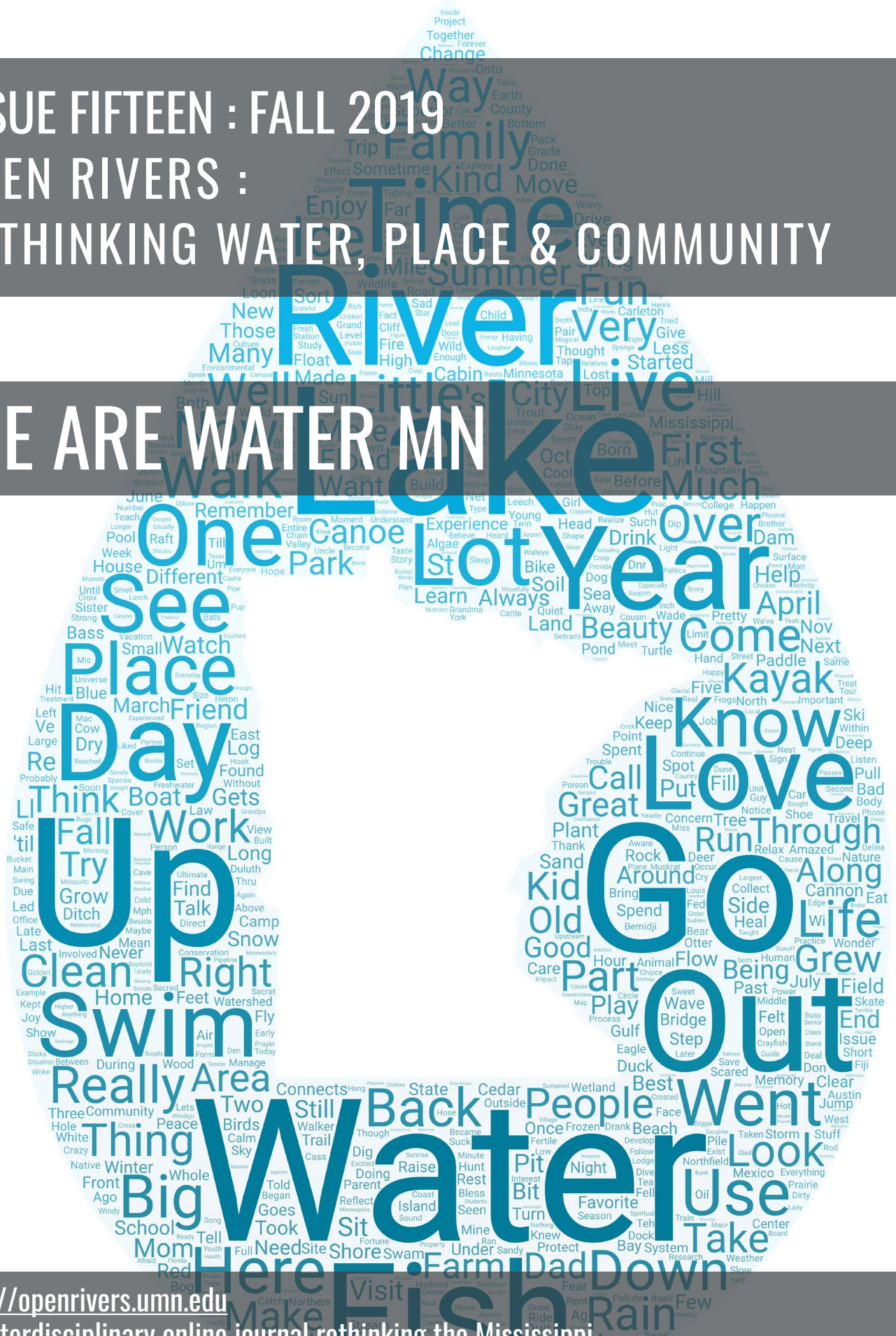


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RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

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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FEATURE

WE ARE WATER: STORIES AND CONNECTIONS TO *NIBI*

By Paula Maday

We wanted to include this article by Paula Maday, written for the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission's (GLIFWC) newspaper Mazina'igan, because we were thrilled to read someone else's description and understanding of We Are Water MN and wanted

to pass that along to Open Rivers' readers. It was exciting and affirming to learn one way the spirit and intent of We Are Water MN comes through to visitors via this article.

—Jennifer Tonko, Guest Editor



We Are Water MN on exhibit in the lobby of Great Lakes Aquarium, Duluth, March 10–April 22, 2019. Image courtesy of Paula Maday.

Traveling exhibit explores stories & connections to *nibi* in MN

“What’s my relationship to water, as a woman?” Fond du Lac’s Nikki Crowe repeated the question posed to her. “Women take care of the water. Everyone in this room came from a woman, and started in the womb being carried in water, so for women, it is important for us to take care of the water.”

Crowe’s words resonated with those around her in the room, and were true. We all began surrounded and protected by water as our spirits took form and entered the human realm. As adults, our bodies are composed of roughly 60 percent water. Our brains and our hearts are said to be about 73 percent water, our lungs 83 percent. Other organisms within this world have a body weight made up of 90 percent water. *Nibi* (water) is of great importance to all living things.

Exhibit Overview

We Are Water MN is organized around four main themes. The first theme—We Are Water—recognizes that water is a large part of the identity of the state and tribes. From the state slogan “Land of 10,000 Lakes” to Mnisota Makhoche—a Dakota phrase translating to “Land where the water reflects the sky,” people from all around the region embrace water as part of who they are.

This section of the exhibit highlights these relationships through listening stations where visitors are encouraged to listen to recorded water stories told by various Minnesotans. Other

Our stories and connections to the water are the theme of a traveling exhibit called We Are Water MN that tours throughout the state. A multi-agency partnership formed to tell Minnesota’s water story collaboratively, the exhibit brings together personal narratives, historical materials, and scientific information in an easy-to-navigate display suitable for both adults and children. I visited the exhibit at the Great Lakes Aquarium, where it was on display March 10–April 22. What I found was great humanity, intimacy, and culture woven throughout scientific data and demonstrations. 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 this world, as it takes care of us.

displays feature printed water stories and photos available to read and look at. Blank cards are on hand for visitors to write their own water stories and display them around a Story Map, marking where their story takes place with a pushpin. These local, handwritten stories were highly engaging and endearing for me; I felt like I was sitting around the kitchen table trading memories and stories with folks I had known my whole life. Many of the details shared are heartfelt and intimate. Activities for children in this section include a puppet station and book basket.

Get Active!

A big part of the initiative for We Are Water MN is to mobilize and inspire community engagement beyond the exhibit. If you can, visit the exhibit at its nearest host site to you. If you can't visit the exhibit, look for tips within the 'Get Active!' sections for ways that you can still get involved, experience parts of the exhibit remotely, and strengthen your relationship with the water. Special thank you to the Minnesota Humanities Center, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, and other exhibit partners—including the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa—for providing supplemental information and handouts as part of this exhibit. We are sharing some of those ideas here.

- Visit <http://www.mnhum.org/water> to watch and listen to water stories from the people who live and work in Minnesota. Some of the stories share moments of fun or play. Others tell stories of loss or change. How has hearing many perspectives influenced the way you think or feel about water?

How's the Water?

The second theme of the exhibit asks the question, "How's the Water?" Minnesota's waters are headwaters located on a triple, continental-scale water divide. From here, it travels to the Gulf of Mexico, Hudson Bay, and Atlantic Ocean, making the health of the water in Minnesota very important. Currently, 40 percent of Minnesota's waters are polluted. This section of the exhibit explores factors that impact the health of the water and how.

Visitors can view a map of altered streams in Minnesota, read informative panels on

- Write your own water story! Take time to consider your personal water story or stories. Are your stories recreational, spiritual, or something else? Is the way you tell your story similar to or different from the stories you heard on the website?
- Interview others within your community about their water stories. The exhibit's *Docent & Educator Handbook* contains a guide for interviewing community members, available at: https://mnhum.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/water_docent_ed_guide.pdf. The recently produced *Dibaginjigaadeg Anishinaabe Ezhitwaad: A Tribal Climate Adaptation Menu* can also provide guidance on conducting interviews or seeking knowledge from indigenous peoples or communities. This document is available at: <http://www.glifwc.org/ClimateChange/TribalAdaptationMenuV1.pdf>. While conducting interviews, do you notice any patterns?

the condition of lakes, rivers, wetlands, and groundwater by Minnesota region, and learn how infrastructure like lead and old plumbing affects the safety of drinking water. A final multi-panel display details four ways to ensure that the future of Minnesota's water is fishable, drinkable, and swimmable. Children can keep their hands and minds busy within this section by completing a colorful water cycle puzzle, or by playing at a light table that teaches about common pollutants found in water. There is also a water tower display and activity area showing how private wells are drilled and managed.

Get Active!

- Model a watershed! This is a great activity for families to do together. Color a watershed on wax paper. Include a headwater, main river channel, tributaries, and human development. Color all the water bodies with washable marker and the rest with pencil and crayon. Crumple the wax paper to create elevation change and spritz it with water. Watch where the water flows!
- Learn about your local watershed. Visit the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency website at <https://www.pca.state.mn.us/water/watersheds> and enter your zip code to learn more about how your watershed is doing.
- Research and share what local tribes are doing to help protect the water. Many tribes develop and adhere to strict water quality standards. In addition, they are often engaged in research and studies that focus on protecting and improving the health of the water.

People + Water + Choices

The third theme of the exhibit explores the human ability to change water. From climate change and infrastructure change, what people do—matters. So how do people work together to agree upon water issues? What challenges or boundaries do people face when trying to make decisions about a resource that crosses boundaries? This section of the exhibit delves into these difficult questions and more!

Colorful panels illustrate examples of how decisions made by people in the past affect water today. One panel, for example, details the history of the chain of lakes around Minneapolis and how access to those lakes has changed from private to public over time. The information provided here provokes thought about the types of boundaries involved with water management, including political and cultural considerations.

You + Me + Water

The fourth and final theme of the exhibit focuses on efforts to protect and preserve the water in Minnesota. From individual efforts to organizational work, this section puts forth a call to action on what we can all do to pitch in and help our relative stay healthy.

“What you Flush Matters” is an interactive kiosk that teaches about the impact of contaminants entering our water through household drains. In this section, visitors can also pledge a water protection idea by writing it on a raindrop and then hanging it on a board for others to read.

Tribal Treaty Fishing Forum

As part of the We Are Water MN exhibit, Duluth host partner Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa organized several public events to explore connections between people and water. Events included a native plants presentation, a food and photo event, and the Fond du Lac Youth Climate Convening. On April 4, the Band and Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission hosted the Tribal Treaty Fishing Forum, intended to help people learn about how tribes in the region manage off-reservation treaty fishing seasons.

To a crowd of 50 attendees, GLIFWC Director of Biological Services Jonathan Gilbert spoke on intertribal co-management in the Minnesota portion of the 1837 Ceded Territory. Fond du Lac Fisheries Program Manager Brian Borkholder followed, presenting on the work that Fond du Lac Band is doing related to water, fisheries, and resource management. Points of interest with the audience included sturgeon-stocking efforts in the upper St. Louis River, and use of the Thermal Optic Habitat Area model as a way of predicting average annual walleye production in lakes.



From left, Tom Howes (Fond du Lac), Bradley Harrington (Mille Lacs), and Jason Schlender (Lac Courte Oreilles) share their personal stories about water and why they fish. Image courtesy of Paula Maday.

The second part of the forum featured tribal members Tom Howes (Fond du Lac), Bradley Harrington (Mille Lacs), and Jason Schlender (Lac Courte Oreilles) sharing what it means for them to be able to fish.

For Howes, he sees it as part of who he is as an eagle clan member. “I see it as my job as an eagle clan person to fish and exercise those rights to ensure the continuity of that practice,” he says. Within Ojibwe culture, eagle clan members are recognized as spiritual leaders, intuitive and bearing a sense of knowledge about the future. Members of the clan are often looked to as teachers and keepers of important cultural knowledge.

Harrington explained the spiritual connection that Anishinaabe have to fishing. “Imagine if someone told you that if you go out and gather something, it will give you life. Fish is that, maple, sunlight, water, wild rice. A lot of the things we are given as Anishinaabe people have been given from the *manidoog* (spirits). They each have a story that they were given to us because a spirit loved us. These things represent an abundance of spiritual energy in another, spiritual world. So this is a cultural, spiritual

contract between us—the most pitiful beings on this earth—and everything else that was given to us by Gitchi-Manidoo as a way for us to sustain ourselves.”

For his part, Schlender noted his gratitude at being a “beneficiary of very wise, gifted visionaries.” In speaking this way, he paid tribute to his ancestors who signed the treaties, ensuring that Anishinaabeg could sustain their life and their identities for generations to come.

Ending with many questions and comments, the Tribal Treaty Fishing Forum was a successful event that shared information and stimulated community dialogue about the exercise of treaty rights. Eleven tribes in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan exercise rights reserved under treaties signed with the U.S. government in the early-mid 1800s.

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About the Author

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