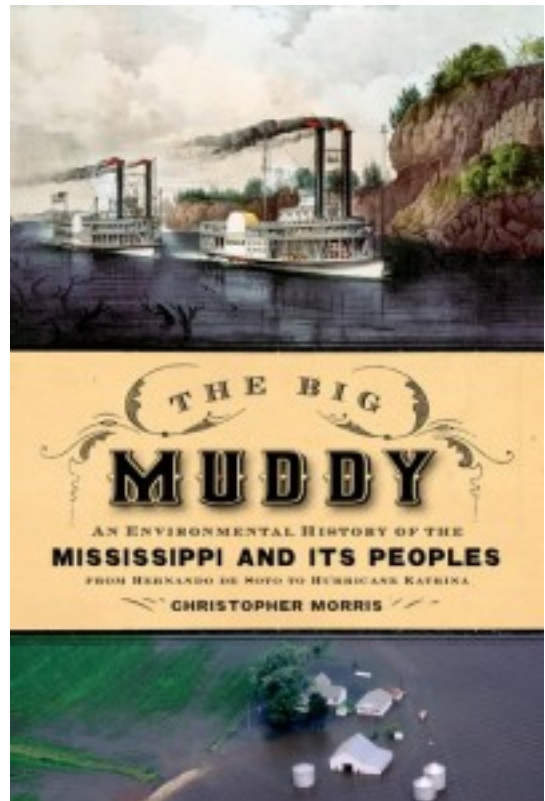
Professor of History, The University of Texas, Arlington

*How did you come to know the Mississippi River?
What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?*

How I Came to Know the Mississippi River

I'm not sure that I do know the Mississippi. I'm still learning about it. Getting to know the river might take a lifetime.

I grew up in Ontario, so, nowhere near the river. I first saw the Mississippi when I was in my mid-twenties and a graduate student in history at the University of Florida. I took a trip one spring break to Vicksburg to do some research for a seminar paper, and to see if that paper might turn into a dissertation. (It did, and the dissertation became a book on the development of plantation society in the Vicksburg area between the Revolution and Civil War.) From the top of the bluff outside the Old Court House Museum, I could glimpse the Mississippi about a mile or so away. I knew it had once flowed right past downtown Vicksburg. I would soon learn when it altered course, and somewhat later, I would understand why it altered course. From a lookout park near the Interstate 20 bridge, I saw the Mississippi River for the first time. I had read about the river, of course, but no book, not even Mark Twain's, can fully convey its size, power, movement, color, and up close, where the water touches its banks, its earthy smell. Rivers, like flames in a camp fire, because they move constantly, are captivating. I recently



Christopher Morris is the author of The Big Muddy: An Environmental History of the Mississippi and Its Peoples from Hernando de Soto to Hurricane Katrina

spent an hour or so eating lunch in the park along Riverside Drive in Memphis, and watching the river, which was high for the summertime, as it conveyed giant logs past me at a speed, I guessed, of five miles per hour.

I have never been swimming in the Mississippi, nor have I canoed it, although I hope to do that one day soon. Except for the year I spent in Vicksburg conducting historical research, I have not lived near the river. I have not worked the river, as barge crew do, as the few remaining commercial fishers do, and there are others. I have gotten to know the river by studying it, as a historian interested in past human relations with the Mississippi River, more accurately, with the lower Mississippi, which is my Mississippi. I know the river second hand, by immersing myself in the documents produced by others long deceased who knew the river first hand, because they lived and worked with it.

In 1776, in the midst of the turmoil of Revolution, Matthew Phelps of Connecticut, his wife Jerusha, and their four children—one born at sea—arrived in New Orleans, where they hired boats to take them up the Mississippi River to the patch of land that was to be their new home far from the

turmoil of politics and war. The voyage, “against a stiff current and various casual obstructions,” proved disastrous. Everyone got sick, probably from malaria. Jerusha, her newborn son, and a daughter died. Matthew buried them near the river’s edge, and then he and his two surviving children pushed on. Within sight of their new home, Phelps’s boat capsized in a whirlpool and the children drowned. Matthew Phelps arrived at his new home alone and bereft.

Phelps’s story is exceptionally tragic. But it reminds me that as an academic, I know the Mississippi River mostly as an abstraction, an object of study, as something that exists in books, letters, maps, memoirs, in scientific studies, and in the reports of engineers. When I get so far into the documents and into my own ideas about the Mississippi River that I begin to lose sight of what it really meant—and means—to the people who travelled, worked, and lived with it, I think of Matthew Phelps and of many others I have met through my research, people for whom the Mississippi River was real, for whom it was life and death. I will never know the river like that. For me, the Mississippi River has come to represent the possibilities and the limits of my ability to comprehend the past.

Conevery Bolton Valencius

Associate Professor of History,
University of Massachusetts Boston

*How did you come to know the Mississippi River?
What does it mean, to you, to know the Mississippi River?*

I came to know the Mississippi River through books.

Raised in Little Rock, Arkansas, I first recognized the Mississippi as the huge moving expanse we had to cross on a long, metal bridge in early-morning sun to visit relatives in the northeast.

When I was a kid, the game was to hold your breath when you drove over a river or by a graveyard. Otherwise, the ghosts would get you. Crossing the Mississippi, we never could get past those ghosts—no matter how deep a breath we sucked in on the Arkansas side.

The river wasn't real to me; it was enormous in the way of a far-distant horizon or a harvest moon. It had nothing to do with the creeks we played in on occasional visits to friends out in the country. When we crossed the river and drove high over Memphis on our way out into west Tennessee, that's when we kids really gawked: that was a city, a big city, recognizable and impressive on our scale. The Mississippi was not something you could ever really touch.

Growing up, I was constantly in the library—my first job with an actual paycheck was in the children's reading room. All kinds of stories, from children's picture books to *Huck Finn*, had the Mississippi River as a place and a character and a meaning. I could tell it was important, but mostly to past people who spoke differently and wore different clothes and knew how to milk cows.

In college I studied the history of the U.S. and the history of my home region. Again, I read books about the river, and again, they were of a different place and experience.

In graduate school, I wrote about people moving west from older American regions in the nineteenth century. I read accounts by hunters and travelers, missionaries and lonely women leaving families. Through all of them, the Mississippi snaked—the Mississippi and its sibling water roads, the Ohio and the Missouri and the Arkansas and all the others. I wondered at the way that the Mississippi brought everyone to its shores and on its surfaces.

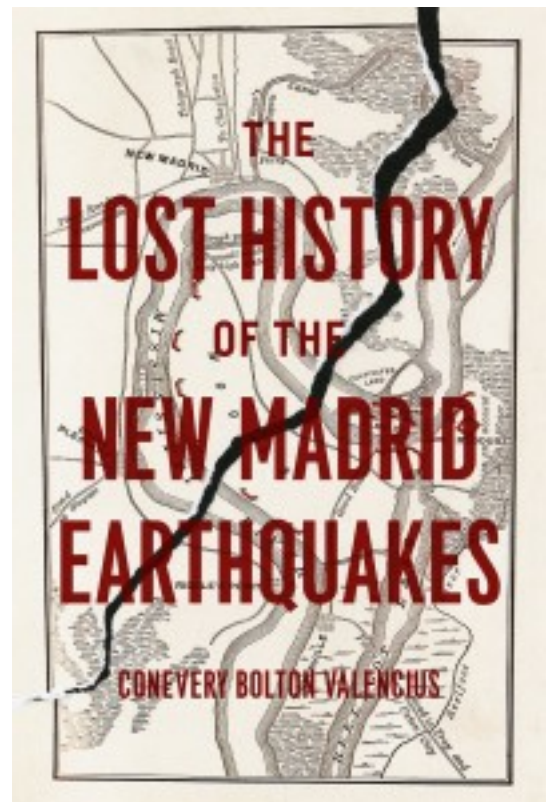
As I read and read, I came to recognize how the river daunted travelers with its heavy implacable current going always only one way: weeks going down, but months working a weary way back upstream again. I shared the mourning of long-ago people when the river sucked someone under during storms and the clenched-stomach worry of farmers and families watching the river rise. Sometimes I shared the exhilaration of people

who used the river to escape from responsibility or from bondage.

Gradually, the Mississippi River came to be real to me: more and more a reachable place whose currents were power and possibility, whose waters were gritty and muddy brown, and whose destiny was to spread out during lethal seasons like some flexing archangel to bring death and destruction and drenching, rich, fertile mud.

After many years of reading, I found myself writing about the Mississippi and its massive but largely forgotten earthquakes. As I did, I realized that all the books I read also worked in me an alchemy of water.

As I cross the Mississippi by Memphis, often in the driver's seat now and heading the other way to visit relatives back home in Arkansas, I find



*Conevery Bolton Valencius is the author of *The Lost History of the New Madrid Earthquakes**

myself telling my own Yankee children to look out the window. As I do, I find myself greeting a place and force that feels now familiar.

Last summer, as my family crossed over the Mississippi again, at an Iowa crossing new to us, I realized how much the river meant to me when I found myself detouring on impulse onto a small island park. Alongside the Mississippi, I pulled over and made everybody get out and cross with me onto a tangled embankment with a faint,

flooded trail. We made our way, kids grumbling, out onto mudflats. With river birds overhead, a morning sun shining on mid-continent, and the river lapping at its banks even louder than the highway traffic downstream of us, I made sure all my children reached out and touched the Mississippi. It was real to me, real because of all the books I had read about it, real through the books I had written about it, and I wanted them always to know how much they too had the Mississippi River as part of their own stories.

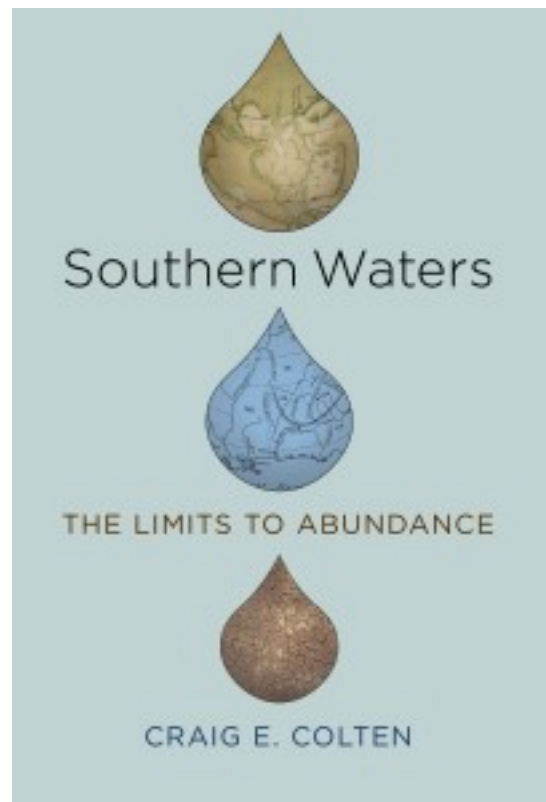
Craig E. Colten

Carl O. Sauer Professor, Department of Geography and Anthropology, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge

*How did you come to know the Mississippi River?
What does it mean, to you, to know the
Mississippi River?*

I wish I could say that I came to know the Mississippi River the year that I dropped out of college (1972) to build a raft and float from Little Rock to New Orleans via the Arkansas and Mississippi Rivers. But the plans for that trip ran aground, and I never gained that incredibly rich experience traveling with the river's current. I had to read Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* as a wonderful, but inadequate, substitute.

My earliest encounters with the river go back much further. I have clear recollections as a small child of crossing the Mississippi on massive steel automobile bridges at Vicksburg, Mississippi and Cape Girardeau, Missouri on family vacations. Also those long, slow climbs up the railroad bridges at Baton Rouge and St. Louis stand out as thrilling introductions to the river. In those encounters, the river often was a boundary between two states, a barrier for land-based transport—an obvious geographical delineation. It was only a short, detached segment that was visible



*Craig Colten is the author of
Southern Waters: The Limits to
Abundance*

from above, not a fluid system that traversed and connected much of the country.

After I returned to college in Baton Rouge in fall 1972, it wasn't long before I met the river as a giant hazard. The spring of 1973 brought exceptionally high stages. My friend Gilbert and I would hustle over to gawk at the river's steady rise from atop the crest of the saturated levee that felt about as substantial as a bowl of jelly. We drove to the Old River Control Structure and, much like John McPhee, felt the massive engineered structure shudder as water poured through the gates into the Atchafalaya basin. These encounters underscored that the river was a mighty force that when unchecked by levees had created the lower river floodplain since the last ice age and when confined by human-made barriers threatened to undermine the finest structural protection the Army Corps of Engineers had built. The device held, but required substantial repairs in the following years.

Another twenty years later, when I was living in Illinois, the river again rose and challenged the flood protection levees along the upper river. Countless volunteers from Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri heaped sandbags on top of the levees to fortify the riverfronts of towns and cities. The events encouraged community unity in the face of peril. There were numerous levee failures and some intentional breaks that reminded us that the river could present an ominous hazard with the occasional potential to wreak havoc.

Since then, I've studied the river in a more formal way—often writing about the power of floods and the efforts taken by society to reduce the risk of high water or the efforts to re-engineer the waterway to serve human needs. Working on museum exhibits about the river enabled me to share my knowledge with a broad public audience. Again in 2011, I watched the river rise toward the levee crest from the same vantage point where I stood in 1973. Also in recent years, I've been involved in

projects that examine the impacts of levees and upstream reservoirs on sediment delivery to the delta. Louisiana is enduring a serious loss of its coastal wetlands due to the re-engineering of the river and this has implications for the society and economy near the river's mouth.

Through my informal experiences and my scholarly pursuits, the river has continued to fascinate me. In many respects it is a giant paradox. It is an incredibly important resource both for the water it provides for cities and industries and for the cargo that it floats. At the same time it presents substantial risks, even though constricted between protective levees on its lower reaches. It is essential to the aquatic life in its waters and along its banks, yet at the same time poses a clear peril to people and property along its banks. It transports human wastes, while delivering tainted water to downstream public utilities. It is a gargantuan geographic feature that many cities turned their backs on—ever present but invisible behind the levees. It is as reliable as the rising sun and maintains a solid boundary between several states, but it remains seasonally dynamic in the volume of water it carries and sometimes capricious in its course.

To know the Mississippi is to know the fluidity of nature and to understand the dynamic and often inconsistent relationships that society has with big rivers.

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