Firstly, a welcome to you readers, traditional style. Just because we are many, sitting in many places gathered in “internet land” does not mean that I cannot welcome you as a virtual visitor to my place and to what we may imagine as our campfire. Here, 200 meters from the banks, I share with you the River Ericht and speak to you with the sounds of water flowing across rocks and swirling in the currents.

I welcome you to the hills and forests, the local berry fields of Scotland, perched on the divide between the Lowlands and the Highlands and the farmlands growing potatoes, beans, brassicas, and barley. You too, in my imagination, have your places to share—your rivers and lakes, your coastal beaches and mountains. We are first and ever in the world by the time we come to know where we are. As we come together, what we share here are stories from places and people across the world showing and telling and singing songs that reveal more than one place, more than one story. These are sharings that resonate with how we are in our places and what these places mean to us.
An International Perspective of Rivers

This issue of the Open Rivers is dedicated to an international perspective of rivers, particularly in an overview of the current place-based research conducted by artists, writers, and socially engaged practitioners who lead fieldwork studies, regeneration schemes, and collaborative community projects. From rivers as far afield as China, Brazil, Canada, Scotland, Ireland, and Aotearoa/New Zealand, rivers as rivers and as “waters of life” will be considered, along with the importance of what rivers mean to human and nonhuman inhabitants and how they come to these meanings.

A river as a metaphor so easily functions symbolically that we take in, all at once, an understanding that what we are seeing is simultaneously water flowing by, but also, from a distance of history, geographical changes, and epochs, how rivers have agency. They are the barometers of environmental health, or they may separate us from the other side; they may divide as political separations and borders, and yes, they may even conjoin creatures, human and nonhuman. They are the forces of erosion as well as of life, carrying away soil, plants, and even more in spate. Rivers are component parts in complex watersheds, separating into two streams that flow in different directions; they can be dammed to provide energy, can be tapped for irrigation, and can even be forced to change the direction of their flow.[1] Rivers can disappear underground, flowing unseen in cavernous depths. They can even disappear entirely, as the water tables are depleted, redirected (as in the case of the Chicago River), or lost entirely in a process of climate change. [2] The slower lessons show us even more, as time passing, as constant change, as stages of life and mortality, with hints of well-being and joy.

Rivers are Precious to All Life on this Planet

What we know universally—and has finally (belatedly) reached a consensus in world understanding—is that rivers are precious to all life on this planet. We learn from Indigenous and traditional peoples across the world that rivers have agency in themselves and teach us the deep interconnectedness of all living things; that they are crucial to the function of the entire world ecosystem; and that human actions have damaged most rivers and completely destroyed several. [3] And through news, education, and community outreach agricultural experts from Michigan State University were called in and tried their best to figure out what was wrong. Then the farmers themselves grew ill and their wives had hair falling out. Their pigs stopped eating and grew sores before they too died. No one could figure out what sort of pestilence this might be, and so it went for almost two years with accelerated testing.

This was in 1973. What finally emerged was that fire retardant had been accidentally placed in the livestock nutrient supplement bags. There had been no reason prior to this for any feed or material to be tested for polybrominated biphenyls, or PBB. But indeed, these fire retardant chemicals are exactly what had gotten into the nutrient supply. In a case of one of the most extensive mass poisonings in the United States, PBBs had been no reason prior to this for any feed or materials to be tested for polybrominated biphenyls, or PBB. But indeed, these fire retardant chemicals are exactly what had gotten into the nutrient supply. In a case of one of the most extensive mass poisonings in the United States, PBBs had moved from the cows to the cows’ milk to agricultural runoff and then into the rivers, into the fish, and into the general population of inhabitants, human and nonhuman. People were advised not to eat more than one fish per week; breastfeeding

Interlude: A True Story from My Youth

When I was a college student in Michigan, the next small town over was St. Louis, Michigan, home to the Michigan Chemical Corporation (now known as Velsico). It was a small-ish company, in a small town, that produced several items in its product line. One among them was cattle feed supplement, which added nutrients to livestock feed as they were fattened up for market. One night in the bagging area, workers accidentally used different bags to seal up the product. Of course, no one knew this at the time.

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If lessons are to be learned—that hollow phrase often repeated in political circles—it must be first the truth of interconnectedness. We are all affected by each other’s actions—humans, nonhumans, rivers, air, and earth. The Pine River still flows, but harmed, injured, and yearning as much for the clean water it once carried as the fish, birds, and human inhabitants are. So here is another river, one whose presence is not the joy of others, but one who typifies sorrow, shame, and loss.

 Mothers were told to use formula instead. To this day it has not yet been established if there is intergenerational harm that lingers in the children and grandchildren of inadvertent PBB consumers. The Pine River, which runs through St. Louis and that part of Michigan, is still the subject of ongoing efforts 48 years later to clean what might still be removed from the river. The accident of minutes nearly half a century ago lingers invisibly still be removed from the river. The accident of minutes nearly half a century ago lingers invisibly. The Pine River still flows, but harmed, injured, and yearning as much for the clean water it once carried as the fish, birds, and human inhabitants are. So here is another river, one whose presence is not the joy of others, but one who typifies sorrow, shame, and loss.

\[4\] The photographic essay by Francisco and Lau Pereira Da Silva and Lau’s wife Helena Beutel uses imagery to do this without the need for text, showing aspects of the high mountain streams in a tropical Atlantic rainforest in Ilhabela, Brazil flowing to the sea. These images tacitly remind us of the physical realities that play out a metaphysical and actual journey simultaneously. Robert Snikkar’s videos do something similar, but differently, as they also include his voice as a settler and that of his Métis friends, Patsea and Carmel, from whom he learns on the Ottawa River, which divides the provinces of Ontario and Quebec, Canada.

\[5\] The photographic essay by Francisco and Lau Pereira Da Silva and Lau’s wife Helena Beutel uses imagery to do this without the need for text, showing aspects of the high mountain streams in a tropical Atlantic rainforest in Ilhabela, Brazil flowing to the sea. These images tacitly remind us of the physical realities that play out a metaphysical and actual journey simultaneously. Robert Snikkar’s videos do something similar, but differently, as they also include his voice as a settler and that of his Métis friends, Patsea and Carmel, from whom he learns on the Ottawa River, which divides the provinces of Ontario and Quebec, Canada.

\[6\] In her text, she states that “all rivers have their own voice.” In this piece, entitled “TWED” after the River Tweed in the borders between Scotland and England, she “expressed the narrative of the river as a tortured love story between he/she, north/south, that ultimately ends in separation.” Referencing the tradition of bothy ballads (such as those sung by Arthur Watson in this issue), she likens the sung genre to her own drawings and writings in border ballads, the text of which is embedded in these works.

A major feature by Margaret Cogswell documents art and research in a body of work that spans more than 35 years. In River Fugues, Margaret details a personal journey of investigation that crosses over geography, history, politics, environmental studies, and current events. Beginning in 2003, she researched the musical genre of fugues and instinctively realized that not only the alignment between musical form and movements in rivers made sense, but also decided to construct her meticulously planned art installations in the manner of “writing a musical score for a chamber music ensemble.” Through many images and text and her eponymous book, her intriguing installations work as visual poetry in consolidating her River Fugues. Another major feature in this issue is the work of Jiao Xingtao, a sculptor and socially engaged artist who has led a collaborative art project in Yangdeng, a small rural community in mountainous terrain on the Yangdeng River in Tongzi County of Guizhou Province. Since 2012, Jiao—who is also a professor and vice principal at Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in Chongqing, China—has led a group of students and colleagues each year to work in this community with local residents, collaborating on many projects that include murals, sculptures, videos, drawings, benches, and other installations and light projections. His collective understanding is both poetic and practical, material in its expression and immaterial in his intuitive grasp of layered meanings and mythology, highly attuned to the nuances and spirit of the place. His photographs...
and video complement the wisdom revealed in his answers in the textual interview.

Two final contributors here must be also be mentioned. Clara Healy Musson has provided a review of an art exhibition in the Lismore Castle Arts and grounds, the River Blackwater, in County Waterford, Ireland. She not only situates the work for the exhibition, entitled Light and Language, within the tradition of twentieth- and twenty-first-century art, but she weaves this work together in a tapestry of the history of the eighteenth-century castle (the initial construction of which began in the twelfth century), and the grounds that abut the Blackwater. Her evocative text brings to life the qualities of the Blackwater’s protected species, its glinting sunlight on the water, and inevitably the confluences of time it conjures.

And finally, though certainly not least, Laura Donkers writes of Māori tradition and belief as it has shaped contemporary community actions in attending to the regeneration of rivers. She has collaborated with Charmaine Baillie in doing this. In “Māori and non-Māori collaboration on the restoration of an urban stream [Awataha] in Aotearoa New Zealand,” Laura outlines traditional Māori belief for us readers, and thereby constructs for us a narrative and video documentation of this important restorative work done by local people. In doing so, she explains the recent actions of individuals who have presented the ground that abut the Blackwater. Her evocative text brings to life the qualities of the Blackwater’s protected species, its glinting sunlight on the water, and inevitably the confluences of time it conjures.

References


A “bothy” is a crude dwelling place for the workers on an estate. As the place where these laborers had long nights together in cramped quarters, singing ballads—songs with a story unfolding—was a frequent way to spend the evenings. In the “border ballads” presented by Tania Kovats, the stories are about the tensions, conflicts, and attractions taking place in contested lands between Scotland and England.


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**About the Author**

Professor Mary Modeen, as an artist/academic, lectures in fine art and more broadly across the humanities in relation to creative practices. Her research has several threads: perception as a cognitive and interpretive process, and especially place-based research, which connects many of these concerns with attention to cultural values, history, and embodied experience. As such, this research is usually interdisciplinary. Part of this work appears as creative art, and part as writing and presentations. Modeen addresses aspects of seeing that go beyond the visible, questioning what we know as sentient humans, and valuing the cultural and individual differences inherent in these perceptions.

Her most recent publications include a co-authored book with Iain Biggs, *Creative Engagements with Ecologies of Place: Geopoetics, Deep Mapping and Slow Residencies* (Routledge, 2021), and “Traditional Knowledge of the Sea in a Time of Change: Stories of the Caïcaras,” in the *Journal of Cultural Geography* (November 2020). Her edited book and essay just published is titled *Decolonising Place-Based Arts Research* (Dundee, 2021). She is chair of Interdisciplinary Art Practice and associate dean international for Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design at the University of Dundee, in Scotland and visiting fellow with the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota.