



“DOWN BESIDE WHERE THE WATERS FLOW”

Reclaiming Rivers for American Studies
(Introduction)

Over the past three decades, rivers have become a fascinating and popular subject of scholarly interest, not only in the field of environmental history, where river histories have developed into a distinct subgenre (Schönach 2017; Evenden 2018), but also in the emerging field of environmental humanities. In this scholarship, rivers have often been reconceptualized as socio-natural sites where human and non-human actors interact with the natural world, generating complex legacies, path dependencies, and feedback loops (Winiwarter and Schmid 2008). Furthermore, rivers have been described as hybrid “organic machines,” whose energy has been utilized by humans in many different ways, including the harvesting of both hydropower and salmon (White 1995). Indeed, as several environmental historians have noted, in many regions of the world, watercourses have been transformed by technology to such an extent that they increasingly resemble enviro-technical assemblages rather than natural waterways (Pritchard 2011). Rivers have also been discussed through the lens of “eco-biography,” a term coined by Mark Cioc in his influential monograph on the Rhine River, a book informed by “the notion that a river is a biological entity—that it has a ‘life’ and ‘a personality’ and therefore a ‘biography’” (2002: 5).

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Quite surprisingly, despite this “river turn” (Evenden 2018: 700), rivers have played a marginal role in recent American Studies scholarship.¹ To address this gap, this issue of *RIAS* brings together scholars from different disciplines, countries, and continents to analyze a wide variety of river experiences, histories, and representations across the American hemisphere and beyond. Hence the title of this volume, *Rivers of the Americas*, should be seen as both an allusion to the *Rivers of America*² book series (a popular series of sixty-five volumes, each on a particular US river, published between 1937 and 1974) and as a reminder of the still untapped potential of hemispheric, transnational, and comparative modes of critical engagement with rivers in American Studies. Thus, this issue features articles on major and iconic rivers, such as the Mississippi and the Uruguay, as well as contributions on less well-known rivers like the Saint-Maurice River in Canada and the Sumpul River in El Salvador, along with a comparative discussion of the Mississippi and the Volga. While several of the authors in this special issue emphasize the transboundary and transnational elements of American rivers, they also constantly remind us of the intimate connection of rivers with local cultures, practices, and histories, for, as Heidegger put it, “the river is the locality of journeying. The river is the journeying of locality” (1996: 35).

The purpose of this introduction, then, is twofold: on the one hand, it attempts to map the articles gathered in this volume onto existing scholarship on rivers; on the other, it suggests some possible axes of intellectual and critical engagement along which to organize new conversations about waterways—conversations that in our intention should attempt to cross disciplinary, linguistic, national, and epistemological boundaries. Above all, the following pages are an invitation to other colleagues from around the globe to take a walk “down beside where the waters flow,” as Joan Baez sang, to explore together the innumerable, intersecting ways in which thinking with and about rivers could contribute to the field of American Studies.

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1. While submitting the final version of this article, we were pleased to read that the journal *Comparative American Studies* is going to publish a special issue on rivers, too.
 2. See Mink (2006).

The hydrology of large river systems—their systems of tributaries, canals, locks, and dams linking separate watersheds—has played a major role in sustaining communities and vast networks of commercial relations. In the Americas, large and small rivers were of crucial importance for Indigenous societies as a source of food and as paths of transportation (Wood 2018). In the absence of other reliable means of transportation, rivers also became the main and often only available pathways for the exploration, conquest, colonization, and settlement of the vast interior spaces of the Americas so that at the beginning of the nineteenth century, as Donald J. Pisani (2000: 468) has pointed out, it made “more sense to think of the United States [...] as a series of rivers separated by land, than as a huge land mass punctuated by rivers.”

With the rapid industrialization and urbanization of the United States and other countries in the second half of the nineteenth century, major rivers became infrastructural corridors that included not just the waterway itself but also the roads, railroad tracks, tunnels, bridges, warehouses, telegraph and telephone lines concentrated along their banks (Castonguay and Evenden 2012). At the same time, rivers also became an integral part of the urban metabolism of fast-growing cities (Heynen et al. 2006), providing drinking water and a sewer for city dwellers as well as an “ultimate sink” for industrial waste (Tarr 2006). Furthermore, by making use of “their” rivers, urban centers could draw upon a vast hinterland, sometimes artificially extended by the use of canals and aqueducts, tapping far away water sources (Steinberg 2002).

But as much as rivers connect and create opportunities, they also have a highly destructive potential. The very characteristics that make rivers so attractive for humans bear the seeds of destruction and, it could be argued, that our use of rivers has produced what German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1986) described, in a different context, as “risk societies.” In particular, the flooding of rivers is a constant reminder of the precariousness and vulnerability of river life and river economies. In the history of the Americas, inundations have swept away entire settlements and human communities—both Indigenous and colonial. They have fundamentally altered the social composition of cities and caused the displacement

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of many people who had settled along the riverbanks (Lübken 2019). While floods have created huge human and non-human suffering (Lübken 2010) and vast economic damages, droughts, too, though less deadly than extreme flood events, possess a tremendous disruptive potential. Until year-round river navigation could eventually be guaranteed by the construction of vast systems of locks and dams, droughts could interrupt river traffic and transportation for weeks or even months and therefore were dreaded in many parts of America. Steamboat traffic was especially vulnerable to snags, to trees floating in the river—often invisible—to sandbars, and to shifting riverbeds (Shallat 1994: 101). As T.S. McMillin points out in his contribution to this issue, which focuses on the “interrelations among rivers, steamboats, and literature,” the advent of steamboats and steamboat travel transformed rivers in the nineteenth-century United States, allowing writers of the period to use the steamboat as a symbol of the tension between nature and culture.

It is important to understand that the disruptive qualities of rivers are the result of vulnerabilities embedded in human societies—often built up over long periods of time—and a certain autonomy of natural processes. Indeed, one of the most important aspects of recent scholarship on rivers and of several essays in this volume is the insight that rivers have not only been acted upon, but are also actors themselves (Mauch and Zeller 2008: 7). As much as rivers have been transformed by societies, they have also imposed their agency on human settlements, not just by floods and droughts or by hydro-morphological changes but also by their very rhythm, or rather lack of it. The unpredictability of rivers will always pose challenges to riverine societies. The construction of locks and dams, levees, floodwalls, and the constant dredging of riverbeds can all be seen as attempts to tame natural waterways and to find a “happy mean between low water and flood,” as the *New York Times* put it in 1895. As a result of the efforts of engineers and planners, many rivers have been dramatically transformed—some to such an extent that they have come to resemble squalid concrete-lined canals, without any vegetation on their banks. Others, like the Cuyahoga River in Ohio, have been polluted to such a degree that they caught fire (Stradling

and Stradling 2008). While the reengineering of the Chicago River has even forced the river to flow backwards (Cronon 1991).

LOSS, CONSERVATION, RESTORATION

The severe environmental consequences of these human-induced transformations has not gone unnoticed, though. By the middle of the nineteenth century, nature writers like John J. Audubon and Henry David Thoreau in the United States started to complain about the loss of biodiversity along the riverbanks and denounced the environmental degradation created by the advance of settler society. Only a few years later, but at the southern end of the American continent, as Eunice Nodari and Marcos Gerhardt emphasize in their article on the socio-ecological history of the Uruguay river, the Brazilian engineer Francisco Rave would express his deep concern about the unsustainable harvesting of *yerba mate* along the shores of the Uruguay River. Perhaps it is also worth remembering here that one of the most famous conflicts in US environmental history, which in the early twentieth century pitted conservationists against preservationists, centred on a proposed dam cutting through a scenic valley in the Yosemite National Park. In the end, the Tuolumne River was dammed and the Hetch-Hetchy valley flooded, but the fight against this intervention left a lasting imprint on the North American environmental movement (Miller 2007).

It is only in the second half of the twentieth century, however, that ecological considerations began to percolate into legislation leading to real change with regard to the protection of rivers (Evenden 2004). Since then, rivers have been increasingly rediscovered, restored, and regenerated—a development facilitated by the deindustrialization and depopulation of many river landscapes (Knoll et al. 2017). Yet, just as the broader environmental movement of the postwar decades tended to ignore the interests and demands of minorities (Bullard 1990), rivers deemed worthy of protection were most often not those flowing through areas with large ethnic or minority populations.

As several of the articles in this issue attest, environmental protection, environmental (in)justice and environmental colonialism have been closely interrelated in the history of the Americas,

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and rivers are no exception. Thus, Stéphane Castonguay and Hubert Samson show in their contribution how, between 1850 and 1930, due to the steady expansion of Euro-Canadian society, the Atikamekw people lost large portions of their traditional hunting and fishing grounds in the valley of the St. Maurice River in Quebec. In particular, Castonguay and Samson examine how the St. Maurice watershed was not just materially transformed by dams and other hydrological interventions, but also symbolically appropriated by Euro-Canadians settlers, who produced maps and surveys that “erased” the presence of the Atikamekw.

Paul Formisano, in turn, takes us to the Colorado River Basin and discusses how Indigenous texts on the Colorado tend to emphasize the connections, rather than the differences, between nature and culture. He argues that Indigenous knowledge challenges mainstream water knowledge and emphasizes how in the Indigenous texts he examines the “concern for the land and water reflects a concern for the self, the home, community, and all relationships that unite the human with the nonhuman world.” The “decolonization” of Colorado River basin water knowledge evoked by Formisano is a powerful reminder of the role that rivers have played and continue to play “as sites of colonial contestation” and resistance to various forms of oppression, including state-sponsored, neocolonial violence, a topic explored in this issue by Adrian Kane in his discussion of literary and filmic representations of Central American rivers. For Kane, in Central American literature and film of the civil war period, rivers are often portrayed as “deathscapes,” places associated with death, trauma, and mourning.

The close interplay between environmental protection, environmental (in)justice, and environmental colonialism resurfaces in Christof Mauch’s transatlantic conversation with Lawrence Buell included in this volume. Discussing how today some of the most “powerful and subversive” ideas to rescue endangered ecosystems around the globe come from Indigenous concepts, Mauch mentions how it is indeed the Indigenous concept of “derechos de la naturaleza” (rights of nature) that has recently been applied by an Ecuadorian Provincial Court to a river, which might be seen as indication of an increasing willingness to take a more holistic

approach to river management. Buell, in turn, offers his thoughts on a wide range of topics, including a discussion of the role of rivers in the American environmental imagination and a critical reassessment of “Watershed Aesthetic,” a chapter from his monograph *Writing for an Endangered World*, a book published twenty years ago but in many ways more relevant than ever.

FLUID BORDERS, WORKSCAPES, RIVERSCAPES

Rivers not only connect, they also separate. Throughout the Americas, rivers constitute official borders between counties, states, and nations. Rivers form parts of the northern and southern borders of the United States. Further south, the Uruguay River, as Nodari and Gerhardt mention, was “considered as the southern border between the colonial domains of Spain and Portugal in the Treaty of Madrid” of 1750 and today still serves as a “permeable” geographical and political border between Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay. In the past, as today, rivers also represent not so much the boundaries between political entities but lines of demarcation between oppression and opportunity.

For instance, in the first half of the nineteenth century, the Ohio River was not only a commercial artery of the trans-Appalachian West but also the boundary between slave and free states. For this reason, during the antebellum era and the Civil War, African Americans often referred to the Ohio as the “River Jordan” (Trotter 1998; Bigham 2005), the last obstacle in their passage from slavery to “the Canaan of liberty on the other side” (Stowe 1998: 57). In fact, the crossing of the Ohio River was one of the most important segments of the Underground Railroad, the interlinked system of routes, people, and hiding places that helped runaway slaves to leave the South. One of the most famous and dramatic crossings of the Ohio River, immortalized by Harriet Beecher Stowe in her 1852 novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, happened when the river was frozen, a rare occurrence in the early nineteenth century and more or less impossible today. Crossing the Ohio, however, did not necessarily mean the end of the fugitives’ ordeal, especially after the US Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, which allowed slave owners to “reclaim” their property. At the same time, this river boundary, as many other river-borders around the globe,

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was more permeable than it seemed to be at first glance because its function as an artery of commerce required not just many goods but also many people to cross the river daily, especially in port cities. Thus, as Christopher Phillips has recently pointed out, for many whites but also for some free blacks and sometimes even for slaves, “rather than form an absolute barrier that slavery could not penetrate, the rivers served as a collective confluence for both slavery and freedom” (2016: 21).

But rivers also represent a different kind of confluence, namely, that of work and nature. Loggers, farmers, fishers, steamboat pilots, boilermen, and all those working on the banks of rivers experience nature mainly through labor and work. Yet, as Richard White (1995; 1996) and other critics in the emerging field of environmental labor history have noted, environmentalism—especially in the US—has too often neglected the crucial nexus between work and nature. In her contribution to this issue, Dorothy Zeisler-Vrlasted draws from both White’s insights and on the concept of “workscape,” a term coined by Thomas Andrews in his *Killing for Coal* (2010). In doing so, she compares the subculture of both free and enslaved African Americans who worked on and along the Mississippi to that of another non-hegemonic group, the barge haulers on the Volga (see also Chabrowski 2015). One of the aspects of her discussion that will be of particular interest to the readers of *RIAS* is the comparative and transnational approach underlying her analysis.

A different type of ‘scape’ animates “The Chosen People: The Hudson River School and the Construction of American Identity,” the chapter from Tricia Cusack’s *Riverscapes and National Identities* that we have the privilege of reprinting in this volume thanks to the combined generosity and support of the author and Syracuse University Press. The question Cusack explores is a simple but crucial one: what role did riverscape imagery play in the formation of national identities in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe and North America? After reminding us that the use of rivers in service of nationalist ideologies was not US-specific but a transnational phenomenon, Cusack discusses how a national riverscape may be considered as “a visual text that forms part of a discourse in the Foucauldian sense; that is,

it actively constitutes national imaginings.” Using this observation as a point of departure for her analysis, she moves on to examine some of the most celebrated paintings of the Hudson River School to unmask the “peculiar ideological character” of these national riverscapes.

A project like this would not have been possible without the personal, intellectual, and financial assistance of many others. We would like to thank the journal editors for allowing us to pursue the idea of publishing a special issue on a rather unorthodox topic. *RIAS* is, we are convinced, the ideal outlet for such a project due to its interdisciplinary and transnational character. We are also grateful to all the anonymous peer reviewers for their thorough yet constructive comments. LMU’s Amerika-Institut, our academic home, has supported this special issue logistically and financially. Sarah Graewin’s meticulous bibliographic research has been of great help to us. Finally, we are indebted to Nathaniel Racine for his editorial assistance and sensitive copyediting.

As we push this fragile paper canoe into the unpredictable waters of digital academic publishing, we hope that its intellectual cargo will reach many other scholars similarly interested in rivers the world over and inspire them to launch other vessels into the waters of this growing area of study.

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