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OPEN RIVERS : RETHINKING THE MISSISSIPPI

WATER, ART & ECOLOGY



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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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FEATURE

DEPICTING THE POWER OF WATER IN ART AND POETRY

By Gwen Westerman, Nnette Luarca-Shoaf,
Laura Turner Igoe

O*pen Rivers* guest editors Nnette Luarca-Shoaf and Laura Turner Igoe contacted Gwen Westerman, professor, visual artist, and an enrolled member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Dakota Oyate. The interview was conducted via email on March 31, 2016; it has been edited for length and clarity.

Editors [OR] Since the focus of *Open Rivers* journal is water, we're especially interested in the way that rivers and water figures into your work. Could you talk about how and why you represent watery places in works like Otokaheya, Owamni Omni, and Anpetu Sapa Win?

Gwen Westerman [GW] In our Dakota way, mni or water, is our first medicine. Without it, there is no life. The rivers and water in this region have served Dakota people as travelways, sources of food, and later sources of commerce. The three connected pieces portray Wakpa Tanka, the Mississippi River, as I imagine that it has changed over time. "Otokaheya" (In the Beginning) represents the unlimited power of the only significant falls on the Mississippi River as they might have been 10,000 years ago. Geologists suggest that at that time, the falls would have been much farther east of their current location in present-day Minneapolis, nearer to what is now St. Paul, Minnesota. "Owamni Omni" (Whirlpool) is the Dakota name for this place, although Father Hennepin would claim it for St. Anthony in 1680. This piece is

based on a 1780 engraving by explorer Jonathon Carver, titled "The falls of St Anthony in the River Mississippi" which depicts a Dakota village on the far bank. "Anpetu Sapa Win" (Dark Day Woman) takes its title from the story of a woman who went over the falls in a canoe with her young child because her husband took a second wife. However, this piece depicts the degradation of the river due to the betrayal of industrialization and the environmental impact of "progress."

[OR] Do you grapple with environmental change in your work, especially as it has impacted local river systems?

[GW] Absolutely. I used a single piece of hand-dyed fabric for the water in all three of these works. Otokaheya is one piece of fabric and is full of movement and power. Owamni Omni depicts the river and the falls with that same fabric, less than half of the surface, still full of movement, yet with little (literally and figuratively) human impact. The last one, Anpetu Sapa Win, is comprised of even less "water" and very little movement—the result of human disregard for the value of water. I also create landscapes that incorporate traditional Dakota songs and stories and provide a counter-narrative to the power lines, wind turbines, and pipelines that threaten to destroy not only the land, but also the water. ("Buffalo Ridge I" and "Buffalo Ridge II" are examples.) I take a lot of photographs of power lines, wind turbines, dams, bridges, and cell phone towers in the plains



*Gwen Nell Westerman (Sisseton Wahpeton Dakota Oyate, b. 1957),
“Otokaheya” (In the Beginning), quilted fabric, 2009.
© Gwen Westerman. Image courtesy of the artist.*

where I live to incorporate into my art. I'm a little wary when I do that, hoping it doesn't look like suspicious activity that will get me arrested!

[OR] Do you find fiber and textile to be conducive or challenging materials for conveying ideas about water?

[GW] Working from a quilting tradition and hand-dyeing fabric make for a very labor-intensive art form. I once told my friend who is a water color artist that I wished I were a painter because it didn't appear to take as much time as quilting. He looked at me sideways, and told me I was a painter, but I used fabric instead of paint. Traditional forms of quilting are very labor intensive ("Waci Au" is a good example). However, the shift I have made in the past few years to landscapes has made fabric and textiles a very conducive material for telling stories about water.

[OR] We are intrigued that you refer to your fiber art as "narratives" on your website. What stories do they tell? What is it about fiber and textile that help you tell these stories?

[GW] I am influenced in every aspect of what I do by the stories I have heard throughout my life. Many of those are cultural stories of Dakota experiences in this world, and more broadly an American Indian experience. The quilts my grandma made from the leftover scraps of fabric I used to sew my own clothes in junior and senior high school tell many stories. The quilts my great-grandma made during the Depression from the worn-out shirts and dresses of her family tell different stories. Many of us have those kinds of quilts—patterns called "log cabin," "lone star," or "wedding ring." So in my mind, quilts have always told a story. Most people can relate somehow to quilts, fiber, and textiles. It is somehow more approachable, and there is an urge to touch it, to be close to it. My quilts, especially the art

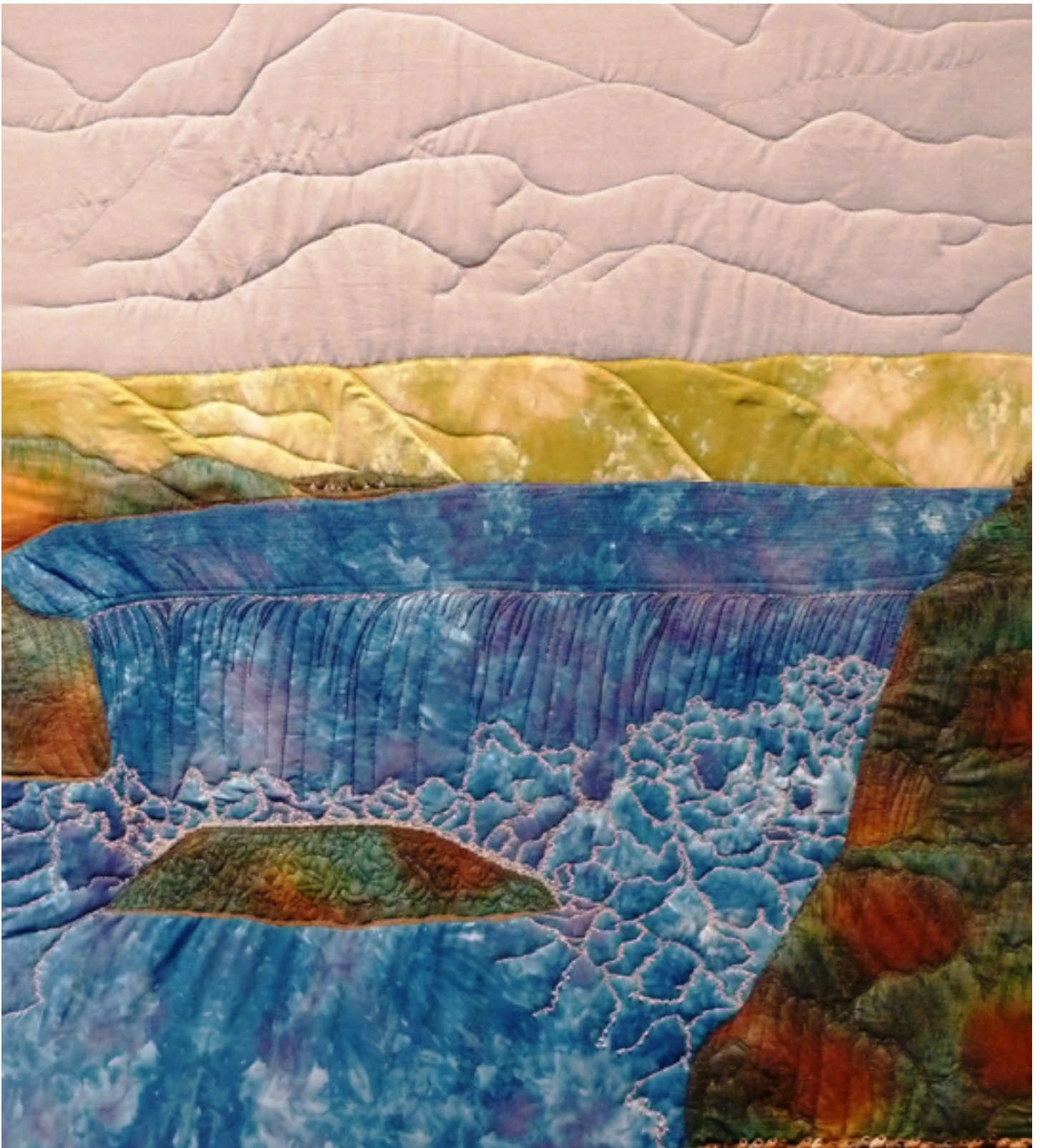
quilts, incorporate Dakota stories and language in a different form that might reach more people than words in a book.

[OR] How does your visual art relate to your poetry?

[GW] Both genres are image based. The pieces have to fit together in a specific and intricate way. They are both snapshots of a fuller story. To me, they are two sides of the same coin. I don't find them mutually exclusive in any way; in fact, I think they support each other—and they are both driven by telling stories about our Dakota experiences.

[OR] You were recently an artist-in-residence at the Minnesota Historical Society. How did working with the collection affect your artistic practice?

[GW] The Artist-in-Residence Fellowship at the MHS was an amazing experience and I am so very grateful to have been provided that opportunity! Working with their collections of textile works made by Dakota women (mostly) and those in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and the American Museum of Natural History brought me into direct contact with their techniques. I could see their stitching, their choices of materials and colors, their improvisations when they ran out of fabric or ribbon. I could also document the changes in their handiwork as new materials were introduced or new fashions were brought into their communities. They sewed by hand and later on by treadle sewing machine. Holding their work in my hands, some of it 160 years old, was like holding their hands. I realized that we have been "artistic" for generations and generations and that what I do is a continuation of their love of beauty, of creating something for someone else, and of telling a story.



*Gwen Nell Westerman (Sisseton Wahpeton Dakota Oyate, b. 1957),
“Owamni Omni” (Whirlpool), quilted fabric, 2009.
© Gwen Westerman. Image courtesy of the artist.*

The author recounts her poem from "Follow the Blackbirds" (Michigan State University Press, 2013).

This is my explaining ceremony

My strongest memories are of water. A rough rock ledge that reached out for the horizon beyond the lake, holding a perfect place to play in its palm. Cradled by the beat of waves washing ashore, I watched slick, black-green moss sway in clear swells, and was not afraid at four. Sounds of water comfort me.

At ten, I splashed through 14-Mile Creek with my cousins, turning over smooth stones and sharp rocks with flattened, shining forks tied to long willow sticks. We speared unsuspecting blue and gold crawdad treats hiding in the deep swift stream. Our grandmas gathered glistening green watercress for a summer feast, but a child with fast food tastes, I refused to eat. Sounds of water connect me.

Near the old home place, my grandma said the spring at Greasy Mountain never runs dry and the edge of 100 Highway always crumbles with each late winter thaw. I followed the black asphalt road as it snakes toward the turnout for the spring, and took my children there to drink the water, clear and cold. Sounds of water call me.

A grandma's words that can fill a rain barrel or wash away fences and fields like a flood. Sounds that bring life ticking on a tin roof, that sting bare legs and hearts. Sounds of water flowing. Sounds of water falling. Sounds of water filling.



*Gwen Nell Westerman (Sisseton Wahpeton Dakota Oyate, b. 1957),
“Anpetu Sapa Win” (Dark Day Woman), quilted fabric, 2009.*

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About the Authors

Gwen Westerman is Professor of English and Director of the Humanities Program at Minnesota State University, Mankato. A recipient of the 2014 Hognander Minnesota History Award and the 2015 Native American Artist-in-Residence Fellowship at the Minnesota Historical Society, Gwen is an enrolled member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Dakota Oyate.

Nenette Luarca-Shoaf is Associate Curator of Learning and Interpretation at the Art Institute of Chicago. She curated the 2014 exhibition, *Navigating the West: George Caleb Bingham and the River*, and contributed to the catalogue published by Yale University Press and the Amon Carter Museum of American Art. She earned a Ph.D. in art history from the University of Delaware and was the 2014-15 Sawyer Seminar Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Minnesota.

Laura Turner Igoe is an NEH Research Fellow at Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library. Beginning in September 2016, she will be the Maher Curatorial Fellow in American Art at Harvard Art Museums. She is a co-editor of *A Greene Country Towne: Philadelphia's Ecology in the Cultural Imagination*, forthcoming from Penn State University Press. Her current book manuscript, *Art and Ecology in the Early Republic*, investigates the ways environmental conditions and ecological change shaped artistic production in the decades following United States independence.