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RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

WOMEN & WATER : CALLING



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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image of Ann Raiho with a canoe, is courtesy of Natalie Warren.

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IN REVIEW

ON RIVERS, WOMEN, AND CANOES

By Natalie Warren and Phyllis Mauch Messenger

Open Rivers contacted Natalie Warren [NW], author of *Hudson Bay Bound: Two Women, One Dog, Two Thousand Miles to the Arctic* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), to talk about her memoir and the story it chronicles: a river trip by canoe with her best friend, Ann Raiho, from Minneapolis to Hudson Bay. The months-long journey, never before attempted by an all-women crew, is a

story of perseverance and optimism in the face of challenges, while also showing the dramatic changes these river landscapes have seen over the past century. Phyllis Messenger of *Open Rivers* [OR] spoke with Natalie about her journey and her perspectives on the connection between women and water. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.



Natalie Warren paddling a canoe. Image courtesy of Kelsey Daly.

[OR] Tell me about your journey in becoming connected with water.

[NW] I am from a very urban area in Miami, Florida, and did not grow up spending much time by water, except occasionally hanging out by the beach and the ocean. I didn't interact with the Miami River or any of the water systems there. So it was a shock to my system when I came up to the Northwoods when I was 15 for a two-week Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA) trip with Camp Menogyn. I had never been overnight camping before and had never been canoeing for more than an hour or two, so I had a lot to learn quickly. I was kind of an angsty teenager and there weren't a lot of mental health resources in high school. I went to a very intense art school; I played sax for four to five hours a day and was being groomed to be a professional musician. I didn't think that was what I wanted to do, but if I changed my mind, I would have had to change schools.



Hudson Bay Bound: Two Women, One Dog, Two Thousand Miles to the Arctic by Natalie Warren, with a foreword by Ann Bancroft. Published at the University of Minnesota Press.



Natalie Warren and Ann Raiho canoeing. Image courtesy of Alex Horner.

Being on the water for those two weeks, I just remember feeling the most at peace and relaxed and centered that I had ever been in my young adult life, so camp became a place for me to reflect and be by water. I think water has these calming attributes to it. This was my first time being immersed in it. From there I just kept coming back to Menogyn every summer. I did my 2-week trip, my 30-day trip in Ontario, and then my 50-day trip on Kazan Kunwak [rivers in Nunavut, Canada], and from then on, my relationship with water and my understanding of what it means to be a woman became deeply intertwined.

[OR] And then you just decided to do this big trip to Hudson Bay?

[NW] It was a long time coming. Ann and I were really stressed during our senior year in college; trying to get a job after the 2008 recession was really challenging. The pressure that “once you’re out of college, you’re a fully capable adult” is really problematic, because it sets up too many expectations to fulfill. I also wanted to get back to the river so we could go back to where we had been happiest, the most ourselves—on water. So we were clawing back to that in a way: “OK, we just did this really hard thing. Let’s go travel on rivers for three months and re-center ourselves.”



Women of Menogyn. Image courtesy of Natalie Warren.

[OR] How did other women foster your growth in paddling? Your relationship with Ann was really central, but how about other women?

[NW] Growing up in Miami, and not to stereotype Miami culture, I felt certain pressures as a woman and in general to look certain ways and act a certain way. It meant really focusing on appearance and body weight and all these things that a lot of women struggle with. When I think of Miami, I think of a glamorous culture, more so than when I think of Minnesota culture. For me, I came up to the BWCA trip for the first time and I had a guide who was tanned and tattooed and hairy, and no one shaved. At first I was going, “what’s happening here?” All these wild women in the woods! And it was really different from what I was told women were supposed to be. On those trips, we would swim naked, and I became

comfortable with my body for the first time, which I had learned somehow to be ashamed of. From there, building those relationships day after day was monumental for my own growth in the outdoors. I realized that women going on an expedition together for however long is almost an equalizer, especially for groups that have been marginalized (obviously I am a white woman, and I have lots of points of privilege). But for me, thinking about the challenges I face as a woman—like trying to live up to the standards of female beauty—were just completely erased when I was on an outdoor trip, because you are so focused on where to camp, what to eat, and everyone is working together as a team to survive. It just takes away all of those cultural pressures and stereotypes that are really problematic and prevalent outside of that context.



Hudson Bay Bound! Image courtesy of Ron Hustvedt.

[OR] Other than being with hairy, tattooed women, was there other diversity in some of the groups you've traveled with?

[NW] Well, recreational activities like this were and still are today—although it is getting better—very much a white space. You need money, gear, accessibility, and introduction to all of these things, so Menogyn was very white when I was there. One of my best friends is Hmong and she was on my long trip; we have since talked a lot about her experiences as a woman of color in that space as well, and yeah, it's weird to be in this really empowering space that you also recognize is a place that needs a lot of work. But being in the canoe all day provides a space to talk about these things. You have nothing but time to think,

speculate, reflect. I think water really sparked us to imagine and envision different things, different futures. It sort of shows us how what we see on the land impacts the water. You can literally see how everything is connected, and that transfers to a larger understanding of systems, of thinking about interconnected issues of place, race, and gender, too. So we were able to reflect on and think critically about what our role was on and after this trip. What can we do differently and improve and make the outdoors more accessible? So it was not very diverse, but it helped us become critical thinkers, to have space to consider a better future within the context of an expedition. And now some of my friends from camp are on the board of Camp Menogyn, working on diversity and inclusion.



Natalie Warren and Myhan on the trip. Image courtesy of Natalie Warren.

[OR] Thinking about your relationship with Ann Raiho, what does it mean for you to be embarking on this expedition as the first two women to be taking up this challenge?

[NW] Deciding to take a trip like this, you are making a commitment to this relationship. You are going to be a meaningful part of each other's lives for a really long time. For us, we had come together, then drifted apart at different points in college. This was like a statement that we love each other, care for each other, and wanted to solidify that bond in a way. In terms of being the first two women to do the trip, we had yet to learn the significance of that. We had grown up in the Menogyn space. It was familiar to us, so it was a totally normal thing to do. *Why is everyone so excited about it?* We hadn't learned what it means to be a woman in the world. We began to notice the microaggressions and started to recognize the constant messages women receive to direct them on a certain path in which canoeing for three months is monumental. Showing that women can be in those spaces and also that women can make their own decisions and shape something different for their lives than the traditional path of marriage and having lots of children—which is part of my life now—but knowing that there is something else out there, was sort of an epiphany for me.

[OR] So it didn't really dawn on you, at the beginning, how monumental it was. How did that creep up on you?

[NW] We had a lot of encounters early on, and throughout the book I'd pose the question: Would this have happened if we were two men? To a certain extent you can only speculate, but the fact that our bodies were feeling the question at all says a lot about the interactions. If you are led to question, "Is this happening to me because I am a woman?" something is wrong. So we started having these interactions with people: they were doubting us, or they were overprotective of us, or they were totally dismissive of us. "Who cares that you are two women doing this trip?" We saw this spectrum of reactions that planted this seed

in me to feel angry or feel disrespected or not trusted or not responsible somehow. That grew and continues to grow, as I am able to know more and reflect on those moments as moments of sexism and moments of me having to overcome barriers that might not exist for men.

[OR] Sounds like not only the experience of the expedition, but also the recognitions of sexism are continually affecting your life and your work.

[NW] Yes, and I think that for all marginalized groups, it's harder to walk through a world that is not made for you. Again, I have lots of privilege, but I think a lot of people have these experiences and confront barriers that are hard to acknowledge until you begin to live through them, and begin to digest and reflect and communicate over time. Sometimes we were really defensive. There was a guy who said we couldn't do it, and he laughed at us and said we wouldn't make it to Hudson Bay until October, if we made it at all. And while that was really upsetting and problematic, for us it was a fan on the flames to prove something. It's unfortunate that we felt we had to prove anything to begin with. But it did put a fire under us to start to recognize that we were actually making a difference and proving that we could do it.



*The original Hudson Bay Bound logo
courtesy of Nick Fox.*

[OR] Was he the one who said he was going to send you a barrel of beer at the end if you made it?

[NW] Yeah, and at the end he didn't even remember who we were. We thought about him every day and he didn't even remember us.

[OR] You must have had support from a whole community of women and men who were there for you. What did that mean for you in opposition to what you were just talking about, the doubters?

[NW] When we started out planning this trip, we got this resounding "Yes! What do you need? Let's make this happen for you." We didn't have money, we didn't have a canoe, we didn't have means to do this. If we had received silence or no support, I wonder if we would have even been able to do this trip. So it was all these people and their support, whether it was verbal, financial,

gear, whatever, that made this trip possible. It was the community of outdoors people that we are part of, and people who just want to be a part of someone else's dream. We just felt so humbled.

[OR] That's wonderful. And you met people along the way. Besides the doubters, you met lots of supportive people.

[NW] We met this woman at the southern shore of Lake Winnipeg who is just a total badass. She goes on Arctic trips all the time. For her, canoeing expeditions are just a thing that you do. Being with her was really, really cool. We met a mix of people. I think that helped shape our understanding of the world, the diversity, not just race and gender, but also just the very complex fabric of humanity that we were traveling through as we encountered all these vastly different personalities.



Map of the journey. Image courtesy of Angela Staehling.

[OR] All the way through your book, *Hudson Bay Bound*, you are talking about environmental stewardship and advocacy and Indigenous issues and so forth. Were those goals or topics you had woven into your plan, or did they emerge as you went along?

[NW] They emerged as we went along, and one of the most beautiful parts of this trip is that we didn't plan for anything at all. A lot of people say, "Here's our goal, here's our mission, here's a product we're gonna make." Ann and I were really focused on exploration, taking whatever came our way. I majored in environmental studies, which probably helped shape my understanding of what we were seeing. But this entire trip became about the land and the water and the people in a way that maybe an arctic expedition wouldn't as much, because we couldn't look

away from the pollution on the Minnesota River and the Red River; we couldn't look away from the disappearing towns. It's something that by seeing it, we couldn't forget it, and it became the lens through which we began to see everything. It was a way of learning that was really different from the reading and writing and talking that I had just been through in college. To actually be on a farm talking to a farmer who doesn't have the funds or means to farm any differently and they love the river and want it to be healthy, but all of their practices are directly polluting their water resources and they're sort of stuck. And that's something that, when I experienced it as an embodied visceral experience, I felt compelled to tell people about, which was different than how I felt after going on more isolated wilderness trips.



Visiting supporters on the journey. Image courtesy of Natalie Warren.

[OR] So that planted the seed for the book as a way to tell that story?

[NW] I felt a need to bring people to the tension that we had experienced, which in many ways is normalized harm to land and water, things that we accept, like: “Of course we’re going to grow corn all the way to the water.” “Of course we’re going to put these toxic chemicals on the field.” “Of course we’re going to only invest in this one industry that doesn’t benefit the local communities.” There are all of these things that we accept as how we live in the world. I had to

bring awareness to it, which started out as me just doing public speaking to begin with, and then it turned into a book to reach more people. So in many ways, it wasn’t just “here’s my story;” it was “here’s what’s going on in the world, through a somewhat entertaining journey along the river.” It became a bit of a bait and switch for me.

[OR] Waiting for the polar bear to show up, right?

[NW] Exactly! No big dramatic moment at the end, but hopefully people learned something.



Paddling along. Image courtesy of Natalie Warren.

[OR] You ran into people who were doing things for the environment as well. Tell me one or two of those examples.

[NW] When we were paddling the Minnesota River there were all these groups that love the river and are working to improve it. They would take us in and introduce us to organic farmers and people who are working on climate justice. For me, that was a shock to my system because growing up in Miami, I had a skewed understanding of what rural areas were and who lived there. I went from Miami to the wilderness to a liberal arts college. I had never spent time in a place that wasn't in a very liberal, progressive setting. My mind said, "We're in the red zone, where everyone is conservative. They don't like the environment." To encounter these groups along the waterways, meeting these pockets of people trying to make the world better in terms of caring for all of our interconnected systems made me realize that I had to rethink and check myself and my stereotypes cause there's some really good stuff being done in rural areas, not just urban, liberal environments.

[OR] This gives you some hope, doesn't it? How has your connection with water that you've described so eloquently impacted your life's journey, after the expedition, after the public speaking, and after the book was out? How has that changed your life?

[NW] I really do feel like my purpose for this life is centered on rivers, centered on water, and so for me, when I think about what legacy I want to leave, or when I think about what career I have, it all comes down to water and rivers being the center of whatever I end up doing. That's my calling. After that expedition, I came back to the Minnesota River and started a nonprofit guiding canoe trips for youth and staying with farmers. And I was like, "I need to get this out into the world." But I wasn't making enough money to keep that up. Then I started doing environmental policy work on the St. Croix River and helping people protect the water through regulation, and then I was writing about river tourism and

doing research on how to better invest in our communities so people can access water. So I see a river as this literal thread throughout everything I've done. And I'm always trying to get back to it somehow, whether it's physically being on the water or working toward something I think is really meaningful pertaining to water. It has become the meaning of my life.

After that trip, I paddled the length of the Mississippi River and the Yukon River in the Yukon River Quest. Expeditions on water became a space for me to reconnect with myself, but also with this community of people, these amazing women that I've built relationships with to ask: "Where are we going next? How are we going to hang out next?" Rivers have been a social, emotional, cultural space for me to connect in all these different ways.

[OR] You kept a journal while you were on the trip, right? It's always hard to think how you have time to journal while you're facing all those challenges. That was probably a great source of material for you as you started the book process.

[NW] We tried to journal every day, but there were five days on the Red River when I was too tired to journal, so when I went to write the book, those days might as well never have happened. I started writing years after we got back, probably in 2015. I was giving a presentation at Midwest Mountaineering. This guy showed up in a St. Olaf sweatshirt, St. Olaf pants, and a St. Olaf hat, and he said, "I went to St. Olaf, too!" He had graduated exactly 50 years before I had. He's since passed away. He was so excited about our trip and wanted to know more about it. He was living in this old folks home and we became pen pals. So I started writing stories and mailing them to him, and he would write me back with stories about his canoe trips. It started out as this really innocent back and forth. Then I realized that maybe I should write more. It's hard to write a book if you haven't already written a book or been a writer. So I came from this sincere effort

to share a story versus the intentional building of a writing career. I wrote the first half of the book through those letters, and once I got the contract with the University of Minnesota Press, I wrote the second half of the book in one go. When I look at the book, I see these segmented portions. I love the second half of the book because I think it flows more just because of the way I wrote the different sections.

[OR] It also became a little more intense as you went along toward the climax and the potential things that could happen to you without much support of people around you. You were in a risky situation, but you were prepared, you knew the risks, and you managed them.

[NW] Absolutely. Also, I think it was representative of what we view as dangerous. I might think, “I don’t know why you let your teenager drive

around the city. That sounds even more dangerous!” I think it’s just because it’s unfamiliar and out of the norm. It becomes a little more romantic. Honestly, canoeing feels really safe compared to other stuff I do in the city.

[OR] Do you think you will write another book about one of the other journeys you’ve been on?

[NW] I’m currently a Ph.D. candidate in communication studies at the University of Minnesota writing my dissertation on environmental communication, which will be the groundwork for my next book. A lot of what I’ve written so far is reflecting on these river experiences, specifically on my expedition down the Mississippi River. I’m asking, “What about paddling a river is a rhetorical experience? How does it change the world and our perceptions of the land, water, and people?”



Myhan, the dog, lounging in the canoe. Image courtesy of Natalie Warren.

And through that is intertwined this understanding of nature and humans and this very interconnected, complex, subjective system. Along with that I'm looking into Indigenous epistemologies of "walking-with" and thinking about science and education and all these things that are important and super helpful but don't always value the experience of walking or paddling a landscape as a valuable form of knowledge production. So a lot of what I'm doing is reflecting on my own life. I learned so much from paddling with rivers; what about that experience opened me up to the world? It's really rooted in understanding and building a relationship with place and listening to the landscape I'm traveling through.

[OR] Your dissertation will be a lot of the material for the book. I assume it will be accessible to people who are not academics.

[NW] That is my life goal. I walk a strange line between academia and coming from a very public career space. So much of my work in the past, whether it has been policy or education, has been making difficult information easy to understand. So I take that approach in academia as well, sometimes with a chip on my shoulder, other times with sheer frustration about academic jargon. I think we can all share these really inspiring and insightful nuggets in a way that's understandable to everyone and still have it be rigorous and well researched and really rooted in experience or data.



Natalie Warren, Ann Bancroft, and Ann Raiho on the shores of the Mississippi River. Image courtesy of Natalie Warren.

[OR] I'd like to turn to the next generation. How do you hope your work will have an impact on other women, and especially the next generation?

[NW] That's my target market. There's a huge canoe culture in Minnesota that can be stereotyped as older white men going on hunting trips and BWCA trips. When I think about my ideal audience, it's teenage girls. I didn't grow up knowing about Ann Bancroft. I didn't grow up knowing that women did anything similar to this. So when Ann Raiho and I did our trip, it was a continuation of our Menogyn trips and I didn't have any role models. Role models are really important to help someone see what they can be or have someone pave the path before them. I hope that my story provides another example of what women can do so that more women, especially young girls, start to imagine all the things that they can do that are related to their

interests and their passions. I had someone once say, "You know, Menogyn and Widji [another YMCA camp] kids are just privileged kids who grew up in the outdoors." That was not my experience. Knowing adventure is out there even if you haven't experienced it yet, I think, is an important message I want to send. Especially as a mom now with a daughter, I'm starting to realize even more the messages that girls are sent at a young age. Just the fact that there are girls and boys clothes and girls and boys toys and all of these dichotomies that I'm seeing and are being reinforced with everything that impacts how she begins to move through the world. It starts at such a young age that I hope this book gets in the hands of middle school and high school girls so they can imagine something a little bit different that breaks through those barriers sooner than I was able to experience them.



The Hayes River. Image courtesy of Natalie Warren.

[OR] What's next for you?

[NW] When I think about my life, it is like a river and not totally knowing what is around the next bend. I am very comfortable being on rivers, having a map but not knowing what the experience will be like when you get to certain sections of your trip. So that's the metaphor that I use to comfort myself for having no clue what I am doing next. Knowing and being grounded in

water and communication, I know I will find an avenue to connect those things in a really interesting way. To be able to share, not only through academia and all the really cool stuff that I have time and space to learn while being in grad school and making that public, but also my own reflections and experiences on water, continuing to share those in ways that I hope make a difference in how people perceive and think about water.

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About the Authors

An author, lifelong paddler, and river lover, Natalie was one of the first two women to paddle from Minneapolis to Hudson Bay and is the author of *Hudson Bay Bound: Two Women, One Dog, Two Thousand Miles to the Arctic* (University of Minnesota Press). She has since canoed the length of the Mississippi River and won first place in the Yukon River Quest in the women's voyageur division, paddling 450 miles in 53 hours. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate researching environmental communication at the University of Minnesota where she studies human-nature relationships and works as an editorial assistant with *Open Rivers*. Natalie lives in Minneapolis with her husband, daughter, and dog.

Phyllis Messenger is an archaeologist and anthropologist who has published numerous books and articles on archaeology and heritage. Prior to serving as an editor for *Open Rivers*, she ran the lab for an archaeology project in Honduras, organized teacher workshops and summer archaeology camps in Minnesota, and led college students on a service-learning experience in the Andes Mountains of Peru. Now she is looking forward to being in a canoe on Minnesota lakes and rivers with her two young grandsons.