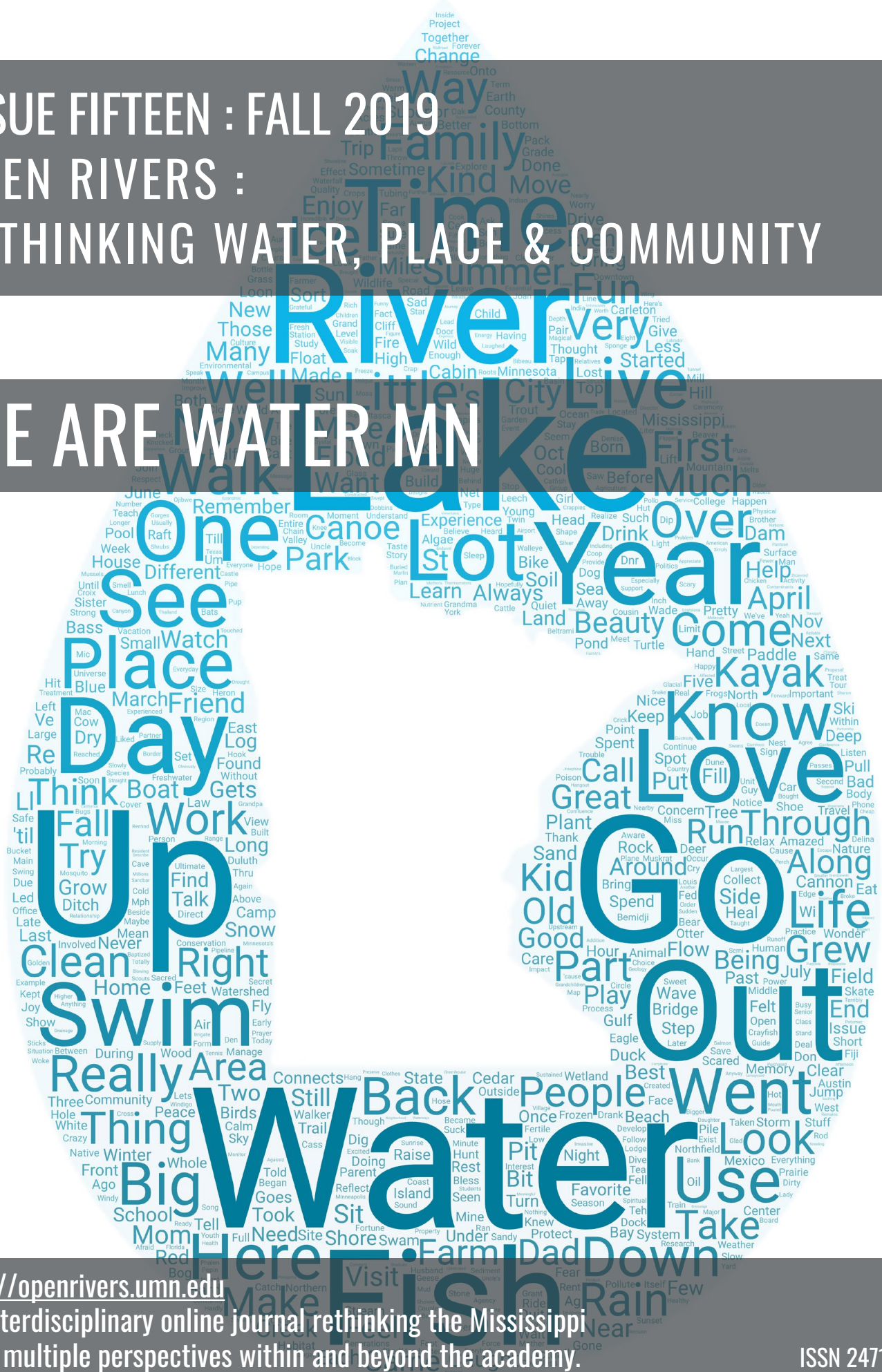


ISSUE FIFTEEN : FALL 2019 OPEN RIVERS : RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

WE ARE WATER MN



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

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The cover image is a word cloud made from narratives representing We Are Water MN. Image courtesy of Minnesota Humanities Center.

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TEACHING AND PRACTICE

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS OVER WATER

By Tim Ruzek

One morning back in spring 2018, I walked down large chunks of shoreline rocks below the Cedar River's dam in downtown Austin, Minnesota.

Perched on a rock in the water, I started taking video of a calming, water-flowing scene for Cedar River Watershed District's social media when something caught my eye downstream across the river.

A circular, cone-shaped sedge hat—typically associated with eastern Asia—was popping out along the shoreline where a woman was crouched while fishing.

I had never seen one of those hats worn in my hometown of Austin. How great it was to see one of the community's newcomers enjoying the local natural resources. I also knew she was someone—along with other refugee and immigrant residents—whom the watershed district likely wasn't reaching through our outreach, projects, and events.

We Are Water MN opened those doors for us and for our local planning partners.

It gave us a reason to go outside the box of our traditional work and audience. We Are Water MN led us to initiate conversations and foster



*Detail from original, showing children and adults get ready to launch canoes and kayaks.
Image courtesy of T. C. Rietz.*

new relationships with individuals and groups who typically don't interact with our watershed district.

When I first inquired about We Are Water MN, my focus was to get our local watershed included with a fun, effective program to promote and raise awareness for our Cedar River State Water Trail on a statewide level.

Reflecting on the overall experience after hosting the exhibit, I now realize how much more we unexpectedly gained through We Are Water MN. We connected with and learned from our communities of color in ways I never imagined, and the process has changed the way I think about our outreach efforts, especially when I have new partnerships to lean on thanks to We Are Water MN.

These efforts not only proved highly fruitful but also much needed in our community.

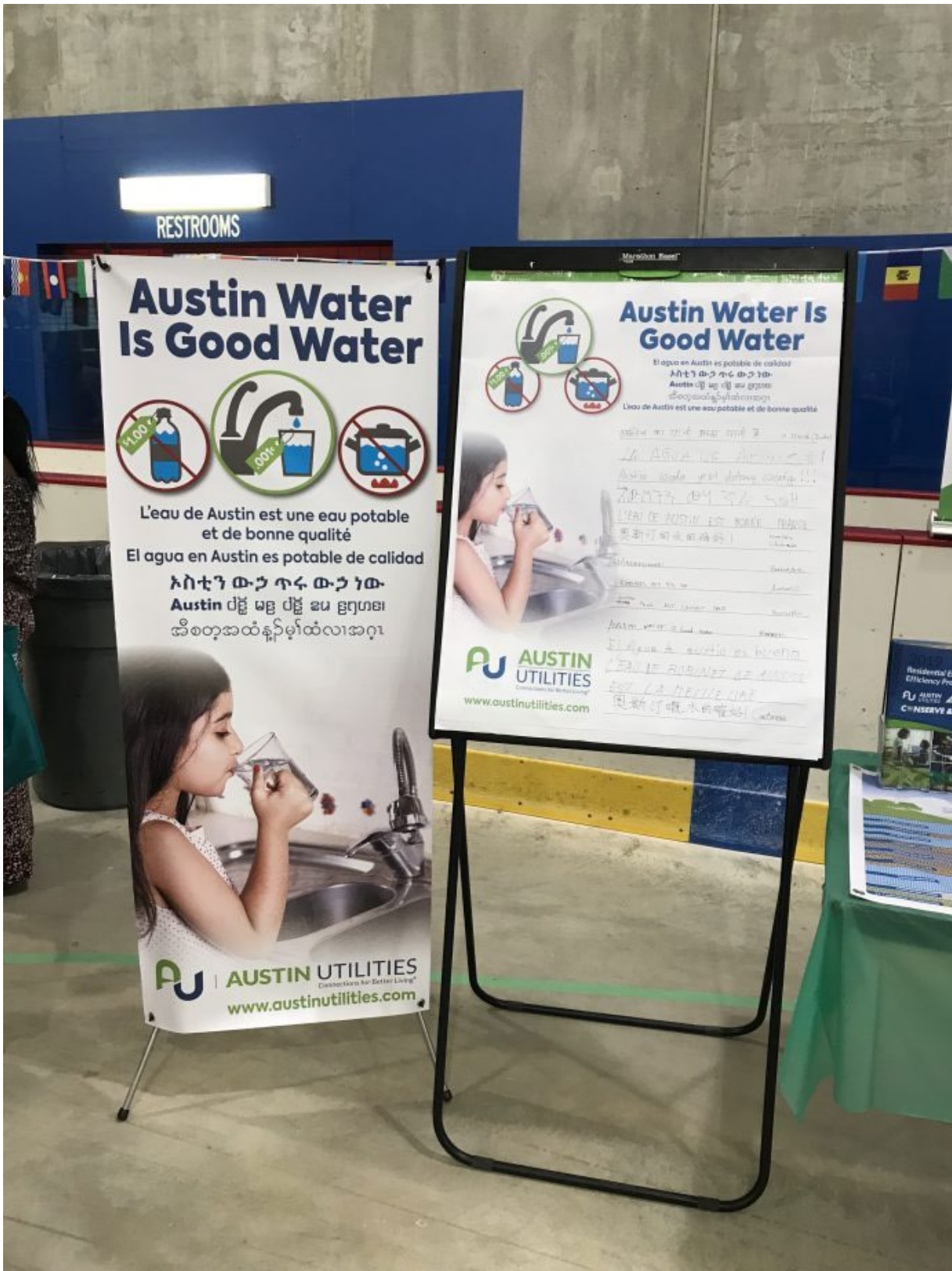
Austin has grown in the past 20 years into a diverse community. Last fall, Austin Public Schools proclaimed the 2018-2019 school year as a "landmark year" given that for the first time the district's non-white student population exceeded the number of white students.

Last year, white students totaled just under 50 percent of the district's 5,226 students overall. A little more than 20 percent of students speak Spanish; another 15 percent speak languages other than English and Spanish.

Austin's Asian student population has grown rapidly in recent years, representing about nine percent of the district's enrollment last year. Austin's Karenni population (those whose families came here from Thailand and Burma) lead that group, which also includes Karen refugees. Austin students, in fact, make up about 40 percent of all Minnesota students who speak Karenni.



Tim Ruzek of Cedar River Watershed District joins Austin High School students in one of the English Language Learner classes for a photo April 4, 2019, following his presentation on the local Cedar River watershed and drinking water supply. For two years, teacher Arik Andersen, who is an ELL instructor at Austin High, has invited Ruzek to give a few presentations each year to his classes; he also brings the students out to the Cedar River to conduct water-clarity testing and gain other natural-resources experiences. Image courtesy of Arik Andersen.



An “Austin Water is Good Water” banner translated into Austin’s main languages is displayed April 6, 2019, at the 10th annual Taste of Nations festival in Austin. Attendees also could write the message in other languages on the poster next to the banner as part of the local We Are Water MN booth. Image courtesy of the author.

Making connections

Back in October 2017, future hosts of the We Are Water MN exhibit met at the Minnesota Humanities Center in St. Paul for training that emphasized the importance of reaching out to and including our community's absented voices and people of color. For Austin, we thought a lot about ways to connect and work with our communities of color and those born in other countries.

I met with two organizations that I had never connected with previously for watershed district work. The We Are Water MN talks were with the

City of Austin's Human Rights Commission and staff at the Welcome Center, an Austin nonprofit started 19 years ago by concerned residents in response to a dramatic change in the area's work force and demographics.

The Welcome Center aims to create an inclusive and welcoming community; today, it provides various services with staff having cultural and linguistic expertise with Spanish, French, Karenni, Karen, Burmese, Fon, Goun, Mina, and Nuer to better serve the area's diverse populations.



Staff with the Minneapolis-based Water Bar & Public Studio and local municipal water provider Austin Utilities serve several types of water April 6, 2019, at Packer Arena in Austin, Minnesota as part of the We Are Water MN booth at the 10th annual Taste of Nations festival. Image courtesy of the author.

At our initial We Are Water MN local planning meeting, a co-planner mentioned learning through her church about many families who have come here from other countries who buy bottled water for home or boil water before consumption. Some even use bottled water for cooking. They didn't trust the local water supply. Most of us didn't know that.

Given this, our local group, which included the municipal water provider, Austin Utilities, developed outreach materials that translated the message "Austin Water is Good Water" into the main languages used in Austin.

I used these messages when speaking to English Language Learners (ELL) classes at Austin High School about our watershed and drinking water supply from underground aquifers. They seemed most impressed that Austin's deepest well goes more than 1,000 feet underground.

As our first major event for We Are Water MN, our planning group committed to running a

booth with Austin Utilities and the Water Bar & Public Studio of Minneapolis at Austin's annual Taste of Nations event, a popular festival led by the Welcome Center that celebrates diversity and different cultures.

This booth proved popular, with Austin's water coming out as the favorite in a taste test that also included bottled water and metro area tap water. People also could write the message of "Austin Water is Good Water" into a language not represented on our banner.

Herve Idjidina with the Welcome Center—who worked with us on Taste of Nations—provided one of our local water stories for the We Are Water MN exhibit. His story focused on how his family of five always bought bottled water when they moved to the United States from Benin, West Africa. When they later moved to Austin, his family switched after a doctor told him the local tap water was safe.



Local residents join the Welcome Center staff along with Tim Ruzek of Cedar River Watershed District and Tony Flerlage, a Minnesota Department of Natural Resources conservation officer, for a photo following a presentation and discussion about fishing rules June 20, 2019, at the Welcome Center in Austin. Many of the attendees are new to the United States and enjoy fishing. Image courtesy of the Welcome Center.

As part of a special newspaper tab prior to the kickoff of the We Are Water MN exhibit in Austin, I wrote about the water story of Oballa Oballa, a Riverland Community College student in Austin who grew up in Africa. He shared a powerful story about the importance of water conservation while living 10 years in a refugee camp in Kenya where his family sometimes went two days without drinking water or eating food.

For another major event, we teamed with our We Are Water MN cohost, Jay C. Hormel Nature Center, to offer free canoe and kayak rentals during Austin's annual 4th Avenue Fest, an event that also celebrates diversity and opens the city pool for free swimming one evening. Our fleet of eight canoes and ten kayaks at the festival could not go out fast enough on the Cedar River at Austin Mill Pond. We helped about 120



Children and adults get ready to launch canoes and kayaks June 12, 2019, on the Cedar River State Water Trail at Austin Mill Pond as part of Austin's second annual 4th Ave Fest. Cedar River Watershed District and the Jay C. Hormel Nature Center served about 120 individuals with free canoe and kayak rentals as part of the event and their We Are Water MN programming. Image courtesy of T. C. Rietz.

individuals paddle the river, with roughly half being people of color and many paddling for the first time. This was a greatly rewarding experience, directly engaging us with most sectors of our community.

A few weeks after We Are Water MN moved on to Northfield, our new partner Herve became the executive director of the Welcome Center. Soon after, he started Saturday morning walks called “A Walk for a Better Life” around Austin Mill Pond that aims to connect people in the community over an hour-long walk along the river. At the suggestion of a Welcome Center board member, Herve also worked with a Karenni interpreter to set up a presentation on our watershed and invited Welcome Center clients who show a lot of interest in fishing. With the help of the Karenni interpreter, who had paddled the river with me in May in a 10-person canoe, I joined our local DNR conservation officer in speaking to this group

about Minnesota fishing, including the rules and types of fish found locally.

This was a great conversation with good questions. I handed out maps for the Cedar River State Water Trail. We took a group photo and talked about organizing another free canoe and kayak rental night on Austin Mill Pond with the Welcome Center.

Our experience with We Are Water MN has been rewarding and has changed our community for the better. We’re excited to continue our new partnerships and better connect with all sectors of our community over water.

Hear Herve Idjidina’s We Are Water MN story, “Austin water is good water.” (transcript) See more stories in the online map.

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About the Author

An Austin native, Tim Ruzek has served since 2016 as the water plan and outreach coordinator for the Cedar River Watershed District and Mower Soil & Water Conservation District (one staff for two local government agencies). Prior to this, Tim worked for six years in public relations and development at The Hormel Institute, University of Minnesota while doing outreach consulting on the side for the watershed district. He started his career as a reporter for the Rochester Post-Bulletin’s office in Austin from 2003 to 2010. He has a strong interest in local water history and has given many presentations on historical aspects of the Cedar River watershed, including one called “Flood Walls in a Former Swamp” about the river’s drastic changes in Austin since the 1850s. Tim and his wife, Heather, an Austin Public Schools teacher, live in Austin with their daughters, Aubrey and Estelle.