

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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INTRODUCTION

GUEST EDITORS' INTRODUCTION TO ISSUE FIFTEEN: WE ARE WATER MN

By Britt Gangeness and Jennifer Tonko

Water can be described as a molecule, a solvent, a relative, a healer, and a force that both gives and takes life.

Reader, what is water to you?

If any article in this issue brings you into deeper understanding of the answer to this question,

then we have succeeded. Like the We Are Water MN project as a whole, the goal of this issue is to share multiple ways of knowing water and to deepen your relationship with and responsibility to water.

Take, for example, “Water and Equity” by Linda Kingery. In her article, Linda describes a concept



*People moving through the We Are Water MN exhibit.
Image courtesy of Minnesota Humanities Center.*

called the hydrosocial cycle, which is simply a way of thinking about how “water and society make and remake each other over time and space.” Through the introduction of this phrase, we have been thinking differently. We wonder: how are changes in water—whether from human climate change, pollution, or overuse—remaking us?

40 percent of the water in Minnesota is not meeting standards set for safe swimming, fishing, or drinking. This pollution is remaking us. By understanding water pollution in this way, we feel a deeper sense of responsibility. We can remake and be remade.

The Articles in this Issue

Many of the articles in this issue are written by folks who hosted We Are Water MN in their community. These authors are part of a cohort that began learning and planning work together in 2017 that culminated in an eight-stop public-facing tour in 2018–2019. Tim Ruzek, Linda Kingery, Travis Zimmerman, and the U of M Twin Cities collaborators (Tracy Fallon, Doug Klimbal, Kimberly Long, and Patrick Nunally) are part of this group. Their articles are about local partnership building and connecting the project to their broader work.

There are also articles written by state agency staff who support the project across locations. Pieces by Ashley Ignatius, Sara Holger, and the team from the Department of Agriculture (Jen Schaust, Kevin Kuehner, and Margaret Wagner) demonstrate the ways that the Minnesota Humanities Center’s Absent Narratives Approach (described more in the guest editors’ feature article) is influencing our work or can be used to describe other successes the agencies experience. Paula Maday, in contrast, reviews the exhibit as an outside observer. She visited the exhibit and events put on by the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa at the Great Lakes Aquarium

As a society, we can be remade too. If we can act with wisdom, we might be remade into people who are remembered for humility and reverence for the natural world. We might be remade into people who understand that “all the water we have is all the water we will ever have,” a phrase we heard from Indigenous leader and water protector Sharon Day at a We Are Water MN event. We think of it often.

When we learn from and with the many different people who call Minnesota home, we create shared understandings of the issues we face and build relationships from which to solve problems. The work is challenging and rewarding and it’s at the heart of this issue.

as a journalist for the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission’s *Mazina’igan*. She describes her experience in words both beautiful and influential: “The exhibit was a star quilt of knowledge and meaning—many pieces and colors intertwined together into one. And in the tradition of Ojibwe star quilts, it was also a gift, a reminder that water is many things to many people, but more than anything, it is its own being; and our relative to take care of in the world, as it takes care of us.”

Last, we offer two perspectives from outside the project. The first is Melissa Miller’s work at the Iowa Water Center where she is finding that, through personal relationships, the Iowa Water Center’s studies and residents’ lived experiences are influencing each other to everyone’s benefit. The second is Mahin Hamilton’s review of *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* by Robin Wall Kimmerer, a book that, like We Are Water MN, shares science, Native teaching, and personal story.

These articles reflect the experiences of the 2018–2019 cohort of We Are Water MN host

sites, but the work is not over. Another cohort has formed and planning is underway with hosts in Chisholm, Pipestone, Morris, Mankato, St. Paul, and Rochester, Minnesota. Their public-facing tour will unroll in 2020–2021. Look

for those details on [the project website](#). More importantly, [reach out](#) if you are inspired to share your water story or if these articles bring you into deeper relationship with water. Your stories shape our story and understanding too.

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About the Authors

Britt Gangeness coordinates and develops outreach and education projects at the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. She has been working on the We Are Water MN project since 2014—a project that embraces the power of people and relationships to make local change. She has a B.A. in biology and M.Ed. in environmental education.

Jennifer Tonko is a program officer with the Minnesota Humanities Center and is the lead for We Are Water MN, a multi-agency partnership formed to tell Minnesota’s water stories collaboratively, bringing together personal narratives, historical content, and scientific information. She convenes state agency partners to jointly develop program direction and works with local community leaders to use We Are Water MN as a community engagement and network building tool, to learn from and amplify the perspectives of all Minnesotans, and build relationships in Minnesota communities among those who protect and affect water.