The cover image is of low clouds in Glen Forsa on the Isle of Mull, Scotland, UK. Image by Jill Diamond on Unsplash.

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Tweed
By Tania Kovats and Mary Modeen

The River Tweed speaks instantly of borders, of unity and division, but also of warp and weft, telling us much about its shapeshifting character. This living marker of national meanings and historical boundaries flows eastwards 97 miles from the Lowther Hills to Berwick-upon-Tweed, descending 1,440 feet over that length. Its source rises 40 miles north of Scotland’s westernmost border with England. The river enters the sea two miles south of the border’s easternmost point. There is a ring of geological predestination to this bordering identity. It’s as if the Tweed exists as a sturdy trace of the ocean that separated Scotland and England 520 million years ago.

The hills in which it rises, and along whose northern margin it meanders, are the deposits of that ocean, thrown skyward by the collision of the two continents, Laurentia and Gondwana, in the Ordovician era, 450 million years ago. The English Lake District and the entirety of the Southern Uplands are the remnants of that collision. In spite of centuries of cross border strife between their respective peoples, there is...
much that is shared, including ancestry. It is very telling that on the map of Scotland’s 2014 independence referendum results, a striking bulwark of “No” (to independence) voting constituencies form a thick line north of the border, coinciding with the Ordovician geology. The warp and weft of cross-border communities is strong, and the Tweed unifies as much as it divides.

Kovats says of the work:

“TWEED started by me following the river. Tweeds Well is a lonely place in the Lowther Hills, where the river rises, traveling for just under one hundred miles before entering the sea at Tweedmouth. I believe all rivers have their own voice. Some rivers run through you, your conscious and beyond-conscious mind. Tweed is a bilingual river that travels along a border, a historic, geopolitical, psychological and metaphoric boundary. For TWEED, I brought together a set of writings and drawings in the form of a unique newspaper publication that were part of an exhibition in the summer of 2019 at Berwick Gymnasium in the exhibition Head to Mouth.

Border ballads are a discrete song form of the landscape that the river Tweed runs through and lent TWEED its form. In TWEED I expressed the narrative of the river as a tortured love story between he/she, north/south, that ultimately ends in separation. The shapeshifter Tam Lin lent his liquid identity to the narrative. This ‘border ballad’ of drawings and writing addressed the fragile state of the ‘Union’ as a metaphysical love story and a test of internal and external boundaries.”

Tania Kovats comes to the River Tweed with that deep sense of time, able to unite its geological agency with its geopolitical resonance. Her work, TWEED, addresses the specificity of this national river and the fluidity of identity that it prompts in its communities. The work also takes its place within the broader arc of her work with, and about, water. Her 2014 exhibition Oceans, held at Edinburgh’s Fruitmarket Gallery, foregrounded the significance of water on a planetary scale. A scan of the Earth’s surface reminds us of what we as land creatures too easily forget; the ocean’s waters cover 71% of the planet and underpin the freshwater systems on land that enable all life. Rivers, her permanent installation at the Jupiter Artland’s boathouse, shifts to a national scale, housing samples of water that the artist collected from 100 rivers across the UK. TWEED zooms in further, and expresses Kovats’ immersion in the geography, mythology, social history and of course balladry of this nationally significant river.

The work that follows here is a set of Tania’s inkwash drawings with the text of the border ballads that accompany the artworks. Her focus on water, fluidity, atmosphere, and the character of the river come to the fore in this work.

_all images courtesy of Tania Kovats._

View TWEED on Issuu.
TWEED

Border Ballad

All rivers have a voice. Tweed is a bilingual river.

Two tongues: The end, The South and North. Steding a Border Ballad.

A song sung with song music but with urgent reading. The song is a short song, sung with the drum of time travelled along the border.

The Border Ballads are songs of Brazil, red leaf, violence, beauty, worth, stoic, vengeance, and romance woven with the supernatural.

Here across the mountains in these lands on the border, love is lived out as a border between two worlds and in that the song of the river

Some rivers flow through you

‘TWEED: Border Ballads’ courtesy of Tania Kovats.
‘TWEED: Border Ballads’ courtesy of Tania Kovats.

Tam Lin

Mid Winter

I am in the North of my imagination, a picture, where your ballads lie. I'll drink out the winter days, sing a story. The sky darkens. I feel the grip of long nights and the snow, turning inside me as the temperature drops so low that the river freezes over.

I go strolling

I trace out your name once, twice, and I fall through the ice.
I hear your Border Ballad.

Tam Lin

Tam Lane
Time is a river

There are gods that dance: In order for time to flow. These may be the gods of ancient faiths and worship, or new ballads in the making of subatomic matter.

Where are we in time and what laws do we have enough to recognize the fluid nature of time? We live and dance in time.

How do we know if we remember the past or the future?

The current is strong and drops all would dance in it.

‘TWEED: Border Ballads’ courtesy of Tania Kovats.
Tam Lin

In the wood of Shirrenbrough near the confluence of the Yarrow Water and Ettrick Water, he wakes. He will have 1131 at the river's edge, and then he will move to each other.

The river is free on a loch called the North. It is a gathering and when the river wakes in a dance that will make him move, it will take him back to the North where he began.

The river dance makes its way along the path of the river, singing, skipping over the stones silver.

He will go on. The river will keep going, always flowing, always changing, always dancing.

The river will go on, and he will follow it, half knowing, half not knowing, and still moving, the wood of Shirrenbrough.

She sleep in a wood, and in the middle of the wood, the river wakes. The river is free on a loch called the North. It is a gathering and will make her move to each other.

The river dance makes its way along the path of the river, singing, skipping over the stones silver.

She will go on. The river will keep going, always flowing, always changing, always dancing.

The river will go on, and she will follow it, half knowing, half not knowing, and still moving, the wood of Shirrenbrough.

'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.
'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.

'They'll turn me in your arms, Janes
An adder and an snake;
But had me fast, let me not pass,
Gin ye wad be my maik.

'They'll turn me in your arms, Janet
An adder an an ask;
'They'll turn me in your arms, Janet,
A bale that burns fast.

'They'll turn me in your arms, Janet;
A red-hot sile o' ains;
But had me fast, let me not pass,
For IT do you no harm.

'First dip me in a stand o' milk,
And then in a stand o' water;
But had me fast, let me not pass,
I'll be your bairn's father.

'And next they'll shape me in your arms
A red hot and an call.
But had me fast, let me not pass,
As you've love me wed.

'They'll shape me in your arms, Janes
A dove but and a worm,
And later they'll shape me in your arms
A mother-naked man;
Cast warm green mantle over me,
I'll be myself again.'
TWEEDS

WELL

I stand in the field moving generally towards the lowest point. This is where things begin. At the lowest point, the lines of sand run and continue to run. A kelp, green and thick, spreading through the sand, following the sound of a knick, which becomes a bubble. The water's voice in Scottish Field, soft and sinking slightly, slips through sand, trampling down across the horizon. Part cool green, bubbling back and shrunking.

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This was a question I remember asking my father, English his poorly spoken English compared to his mother tongue of Hungarian. He thought my question was stupid. His dreams were runs of the terrible. You could make him with me. I never knew in anyone in this drawing. I wanted to know where he spoke in Danish. He maybe he never spoke to himself.

"TWEED: Border Ballads" courtesy of Tania Kovats.
Tweedmuir

Only a couple of miles and the already towering, The laughter is redundant. Tweed peaks over a slope to the river, down he goes. A stone bridge slips under you and is cloaking into pellucid wild stripes. Cockey of hothe bloom across the rocks, luminous target. Lupin prairies cross the rocks and tryst off the sharp edges. Everything is shaped by the water. The air is wet. A sea full of the sound of bubbles forming in the turbulence, paired one way and another, then bursting into song, as the main tannins are pulled over the trap.

The water blackened holds up a net of white foam, spreading across its surface, in the light. This catches you and you cannot stop seeing all the air, breathing, perceiving, and you step...the river

Crickets in the living clutter, the running, the flowing, and the music the river makes. He is ever on knowing, that there is something to catch up with.

'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.
COLD STREAM

Border land

This is a contested landscape scored by battles and domination. Historically and metaphorically, traces were plowed within a landscape that has been
marked by the most extreme of human experiences. The language of power and violence
is deeply embedded within the fabric of the land.

This is the source, where the house

and the past

begin to fade into the distance.

The river is the border,

and desire.

Let's go. Let's go.

Let's go.
Lady Kirk Bridge

I stand on this beautiful sandstone structure that spans the wide, silvery sparkling river.
Meet me at the bridge.
Our side in Scotland.
Meet me at the central curved abutment of the bridge. Here in the middle, at the crossing in a circle.
Beneath me the pink arches form half circles over the water; these curved circles complete themselves in their reflections in the silver Tweed.

Complete me.

Meet me here.

You can only hear when they are murmuring, whispering, calling each other. They are enacting each other. They speak with such passion and they don't always hear what the other says. They don't hear each other's story, but they twin each other. Their stories are both everything in each other, but they are also like other stories, singing, laughing, running, dancing at the same time. They twin each other and they are heard.

They are together now, they bake in each other's energy, they burn in each other's energy. Let me be.

There is too much to say, too much to sing, but there are more songs since they are new. But they have a history that the stories are writing and telling, and going. Laughing, Everything is so funny, even their difficulties and their pain. They are delicious with the sun.

Complete me.

They dance into each other, indistinguishable, blending, moving together, until they are one, and they are free and they are free and they are free.

'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.
‘TWEED: Border Ballads’ courtesy of Tania Kovats.
Fisherman

In the centre of the river stands the fisherman. Long rubber trousers keep his legs dry. His feet are spread in the gravel to anchor him in the current. He is on the border between liquid and solid, between one country and another. He draws the line. His rod is raised and he feels it bend and unsteady in his hands, its potential energy trapped in the line that bears the barely-there weight of the fly on its end. He has thinking hands.

He lightens the line like preparing a whip, getting the balance perfect between the torque of the cane and the flux of the rod to pull out the line. As he flies on it. He then firmly, not gripping the rod too tightly, the fly line is vertical at first and then pulling it back and slightly dropping it, forward on a beautifully straight line that soars and flies on the angle of the current of the river. The rod unlocks. A thin line is drawn along the water.

He feels the current moving through a fly. He holds it in the current and brings it close to the rod. He is seeing the catch through the little window, the black hole where magnifications are being magnified. He is feeling it. The fly dips into the evening light. The dry rises for him. March, river. Border Overtures. Bridge from Blue Guns. The next flag for her. Invicta. Hardy’s Fancy and Silver Bubbles and today he will try some Czech nymphs. They both feel the hook in them that tug against them as they carry on. Barbs that cannot be easily removed, tearing and pricking at their skin.

He doesn’t seem to be able to hold on to them. They are too viscerally free flying. He is pressing, breaking the line. He misses them but he can catch the salmon that swim between them. He will fish everyday he can, but he knows he will do best three days after a flood, in water still slightly stained. When the air is slightly warmer than the water, the river warmer than the sea, the wind coming from the south, the sky overcast, and a few days after the deep tides and full moon.

If he can catch one, the lady he catches the river’s particles, everything that can load the gravel, the bottom of the river, directing them to the place of wear and erasure. He remembers their past or their future in the river or their flooding, that they live and die on the bank born out of the sand and water, the lives, the secrets passing between them basked in between their independent stones.

‘TWEED: Border Ballads’ courtesy of Tania Kovats.
BORDER

An Island breaks the surface of the river in the centre. It divides the flow of water, sending it down natural indentations.

Longing to cross

Sounds fill the air. Once you allow the space for sound, I hear the river, and all the life that it supports.

A wood rises up on the other side, an orchestra of birds singing. The song is a thing still. Curiously, wondrously, wondrous; even, even, even, even, to the eaves, to the trees, to the birds.

The surface of the water ripples like the waves catching the light of the sun, like the scale of a fish, like the mist on the evening sky.

On a bench, a child plays with a stone and a stick. Behind them, the river flows.

We are here. We are here. We are here. We are here. We are here. We are here. We are here. We are here. We are here.

Nothing happened. I am in love. I am content.

‘TWEED: Border Ballads’ courtesy of Tania Kovats.
Past
Union Bridge
English side

Walk along a river bank in sunshine on buoyant new green sheep and lambs everywhere. The land divided with embankments, balder-styled take you up and over the same walls.
Keep drinking the map, orientating through the small stream fisherman hats and tracks that come off the river.
Heading for the place where the border slimmers out of the water, onto the bank, up a little track and swing across the fields, as it the other side.

I listen to the river now and only her voice is left.

Am escaping, a definition, a betrayal. Why aren't you here? Why aren't we together? Why have you left? We could have space for each other here in the flowing river.

See the small fishermen's hut, red shovels stuck. Red door bolted. A blind place that were let me in. I want to be inside: human, raised, alive against a stone wall with you pushed inside me.

I am trying to remember what brought me here. Making time to swim together. Drawing water. Listening. In the position. Instead of I fall in the rippling waves and the emptiness in the space that first. The meaning of less passage me. Can we live in the water? I want to be drawn in the water. I cannot stop myself flowing.

Can we now? You are inside me and you keep changing. I hold on but I am drowning. I am holding on to nothing I am left the land as a map of the coast picked from surface of my waters upstream. The currents underneath pull us downstream. My waters with presence against themselves. Confusing water, pushing against each other, trying to carry us in the place where you set the river.
Equal forces equal resistance. Entangled in this view of me too is the way if my water is standing still.

'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.

He has left the river and taken the border within, slimmers out of the water and moving out over the land again, back on the world beyond the river.

She doesn't need to leave and go on, on her own. No longer the border. No longer remembered. She can sense her end will be at his beginning, a lovely place.

The river full and brown from last night's downpour.

You can't say no to the story. The going gets on. You can't make its pull of direction.

Climbing on to nothing. She has to go on. The goes on.

Here is your border, the line you should remember. A drawing which holds the river.

Clouds push over the river surface, shoving the water. She is here. Chains. Diving. United. Winning. Anarchic. Once turned to the water as her. The merging is correct of all here in this lovely place.

Fishes: I do not cross the border again.

'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.
‘TWEED: Border Ballads’ courtesy of Tania Kovats.

Broken

The water is confluent, bridges.
The land is peppered by incomplete bridges, broken leftovers from a decommissioned railway line that once followed the river along this valley. A set of arches in the middle of a field rise up, empty, and sculptural. The beams could support a bridge, but no longer. They are useless, useless.

Nothing is connected anymore.
There is only a separation, more poles. Outlining, way
from everything else.

Bridges

Beaches, streams, woods cast strong lines of communication, that run invisible into fields and hills, hooking into you.

Blowing rocks buried off a hill point, full of the same wind, desire that comes fresh off the mountains.

Looking out and down over the valley, the river’s flowing below. Gliding, like a silver arrow matching the eye. A line at pond, would be ignited.

Everything else, blood, and stock, the bridges.
Tweedmouth

A hard working poor sister to
Berwick, with a view of the town,
reduced to a line of settlements. A
defended place, sealed up against
another country seasonal and
vernacular.

It’s a remarkable everyday sort of
thing to have seen like small piddic
rock pile end of a bog a hundred
mile away and become this wide
man-made body of water spread
distant morsel here at the mouth
of Tweed.

The river shimmers into the North
Sea, swallowed whole with a
dependent roar.

North wind, against me long
against me, against the Heugh,
against the slope of the Heugh. We
imagination, against imagination, but
mainly against the Heugh.

Hold me.

Love, let go.

The North Sea offers her to come
and go.

Yes, what choice does she have.
In the flow of fate do we remember
our future or our past? Let it go.

Here you are
Here you are.
You are dancing barefoot.
Your energy is everywhere in this
terrifying sea.

Your anger.

Your legs.

Your love.

It’s all here.

Dance, spin, tuck your boards with
joy.

Let her giddy ride out of your sight.

Light like fire throughout all of you.

Fill your lungs with the fog of riding
the waves.

You can see your hand as eye the
split in the bright ground
Tweed lies.

Standing on the shore, having nothing

Holding.

Lost.

letting go of
shape and form.

Your feet sinking into wet sand on
the Cape Wrath dunes rolling across
the hill.

The decades further, nothing

remaining by the sea and

fading.
A liquid narrative

There is only one story. The river is a story told in a song.

When we are part of a story we can't tell our place in it, clearly, you just have to follow as it unfolds. The river follows the lines of a story, singing its song, by many waters, cutting its way through the chaos and what appears to be solid, to bring its own story. It may change its course but never its direction, compelled to go from beginning to end, source to sea, the sea of stories.

Trust the river.
Trust its song.

'TWEED: Border Ballads' courtesy of Tania Kovats.

The river may take you places you don't want to go, but it will keep going, and take you on beyond them.

Your river journey has seen you looking into the long, where the river rises, slipping on the rocks beside it, and on across the backs of hills with the snow coming in. On to where the river spreads about the border, where we're entranced within it. You are the water's journey. When they mirror the sky, it is too deep to walk across. You are here, you are here, you are here.

You have sat crying on the banks, when you went always somehow always on the other side. So much is lost. Separation is coming. You can't know what you'll meet. Your body shivers and breaks itself into scattered light on the water with the upset of the branches. You will be abandoned and abandoned, adrift.

So when you trust the river and its song?

You return.
You gain some and get away from
Deep Sea
Separate
Stay, but don't think that you'll stay

Holding water in your hands.
Midsummer

Who are you to tell me what is real
and what is not?
What happened is nothing, nothing
happened, yet the “nothing” did
happen, shape shifting inside of your
arms. How do you have a
supernatural lover?

Shut your eyes and imagine a lemon.
See its yellow skin, hold it, think of
squeezing it gently to release the oils
of its skin into the skin of your
hand.

Imagine crawling the lemon and
inhale its scent.

Cut a slice out of the lemon and
pretend you put it to your lips and
smack on its juice.

What is happening inside your mouth
right now?

My guess is that it is full of saliva
pouring out from beneath your
tongue.

Who are you to say what is real
or not?
Further reading:

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About the Authors
Tania Kovats’ practice and research as an artist is an exploration of our experience of landscape, increasingly with an environmental focus. Her work includes temporary and permanent sculptural works often in the public realm, drawing, and writing, that currently consider her preoccupation with water, rivers, seas, and oceans. She works at the confluence of environmental, psychological, political, and the personal. Kovats is an advocate for drawing in its expanded field, as a highly significant tool of thinking and expression that provides an infinite and varied means of communication that continues to be expanded and enriched by practitioners. She regularly seeks out engagement and impact with audiences beyond the gallery. Her works are in both public and private collections in the UK and abroad, including Arts Council, Jupiter Artland, The British Council, Government Art Collection, the National Maritime Museum Greenwich, and the V&A.

Her research and advocacy for drawing has resulted in two publications: *The Drawing Book. A Survey of Drawing: The Primary Means of Expression* compiling a cross-disciplinary survey of drawing as a primary generative form of visual communication; and *Drawing Water: Drawing as a Mechanism of Exploration* which consisted of drawings thematically linked by the sea.

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.