

ISSUE THREE : SUMMER 2016  
OPEN RIVERS : RETHINKING THE MISSISSIPPI

# WATER, ART & ECOLOGY



<http://openrivers.umn.edu>

An interdisciplinary online journal rethinking the Mississippi  
from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

ISSN 2471-190X

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ISSN 2471-190X

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INTRODUCTION

# GUEST EDITORS' INTRODUCTION TO ISSUE THREE

By Laura Turner Igoe, Nenette Luarca-Shoaf

Water is a slippery subject: its visual and material properties spur intellectual inquiry and spiritual reverie; its fluctuating form repels categorization and confounds claims of ownership as it crosses property lines and national borders; and river and ocean currents facilitate commercial exchange along with environmental exploitation. This fluidity within so many human and non-human contexts has challenged and inspired artists for centuries, but the limits and opportunities of representing water take on new urgency in the context of the Anthropocene, in which flood events and drought—too much water or too little—will be an increasing reality.

The focus of this issue of the *Open Rivers* journal is on water, art, and ecology. Unlike previous

iterations, many of the essays and columns in this issue look beyond the Mississippi to consider a wide range of rivers and currents. We hope this breadth will encourage a rethinking of that iconic river through other conduits. The idea for this issue began with a panel, entitled “Fluid Currents: Water, Art, and Ecology,” that we co-chaired at the Southeastern College Art Conference in October 2015. Inspired by the conference’s host city of Pittsburgh, located at the confluence of three rivers, we wanted to generate a conversation about different ways that artists imagined and represented water conduits and their relationships with human and nonhuman life. Our call for papers received a large number of responses, ranging from the design of Baroque bridges and eighteenth-century fountains to early



*Seth Eastman, Detail of Distant View of Fort Snelling, 1847-49. Watercolor.  
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twentieth-century photographs of California agricultural irrigation, and contemporary computer-generated sound art.

As art historians who specialize in nineteenth-century American art, we felt it crucial that the papers we selected for our panel, and also for this issue, open up a dialogue between historical and contemporary art. In her essay for the Primary Sources column, Emily Casey makes the case that Benjamin Franklin had national as well as scientific interests in mind in creating his landmark map of the Gulf Stream. Jayne Wilkinson's essay shows us that, three centuries later, oceanic flows are still being scrutinized as in the work of Swiss artist and filmmaker Ursula Biemann and the German multidisciplinary artist Hito Steyerl. Their installations at the 2014 Montreal Biennial

used water as both a motif and a medium through which the human and environmental costs of global capitalism can be made visible. Meanwhile, in her contribution about Marie Lorenz's *Tide and Current Taxi*, Meredith Davis explores the way that artistic practice can facilitate social and personal relationships between a wide range of people and the river on which they float. Poet and fiber artist Gwen Westerman brings us back to the Mississippi as she describes the ways in which she uses quilt making, landscape imagery, and narrative to assert Dakota ways of knowing and relating to water. Finally, Seth Feman's essay for the Teaching and Practice column outlines the way an exhibition catalyzed an art museum's multifaceted engagements in the water issues facing its community, both inside and outside of its galleries.

## Mapping Water

Artists are becoming increasingly essential in calling attention to water as an urgent social and ecological issue, but using water as a lens for understanding art and visual culture from the past can also reveal evolving conceptions of nature and ecology, the flow of people and objects, and definitions of place. For instance, a survey of the lower Susquehanna River (Fig. 1) by the British-born architect and engineer Benjamin Henry Latrobe offers a particularly illuminating attempt to visualize the interconnectedness between water, geology, vegetation, and human

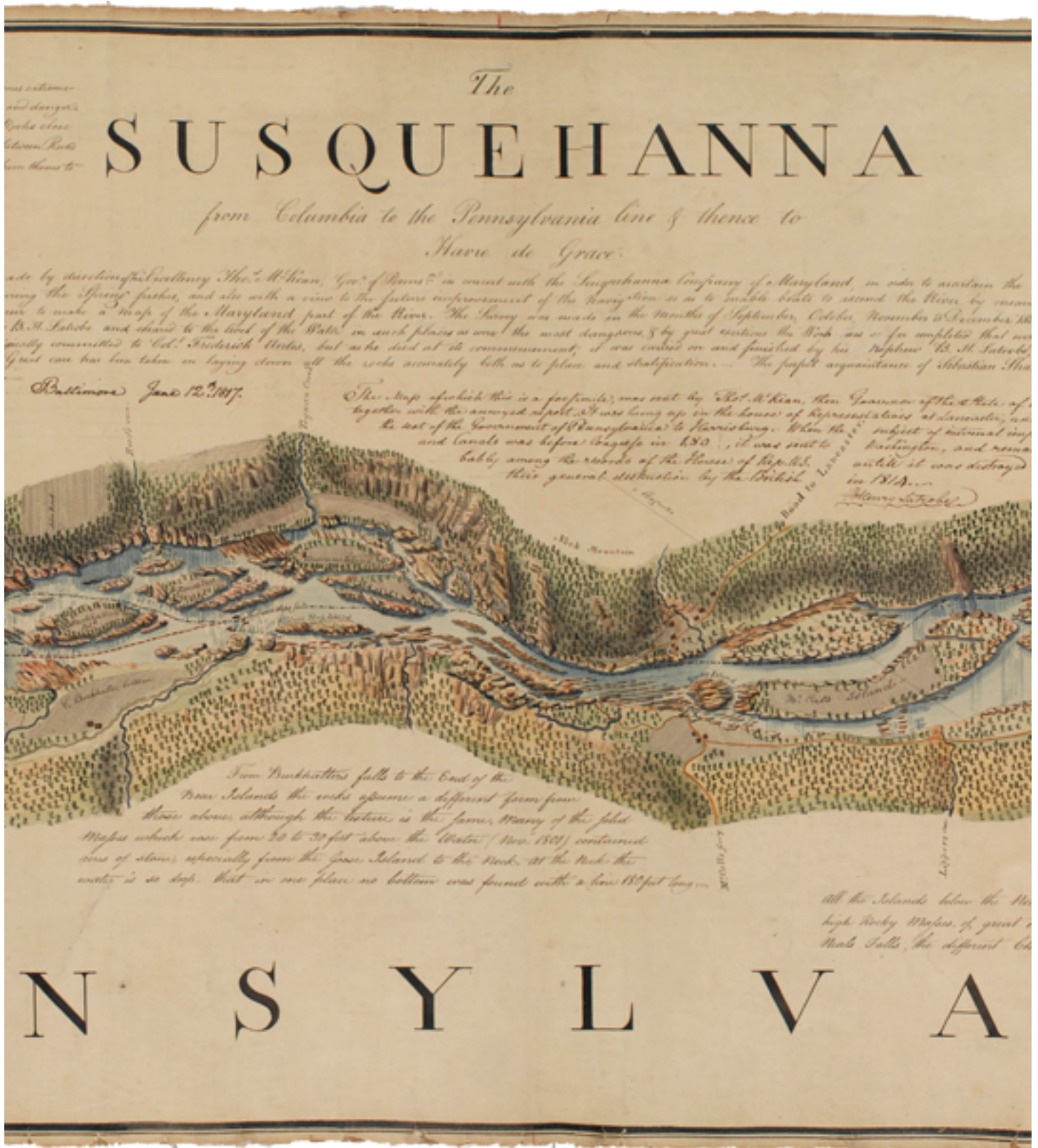
interventions, decades before the articulation of "ecology" as a scientific concept by late nineteenth-century naturalists such as Ernst Haeckel. [1] This map, which currently survives as a copy donated to the Library Company of Baltimore (now the Maryland Historical Society) in 1817, provided a detailed engineering and natural history record of the lower Susquehanna, one of the most important commercial rivers in the Mid-Atlantic region. The river supported agriculture and lumber industries on its shores and branches, but rapids, small islands, and large rocks



*Benjamin Latrobe, Susquehanna River Survey Map, 1817 copy after 1801-02 original, pencil, pen, ink, and watercolor on paper, Special Collections, Courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society.*



*Benjamin Latrobe, Susquehanna River Survey Map, 1817 copy after 1801-02 original, pencil, pen, ink, and watercolor on paper, Special Collections, Courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society.*



Benjamin Latrobe, Susquehanna River Survey Map Detail,  
1817 copy after 1801-02 original, pencil, pen, ink, and watercolor on paper,  
Special Collections, Courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society.

impeded passage on the lower portion of the river from Columbia, Pennsylvania, to Conowingo Falls, Maryland. Pennsylvania Governor Thomas McKean commissioned Latrobe to improve navigation along the river and complete a survey in 1801. The resulting map portrays its serpentine subject with an astonishing degree of detail and clarity on a large scale. Seventeen feet long and drawn with pencil, pen, ink, and watercolor, the map extends across nearly seven pages of white paper pasted on a continuous sheet of linen, stored on two wooden rollers. The process of unrolling and reading the map mimics the experience of traveling along the river itself, as the viewer must incrementally take in the carefully delineated town plans, farms, roads, streams, and evenly spaced trees.

This comprehensive survey and concurrent work along the Susquehanna forced Latrobe to assess the interrelatedness of various elements of the river's ecology and also revealed to him the limits of human control in such a watery context. The architect-engineer later reflected, "the improvement of the navigation of the

Susquehanna has taught me that a thorough knowledge of the river in all its stages of rise and fall is necessary on each particular spot, before it can be judged whether a very plausible scheme of improvement in one state of the river may not be an absolute obstruction in another."<sup>[2]</sup> While this statement appears to confirm the architect's acute awareness of dynamism in the natural world, the map demonstrates that Latrobe's "thorough knowledge" of the Susquehanna was, in fact, limited to the portion of the river controlled by the state of Pennsylvania. The Mason-Dixon line neatly slices diagonally through the last third of the represented river, marking a contrast between the colorful, detailed segment on the left and the bare, pencil and ink sketch on the right. Latrobe was only marginally successful in clearing or blasting rocks to create a navigable channel past the river's rapids and falls, due to budgetary restrictions; the route was only passable when the water was high in the spring. The Susquehanna survey ultimately reveals the limits of human knowledge and the seemingly arbitrary nature of state borders in its documentation of human and nonhuman relationships in and along the river.

## Claiming Water

It is important also to acknowledge the ways that visual representations have created and shaped cultural narratives about watery places. In *Distant View of Fort Snelling* (1847-49, Fig. 2), U.S. Army Captain and artist Seth Eastman represents the northernmost military installation at the time, built near the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota (then known as St. Peters) Rivers. It was the artist's home for several years in the 1840s and also anchored his perception and experience of the Mississippi River valley. While this locale had long been an axis for the seasonal movements and sacred activities of Indigenous people, Eastman confines his representation of Native Americans to two figures in the foreground—neither of whom looks

out onto the vista beyond—and another pair who bring their canoe to rest on an island in the river. Eastman only vaguely represents the figures and their activities. He uses them to create the scene's picturesque qualities: the loose brushstrokes and the brown and red colors used to render the figures are similar to that which Eastman used on the gnarled branches and logs in the foreground, and the variance in size among the figures conveys a sense of the gorge's depth and the scale of the overall landscape. Still, the alignment of the standing native figure in the foreground with the round tower recalls attempts by the federal and territorial governments to restrict the movements of Native American (Dakota, Ho Chunk, Ojibwe, and Sac and Fox) peoples in the period.



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The darker tones, rustic quality, and confined space of the foreground opens up onto a lush, light-filled vista over which the massive limestone military complex presides. Located just above center, it is flanked on the left by the rectangular territorial plots and houses constructed by American settlers, and on the right by a cleared and fenced area of land. The shape of the fort's roof is mimicked by the hills behind it, and the dense cluster of trees seems to bend in its direction. The glassy surface of the river is luminous, reflecting the trees and sky, and recalling the Dakota name for this vicinity, *Mni Sota Makoce*, "the land where the waters are so clear they reflect the clouds."<sup>[3]</sup> But the water's placid quality also obscures the role that the river had

in motivating and facilitating settlement, further naturalizing the presence of the fort.

In the 1830s and 40s, Eastman created hundreds of postcard-sized watercolors depicting the Mississippi River valley.<sup>[4]</sup> Although they were not seen by many people at the time as such, the watercolors were the building blocks for easel paintings that Eastman exhibited in New York and St. Louis and a popular moving panorama by Henry Lewis that toured the U.S. and parts of Europe, its scrolling movement and theatrical presentation simulating a steamboat tour of the Mississippi. Eastman's views were disseminated even more widely as engravings and lithographs in illustrated magazines, as well as ethnographic and folkloric volumes by Henry Rowe Schoolcraft



*Seth Eastman, Distant View of Fort Snelling, 1847-49. Watercolor.  
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and Mary Eastman, respectively.[5] In its ubiquity, Eastman's imagery had the ability to supplant other narratives and insert a territorializing one, in which humans and the natural world existed

in a harmonious balance. But his views also promised of land, abundant timber, and access to water for transport and agricultural needs for prospective settlers.

## Making Water Visible

Both Latrobe's map of the Susquehanna and Eastman's view of Fort Snelling attempt to fix watery spaces in order to facilitate Anglo-American control and habitation. But their drawings, perhaps unwittingly, also illuminate the entangled relationships between the plants, rocks, structures, and peoples that depend on rivers. The essays in this issue likewise investigate the struggles and successes of artists attempting

to make water currents—whether riverine or oceanic—and their ecological systems perceptible and tangible to their audience. For these artists, this visualization is vital and necessary—whether to assist trade or renew appreciation of overlooked, industrial environments or to reimagine invisible data flows in a changing climate—but water proves time and again to be a surprising and unpredictable subject.

## Footnotes

[1] For more on the history of this survey and Latrobe's involvement, see Benjamin Henry Latrobe and Darwin H. Stapleton, *The Engineering Drawings of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, ed. Darwin H. Stapleton, *The Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe : Series II, The Architectural and Engineering Drawings* (New Haven, Conn.: Published for the Maryland Historical Society by Yale University Press, 1980), 75–109.

[2] Benjamin Latrobe to Richard Bate, Washington, November 21, 1809. Benjamin Henry Latrobe, *The Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe*, ed. John C. Van Horne and Lee W. Formwalt, *The Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe. Series IV, Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers* (New Haven, Conn.: Published for the Maryland Historical Society by Yale University Press, 1984), 2:786.

[3] Gwen Westerman and Bruce White, *Mni Sota Makoce: The Land of the Dakota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2012), 13.

[4] On Seth Eastman, see Boehme, Sarah E., Christian F. Feest, Patricia Condon Johnston. *Seth Eastman: A Portfolio of North American Indians*. Afton, MN: Afton Historical Society Press, 1995. For more on the watercolors, see John Francis McDermott, *Seth Eastman's Mississippi: A Lost Portfolio Recovered* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973).

[5] Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *Historical and Statistical Information respecting the History, Condition, and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States*, Vols. 1-6 (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, and Co., 1851-57); Mary H. Eastman, *Dahcotah, or, Life and legends of the Sioux around Fort Snelling* (New York: J. Wiley, 1849).

## Footnotes Continued

[5 Continued] Eastman's watercolors were also the main source material for Henry Lewis's *Das Illustrierte Mississippithal*, a portfolio of prints likely related to his panorama imagery, published in Germany. On the Lewis panorama, see Bertha Heilbron, "Notes and documents: A Mississippi Panorama." *Minnesota History* 23:4 (December 1942): 349-54, and Introduction, *The Valley of the Mississippi Illustrated*. Translated by A. Hermina Poatgieter. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1967.

## Recommended Citation

Igoe, Laura Turner, and Nnette Luarca-Shoaf. 2016. "Guest Editors' Introduction to Issue Three." *Open Rivers: Rethinking The Mississippi*, no. 3. <http://editions.lib.umn.edu/openrivers/article/guest-editors-introduction/>.

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Nnette 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.