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OPEN RIVERS :
RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

WATER & ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

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

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INTRODUCTION

GUEST EDITOR'S

INTRODUCTION TO ISSUE THIRTEEN:
WATER & ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

By Simi Kang

Dear readers,

The work collected here was written about and on the sovereign land of many First Nations. The place it was assembled—the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities—is a land-grant institution that operates on *Mni Sota Makoce* (called

Minnesota), Dakota land, and alongside and over the Mississippi River^[1] whose watershed is the major artery of Turtle Island (called North America).



*Detail from cover of Issue Thirteen: Water & Environmental Justice.
Image courtesy of Matt Huynh, <http://www.MattHuynh.com/>.*

While land acknowledgements often feel like folks checking a box on a list of things one must do as a good liberal, multicultural scholar, I think they are spaces for non-Indigenous settlers and arrivants[2] to begin reshaping our relationship to environment and water. As a mixed-race person whose families are composed of settlers and arrivants, I believe that learning about local histories (here, that includes The Dakota War of 1862, which was central to the U.S. government's ongoing genocidal project) and patronizing American Indian-owned spaces for arts, business, and cultural production are politically imperative for those of us who live on settler colonial land.[3]

Given my research, I have spent a good deal of time learning about the bodies of water on which I rely. This has allowed me to understand how governmental and personal decisions impact their health and the health of all beings—including our oceans—who live downstream from me. I have learned to identify what being in a better relationship with water might look like and to create practices that support this goal. I am grateful to so many of my friends and chosen family for guiding me in my ongoing education on coloniality and Indigeneity. This is an ongoing process that overwhelmingly burdens people who live with the generational and daily harm of settler colonialism. It is important to build this knowledge with our non-Native circles rather than expecting First Peoples to guide us. Above all else, it is our political imperative to listen to and believe Indigenous peoples on these matters always and forever.

Throughout this introduction, my goal is to reorient you, the reader, toward stories—how they are told for and about Native people and people of color, those that we tell about ourselves, and what narratives might be mobilized as we reorient ourselves to old and new ways of being in relationship with persistently colonized spaces. In this spirit, I would like to share some of my

own stories about what brought me to work on water and environmental justice. In so doing, I hope to give you a sense of my deeply specific and situated approach to this issue.

I have been lucky to have many water teachers.

My father's family cultivated my thinking about how to be in right relation to land, water, air, fire, and spirit from a very early age. I went to our farm in Uttarakhand, India for the first time when I was one. I was fascinated by my Dadaji's (grandfather's) big red tractor, watched as calves were birthed and chickens slaughtered, helped my Dadiji (grandmother) collect peas and potatoes from her kitchen garden, and relished how cool fresh well water tasted from squat tin cups. Every year we would return, and every year I would learn lesson after lesson from the place, the people, who are my roots. As Jatt Sikhs whose own roots live in Punjab—land of five rivers, which my Dadaji left during the violence of Partition (1947)—Kangs learned to cultivate and protect the soil for as long as anyone can remember. These lessons are equally of place and heart; they show that caring for and cultivating the elements is as much about who you come from as where you are.

As an undergraduate, my most important water teachers were three nuns at Thiên Viện Trúc Lâm, a Zen Buddhist monastery in Đà Lạt, Việt Nam. The nuns and monks of Trúc Lâm made all of their own clothing and bedding, cultivated everything they ate—fruits and vegetables, tofu, soy sauce—and cared for the animals, communities, and landscape that they lived alongside. Rather than a relationship of extraction—of seeing everyone that isn't human as things available for our use—they practiced communion, deference, and respect with, to, and of all beings. Halfway through my month-long research stay, I spent the morning with one of my mentors weeding and harvesting in the vegetable greenhouse. As we worked, a mosquito landed on my face. When I moved to swat it away, she reached for my hand

and reminded me that it deserved life as much as I did. When I have repeated this story, folks think it is plain ridiculous to allow a bug to bite you. But what if we were raised with the knowledge that a mosquito was as valuable as us?[4] What fundamentally would that do to how power is consolidated in service to so few and at the expense of most? A decade later, I carry what the nuns of Trúc Lâm taught with me as I assess my environmental, personal, and scholastic impact in the world.

Today, I am finishing a dissertation that mobilizes the knowledge and stories of Vietnamese/American and Cambodian/American fisherfolk in Southeast Louisiana, where oil extraction, governance, and settler colonial structural racism put Chata, Houma, Chittimacha, Atakapaw, and Chikasaw first peoples as well as Black, Chicax, Latinx, and Asian/American residents, migrants, immigrants, and refugees in life-threatening and future-foreclosing positions. Alongside fisherfolk and their beloveds, water has been my biggest teacher in this work. Salt and fresh, poisoned and healing, life-making and community-erasing, water is weaponized against people I care for, is essential to their well-being, and is itself a seeker of justice in the bayous of Louisiana.

This is all to say that I did not come to environmental justice and water work as an individual. Rather, the people whom I care about brought it to me; they have taught and continue to teach me my place in it. They have also ensured that I approach the scholastic and community-based work of environmental justice critically, knowing there is no outside of colonialism, capitalism, and the violence of governance as they continue to be wrought on the least resourced, most class-immobile, and overwhelmingly racialized peoples. With an understanding that environmental racism, this “violent control over bodies, space, and knowledge systems,” is truly “a form of state violence,” I come to the present where I am here the editor of an alarmingly beautiful set of calls to action,

meditations on, and new directions toward our relationship with injustice and water (Pellow 2016: 230). I am not proud of this volume because I assembled a knockout set of contributors, which I did, but rather, because they, some of my most significant teachers, answered the call. I want to be transparent about how this issue was assembled. Environmental justice is an ongoing movement created[5] and maintained by Indigenous folks and people of color (POC) in response to viscerally and communally experienced environmental injustice. This movement has and continues to be led by women, queer and trans folks, people with disabilities, formerly and historically incarcerated folks, people who have and continue to live under overlapping and intersecting colonialisms and imperialisms, and folks with tenuous access to regional and/or national citizenship. Powerful people and corporations regularly weaponize water against human and more-than-human communities that stand in the way of their goals. These same powerful people and corporations overwhelmingly craft the stories that authorized and sustain this harm: stories that identify who matters and who is sacrifice-able. Stories, even, that erase whole people and more-than-human species from the landscape.

For these reasons, every contributor to this issue identifies as Indigenous and/or POC (person of color); most identify as women, trans, and/or gender nonbinary, and many are queer, disabled, in diaspora, and/or are reclaiming ancestral land. As you read, it will become clear that their own subject positions fundamentally shape whose stories—whose joy, other ways of knowing, histories, presents, and futures—each contributor chooses to make central to their work in the world. This, in turn, is important because for many generations and still in a great many academic disciplines and cultural contexts, bearing witness to one’s own stories—the stories of one’s communities, childhood friends, ancestors, chosen kin, and on and on—is “illegitimate” knowledge

production. As community-based environmental justice thinkers, then, everyone here is, as David Pellow will tell us in a roundtable of the same name, producing and articulating “contraband” practices.

They also know, as I do, that there is always more to do and a better way to do it. However, if we let the imperfections of research, community organizing, and education stop us from starting, we would never have the opportunity to change how power works or knowledge is produced. So we do this work while striving to do better—to do good—each time.

To orient you in current conversations about environmental justice and water, our first feature is a roundtable of writers, makers, scholars, and dreamers: 신 선 영 辛善英 Sun Yung Shin, Merle Geode, Chika Kondo 近藤千嘉, Karen Bauer, 심 제현 Jae Hyun Shim, and David Naguib Pellow. Each brings their personal, ancestral, observed, and chosen communities’ experiences to bear on three questions: (1) What is environmental justice? (2) What is water’s role in environmental justice? Or why and how does water matter to environmental justice? (3) How do you do environmental justice? In so doing, they, as one person remarked, “explode conventional ideas of what environmental justice work means,” giving us new inroads into these often opaque and always fraught conversations.

This roundtable is a place for us to set down some roots and gather up tools that will help when reading the three single-author features that follow. These pieces are, in their own ways, dense and generous archives of water as acted upon, agent, and kin. Macarena Gómez-Barris uses a decolonial queer femme relational approach to complicate Rachel Carson’s work on water and environment at the ocean’s edge, asking “how can we theorize sea edges as places of coloniality, encounter, financial speculation, yet also as sites of hidden imaginaries and potentiality, and

even sites of ongoing resource resurgence and individual and collective resilience?” Yvonne P. Sherwood, too, thinks coloniality, encounter, and speculation alongside missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW), their kin, and governmental processes that disproportionately harm both, claiming what happens to our lands happens to our bodies. Taking this imbrication of land and body seriously, Tia-Simone Gardner closes out our features with “There’s Something in the Water,” a visual and textual patchwork that erupts and interrupts violence against Black and brown people along the lower Mississippi River. Together, these pieces offer a rich set of analyses that erupt, interrupt, and refuse many of the ways we think about the environment, justice, and water and how they each travel differently for those who cultivate and build relationships with them and for those who seek to commodify them.

The issue’s seven columns help us rethink how we are networked into places, histories, lineages: the seeds of our environmental knowledge. We begin with Lisa Marie Brimmer’s interdisciplinary and poetic review of David Todd Lawrence and Elaine Lawless’ *When They Blew the Levee: Race, Politics, and Community in Pinhook, Missouri* (2018). Brimmer’s meditation on what it means for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to flood an historically Black township emphasizes that “In this era of state-of-emergency thinking, *When They Blew the Levee* ruminates on the power of the nation-state to sanction violence, erasure, and invisibility that can, intentionally or not, remove whole communities from the map.” This meditation on a community’s life post-flood leads us beautifully into “the river.” A story that Jayeesha Dutta calls “a visionary journey to a Detroit of the future where all of our social, environmental, and economic ills have come to a catastrophic crescendo,” adrienne maree brown’s work of visionary fiction is the beating heart of this issue. I extend my deepest gratitude to brown for sharing it with us in this context; no volume on environmental justice should be without creative

writing, one of the movement's long standing guiding lights, and there is no better guide into the liberatory, apocalyptic, water-contingent future that looms large for all of us assembled here than adrienne maree brown.

In Geographies, Caroline Doenmez maps pasts and presents along the McIntyre and Kaministiquia Rivers in Thunder Bay, Ontario and the Assiniboine and Red Rivers in Winnipeg, Manitoba, which have “become associated with the pervasive crisis of the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG).” In this piece, Doenmez refuses a holistic narrative of injury and loss, showing that “caring for the dead and the water is vital for the survival of the living.” In the Primary Sources column that follows, many folks who have carefully considered their relationships to movement and personal ancestors share their own ways of caring for water and community in the form of articles, films, and practices you can use to extend your own environmental justice and water work.

Our last two columns are at once incredibly different and inextricably linked. David Todd Lawrence uses Teaching and Practice to share a deeply personal meditation on what it means to do folkloric work as a Black scholar in Black communities. Following Zora Neale Hurston (1931), Lawrence ultimately forwards a hoodoo ethnography, which “has the willingness to see, to recognize the value of black places, black community, black history, black traditions, and black ancestors—and to imagine the possibilities of a black future” that “allows us as ethnographers to surrender power and submit to the traditions and histories that lie within ourselves and our collaborators—and in the souls of our ancestors.” While emerging from discretely academic pursuits, hoodoo ethnography is a richly personal and ancestral practice and it is work that Adriel Luis takes up, albeit differently, in his Perspectives column. Pivoting around a persistent refrain—“where are you from?”—in

Asian American life, Luis apprehends the knee-jerk response, “I’m from here,” by reading Chinese American history and Navajo presents in New Mexico. Seeking to “learn to understand [one’s] immigrant experience in relation to Indigeneity as opposed to Westernism,” Luis, like Lawrence, draws on communal and ancestral fragments, half-memories, failures, and triumphs to offer us new ways of understanding ourselves as arrivants.

As a collective, our column contributors show us that what we do with our ancestral water knowledge is often as complex as unearthing it.

I will leave you with one final story. When my Dadaji passed on, we celebrated him in proper Sikh custom. My uncle chose a spot by a spring to burn his body, then collected his bones from the ashes. For three days and three nights, our family listened as four Gyanis, or learned men, read the Guru Granth Sahib in its entirety, the Punjabi washing over each of us as we did chores, told stories, tried and failed to sleep. On the last day, after closing the ceremony, we went to Gurdwara Sri Nanak Matta Sahib, the *gurdwara* my Dadiji had brought me to so often as a child. Descending the steps to the Nanak Matta’s *baoli sahib* or step well, I looked down, feeling the water’s heft as it echoed up toward us. My father took a linen bag from his brother, and, reciting words I no longer remember, let Dadaji’s bones into the dark below. Having experienced no Sikh funerary rites before my Dadaji’s passage, I didn’t know that we always send our dead on by giving them to water. This is because by returning to water, we return to the source of all of us. By returning to water, we are able to become all over again. Before that day, I also did not know that *baolis* were constructed on *gurdwara* property to ensure that surrounding communities had access to fresh water, the denial of which was one way rulers at various moments in our history tried and failed to convert Sikhs to other faiths. Not only had we returned our patriarch to everything, we had sent him on in

water heavy with our histories of survival and resistance. For me, there was no better way to say goodbye, which, I reminded myself, was ultimately just another beginning.

With that, I welcome you and thank you for joining with us in what has become a collective

journey to understand how we might recuperate, reprise, and re-envision water and environmental justice in our pasts, presents, and, hopefully, futures.

In source and solidarity,
Simi Kang

Footnotes

[1] All of the Mississippi River's first names are listed in Tia-Simone Gardner's feature, "Reading the River;" where I live, it is called *Misi-Ziibi*—(*Anishinaabemowin* [Ojibwe]), "Great river" and *Mníšoŕethąka*—(*Dakŕótiyapi* [Dakota]), according to [The Decolonial Atlas](#).

[2] Here, I am referring to Jodi Byrd's use of Bahamian poet Edward Kamau Braithwaite's "arrivant." Byrd uses the term to "signify those people forced into the Americas through the violence of European and Anglo-American colonialism and imperialism around the globe" (2011: xix), differentiating these people from European and Anglo-Americans who deliberately and consistently colonized and imperialized Native peoples in the past and present.

[3] In the Twin Cities, these spaces include [Minneapolis American Indian Center](#), [All My Relations Arts](#), and [Birchbark Books & Native Art](#). A good resource to learn about whose lands you are on, what languages they live in, and how treaties have shaped what you are able to say, see, and do in that place is [The Decolonial Atlas](#).

[4] Let me say this example is illustrative of a larger point I'm trying to make about right relationship; I understand that mosquitoes often carry and spread disease and thus, should be understood as potentially threatening.

[5] See Robert Bullard's reflection on the history of the discipline "Environmental Justice in the 21st Century: Race Still Matters" (2001).

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About the Author

Simi Kang is a Doctoral Dissertation Fellow in the Feminist Studies Program at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. A Sikh American educator, scholar, artist, and community advocate, she centers Asian/American stories and knowledges to interrogate the intersection of environment and policy. Kang's work has been supported in many ways big and small by her interlocutors in Louisiana and was funded by the UMN Graduate School and Interdisciplinary Center for the Study of Global Change. Her work has appeared in *The Asian American Literary Review*, *Gravy Quarterly*, *Hyphen Magazine*, *Kartika Review*, *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, and *Jaggery: A DesiLit Arts and Literature Journal*.