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Contact Us

Open Rivers
Institute for Advanced Study
University of Minnesota
Northrop
84 Church Street SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Telephone: (612) 626-5054
Fax: (612) 625-8583
E-mail: openrvrs@umn.edu
Web Site: http://openrivers.umn.edu

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CONTENTS

Introductions

Introduction to Issue Thirteen
By Laurie Moberg, Assistant Editor ................................................................. 4

Guest Editor’s Introduction to Issue Thirteen: Water & Environmental Justice
By Simi Kang ........................................................................................................ 6

Feature

“Contraband” Practice: Doing Environmental Justice with Water
By Karen Bauer, Merle Geode, Simi Kang, Chika Kondo 近藤千嘉, David Naguib Pellow, 심제현 Jae Hyun Shim, and 신 선 영 辛善英 Sun Yung Shin ................................................................. 13

Features (Peer Review)

Life Otherwise at the Sea’s Edge
By Macarena Gómez-Barris .................................................................................. 27

The Political Binds of Oil versus Tribes
By Yvonne P. Sherwood ........................................................................................ 48

There’s Something in The Water
By Tia-Simone Gardner ........................................................................................ 69

Geographies

Resonant Rivers: Water, Indigenous Relationality, and Other Futures
By Caroline Fidan Tyler Doenmez ........................................................................ 89

In Review

Storying Pinhook: Representing the Community, the Floods, and the Struggle
By Lisa Marie Brimmer ........................................................................................ 96

Perspectives

the river
By adrienne maree brown ....................................................................................... 103

Extract: Locating Indigeneity in Immigrant Experiences
By Adriel Luis ........................................................................................................ 110

Primary Sources

What Helps You Dream?
By Simi Kang ....................................................................................................... 117

Teaching And Practice

“The Soul to See”: Toward a Hoodoo Ethnography
By David Todd Lawrence ...................................................................................... 123
THERE’S SOMETHING IN THE WATER
By Tia-Simone Gardner

Editor’s note: This feature article has been peer reviewed.

This essay is a collage of images and writing from an ongoing project “Reading the River: Yemayá and Oshun.” I am approaching it as is an experimental documentary that looks at the relationship between Blackness and the Mississippi River as a collision of ideas, cultural practices, political geographies, and intimacies. This manner of working emerges out of a Black feminist practice of unsettling how we think and know place.

—Tia-Simone Gardner
S S
M – I – CROOKED LETTER CROOKED LETTER – I
S S
CROOKED LETTER CROOKED LETTER – I
P P
HUMPBACK – HUMPBACK – I
Mississippi, or THE Mississippi, is a body memory. The Black Body and Mississippi stick to one another, in pleasure and in violence, through metastasis and re-membering.

“The natural levee along the Mississippi River is a mass grave, filled with the city’s earliest workers and slaves.” [1]
when I was a child, we had a chant.  
we learned to spell

M I S S I S S I P P I

by singing the letters aloud, clapping our hands in time, and hunching our shoulders up to our ears. It is a useful chant; it helped us to also keep time as a song to jump rope.

M – I – CROOKED LETTER CROOKED LETTER – I
CROOKED LETTER CROOKED LETTER – I
HUMPBACK – HUMPBACK – I

...I’m still not sure if we were singing about the land or the water.
...they are not always so distinct, the land and the water.

Image courtesy of NASA.

...perhaps it was both.
Neither are the land, water, and body completely distinct.

Like land and water, the **Black body** was remapped. Rearticulated through a range of regimes: racial capitalism, colonization, labor exploitation, into a site of extraction. The **Black body** was, is, undifferentiated from the land and water that are habitually used to make life, for some, more livable.

“...we must now consider the roads, rivers, and showrooms where broad trends and abstract totalities thickened into human shape.” [2]

Moved, overworked, defiled abstracted as an object of trade, the Black body is an important feature, like the pot ash tree or the bald cypress of the Southern landscape. And the river is a part of this strange abstraction.

“In the seven decades between the Constitution and the Civil War, approximately one million enslaved people were relocated from the upper South according to the dictates of the slave-holders’ economy, two thirds of these through a pattern of commerce that soon became institutionalized as the domestic slave trade...

As those people passed through the trade, representing something close to half a billion dollars in property, they spread wealth wherever they went.” [3]

“I was soon inside, cowering with fear in the darkness, magnifying every noise and every passing wind, until my imagination had almost converted the little cottage into a boat, and I was steaming down South, away from my mother, as fast as I could go.” [4]

“What the New Orleans slave pens sold to these slaveholders was not just field hands and household help but their own stake in the commercial and social aspirations of the expanding Southwest, aspirations that were embodied in the thousands of black men, women, and children every season: the slaves out of whom the antebellum South was built.” [5]
...it is both an old and a new acquaintance. When I lived in the South, I knew it by one name, but it was too far away to enter into my sense of place. Living now in a place where I am never more than few miles from its banks, its presence cannot help but be a part of my everyday life.

Now, I also know that it has many names:

 Báhat Sássin – (Hasí:nay [Caddo]), “Mother of rivers”
 Beesniicíe – (Hinóno’eitít [Arapaho])
 Hahcicobá – (Kowassá:ti [Koasati])
 Háháwakpa – (Lakȟótiyapi [Lakota]), “River of the falls”
 Kickaátít – (Paári [Pawnee])
 Máse’sibowi – (Meshkwahihiaki [Fox-Sauk])
 Ma’xeé’ome’tää’e – (Tséhésenéstsetstótse [Cheyenne]), “Big, greasy river”
 Mihciisipiwi – (Myaamia [Miami-Illinois])
 Misi-Zibi – (Anishinaabemowin [Ojibwe]), “Great river”
 Mìsha Sìpokni – (Chahta’ [Choctaw]), “Beyond age”
 ᨤѡ,proto:ab – (CWY [Cherokee]) “Mississippi [transliteration] river”
 Mnišošethaka – (Dakȟótiyapi [Dakota])
 Ny-tonks – (Okáxpá íe [Quapaw]), “Great river”
 Ohnawiì:ke – (Kanien’kéha’ [Mohawk])
 Uhtawiyú?kye – (Ska:rù:rę’ [Tuscarora])
 Yandawezue – (Waⁿdat [Wyandot])
 Yununu’a – (yUdjEha [Yuchi]), “Great river”
 Xósáu – (Cáuijògà [Kiowa]), “Standing Rocks” [6]

“pointe ouski” = “cane point”
“bayuk loosa” = “bayou black”
“bayuk ouski” = “bayou cane”

from the Houma language [7]
“water of mars” = war water [8]

“What they gone do with all this property? What the oil company gone do?” [9]
Fort Cities. Port Cities. Colonization, Spanish, French, British, American, still marks the landscape and our bodies.

St. Paul
Cairo
St. Louis
Memphis
Natchez
Vicksburg
New Orleans—

The militarized and commodified riverscape flows from Minnesota to the Gulf and our bodies flow with it.

Image courtesy of the author.
New Orleans was the largest and perhaps the most feared of the slave port cities along the Mississippi, no one wanted to be sold down river to New Orleans.

Ports and forts tell stories about mobility, Black death and Black life. The commodified Black body. Commodified landscapes and bodies of water. They do not perhaps look like the castles and forts of Elmina or Gorée, but the ports and the forts are there.
Near the confluence of the Missouri and the Mississippi sits Fort Belle Fontaine, the first established American military fort, which predates the Louisiana Purchase. It was once a fur trading post. Now deaccessioned, it lives down the road from a juvenile detention center.

So I ask: what do histories and cartographies that trace and locate Black mobility along a river that moves between the Gulf of Mexico and Minnesota reveal about the lives and struggles of Black populations contemporarily in and between these spaces?
he says...the levee took the place of the Sugar House. They had to move the houses to place the levee. [10]
Image courtesy of the author.

Ochún...?
“Yemayá

I come to you, Yemayá,
Ocean mother, sister of the fishes.
I stop at the edge of your lip
Where you exhale your breath on the beach
Into a million tiny geysers.
With your white froth I anoint my brow and cheeks,
Wait for your white-veined breasts to wash through me... [11]

I stare at the sea, surging silver-plated between me and the lopped-off corrugated arm, the wind whipping my hair. I look down, my head and shoulders, a shadow on the sea. Yemayá pours strings of light over my dull jade, flickering body, bubbles pop out of my ears. I feel the tension easing and, for the first time in months, the litany of work yet to do, of deadlines, that sings incessantly in my head, blows away with the wind.
Oh, Yemayá, I shall speak the words you lap against the pier.
But as I turn away I see in the distance, a ship’s fin fast approaching. I see fish heads lying listless in the sun, smell the stench of pollution in the waters.” [12]
“Because of its qualities as a tangible, visible scene/seen, it follows that not only can we interrogate the historical and geographical dimensions of the landscape as an object in and of itself (as a material thing, or set of things), we also can read and interpret cultural landscapes for what they might tell us more broadly about social worlds of the past.” [13]

“…rather than seeing surveillance as something inaugurated by new technologies, such as automated facial recognition or unmanned autonomous vehicles (or drones), to see it as ongoing is to insist that we factor in how racism and antiblackness undergird and sustain intersecting surveillance of our present order.” [14]
…the Police-like people I encountered on the levee were ICE agents, Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

They might have taken my camera and what I thought were harmless images of the ships in the channel.

I wonder what, or who, is aboard the ships? Would it, they, have to be quarantined? How did ICE determine the border in the river?

...do borders float? Not all people do.
Image courtesy of the author.
Footnotes


Recommended Citation


About the Author

Tia-Simone Gardner is an artist, educator, and Black feminist scholar. Her creative and scholarly practice are interested interdisciplinary strategies and engage ideas of ritual, iconoclasm, and geography. She received her BA in Art and Art History from the University of Alabama in Birmingham. In 2009 she received her MFA in Interdisciplinary Practices and Time-Based Media from the University of Pennsylvania. She recently received her Ph.D. in Feminist Studies from the Department of Gender Women’s and Sexuality Studies at the University of Minnesota. She is currently working on a project on Blackness and the Mississippi River as well as expanding her dissertation, titled *Sensing Place: House-Scale, Black Geographies, and a Humanly Workable City*, into an artist book and a series of site-specific installations.