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IMAGINING WATER

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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image is by Harold Fisk, 1944, plate fifteen, sheet one, showing stream courses from *The Alluvial Valley of the Lower Mississippi River*. The map covers sections of Arkansas, Missouri, and Tennessee.

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION TO ISSUE TWO

By Patrick Nunnally, Editor

We commonly think of rivers as, for the most part, staying where they belong, in the river bed, occasionally coming out into the floodplain under fairly predictable conditions conducive to high water that we call “floods.”

The writing in this issue of *Open Rivers* belies this notion of predictability, to a large degree. In disparate ways our authors write as if rivers should be understood as fundamentally restless, existing under conditions that are dramatically changing. The terms we use to describe these changes matter a great deal; is a flood a “disturbance” or part of the river’s inherent dynamic? Christopher Morris asks us to reflect on this distinction. More pointedly, Richard M. Mizelle Jr. reminds us that periods of high water are commonly understood to be shaped by a combination of “natural” and “intentional” factors;

what is consistent is that the people suffering the worst impacts are communities of color and the poor.

Much of the work in this issue of *Open Rivers* is derived from the spring 2015 symposium, “The Once and Future River: Imagining the Mississippi in an Era of Climate Change,” which was funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation through a John E. Sawyer Seminar grant. The essays by Patrick Hamilton and Lark Weller, plus Phyllis Mauch Messenger’s interview with meteorologist Paul Huttner all speak directly to the impacts a changing climate may have on rivers. If rivers have an inherent (and cultural) instability, and are manifestly affected by a changing climate, then how can we “know” the rivers in our landscape?



Harold Fisk, 1944, The Alluvial Valley of the Lower Mississippi River. Plate fifteen, sheet one, showing stream courses in sections of Arkansas, Missouri, and Tennessee.

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Other writers represented here have answers, to one degree or another. Kirk MacKinnon Morrow offers us a pathway to learn about the Mississippi by listening to the Dakota, the people who have lived in this place for the longest time. Kate Brauman suggests that “big data” can help us understand worldwide water issues, but only to a degree. Simi Kang recommends learning from one of the preeminent historical geographers in the country. And Len Kne reminds us that mapping is always a valuable way to understand what’s around us.

If you have noted a great deal of equivocation in this introduction, that is because equivocation may be an apt rhetorical stance for addressing a changeable subject such as rivers. Our knowledge must, to a large degree, be understood as contingent rather than definitive. Toward that end, we expect that the writing and images offered here will be the first word in provocative discourses, rather than the last word that settles things “once and for all.”

Happy reading!

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About the Author

Patrick Nunnally coordinates the River Life Program in the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota. He serves as editor for *Open Rivers* and was one of the lead scholars for the University’s John E. Sawyer Seminar, “Making the Mississippi: Formulating New Water Narratives for the 21st Century and Beyond,” funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.