

Introduction: Following the River

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In 1834, two years before the publication of *Nature*, Ralph Waldo Emerson gave a lecture on “Water” in Boston in which he attempted to focus attention on what he felt to be a neglected element. Enumerating water’s effects, biological, geological, historical, sociological—“its influence on human civilization cannot be overestimated”—Emerson came to a declaration that might be taken as a précis for the manifold motivations behind this special issue of *Comparative American Studies*. Water, according to Emerson, is “the circulating medium having communication with every part of the earth through the rivers which ultimately pour their waters into the sea. And this action he performs under as many shapes as ways he has of working. It is surprizing to see how fast he can put on his masks, all new and all beautiful.”¹ As the articles in this issue all attest and explore, rivers still remain crucial to circulation and communication, still take innumerable shapes, still wear new and different masks, and certainly still shape human lives in innumerable ways. “In a bucket of water,” Emerson concluded, in ways that still resonate, “resides a latent force sufficient to counterbalance mountains, or to rend the planet.”²

In recent years, rivers have undoubtedly been the site of renewed interdisciplinary scholarly interest. To borrow Dorothy Zeisler-Vralsted’s terms, from her comparative account of the Volga and the Mississippi in their separate national histories, “rivers are enjoying a renaissance from a social and cultural perspective” while a “growing body of scholarly works

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Volume 1: 1833-1836*, edited by Stephen E. Whicher and Robert E. Spiller (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1966), 52.

² Emerson, *Early Lectures*, 68.

reveals the multidisciplinary of river research.”³ Looking just to the Mississippi—arguably the most analysed American river, commensurate with the scale of its symbolic cargo in the national imagination—those trends are readily discernible. In the past couple of decades, alongside Zeisler-Vralsted’s book and my own exploration of the river’s social and cultural history in and beyond the work of Mark Twain, a multitude of scholars have reframed the way we understand the big, muddy river running through the heart of America.⁴ Thomas Buchanan’s essential *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World* (2004) reshaped our understanding of the significance of the river to African Americans in the antebellum years. Both Christopher Morris’s *The Big Muddy: An Environmental History of the Mississippi and Its Peoples, from Hernando de Soto to Hurricane Katrina* (2012) and Christine A. Klein and Sandra B. Zellmer’s *Mississippi River Tragedies: A Century of Unnatural Disaster* (2014) explored the Mississippi’s troubled and indicative environmental history. Walter Johnson examined the tangled streams of slavery, capitalism, and imperialism in the widely acclaimed *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (2013). The contributors to Michael Pasquier’s innovative collection *Gods of the Mississippi* (2013) focused attention on the vibrant religious history of the river. At the same time, in 2015, the River Life programme at the University of Minnesota launched *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, an interdisciplinary journal that exemplifies these trends; recent issues have explored abundance and scarcity, climate change, environmental justice, and indigeneity. Hand in hand with these scholarly developments, grassroots movements like *IMississippi*, established by a coalition of 57 local, nonprofit organisations that make up the Mississippi River Network, are attempting

³ Dorothy Zeisler-Vralsted, *Rivers, Memory, and Nation-Building: A History of the Volga and Mississippi Rivers* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), 1-2.

⁴ See, most recently, Thomas Ruys Smith, *Deep Water: The Mississippi River in the Age of Mark Twain* (Louisiana State University Press, 2019).

to “protect America’s greatest river” with a whole river vision of renewal and restoration.⁵

That same generative diversity of thought and action can certainly be found along other American waterways.

Yet is also true that in contrast with other bodies of water, rivers have been relatively neglected in the wider scholarly project clustered under the umbrella term of the “Blue Humanities.” The open seas have taken clear precedence in the field-defining scholarship which has reframed the study of water and waterways in compelling new directions. At the heart of the emergence of the Blue Humanities, as John Gillis put it in 2013, “is a belated recognition of the close relationship between modern western culture and the sea.”⁶ But more than that, it is an approach to water writ large that has developed its own methodologies and approaches. In Hester Blum’s influential definition from 2013:

Oceanic studies [...] proposes that the sea should become central to critical conversations about global movements, relations, and histories. And central not just as a theme or organizing metaphor with which to widen a landlocked critical prospect: in its geophysical, historical, and imaginative properties, the sea instead provides a new epistemology—a new dimension—for thinking about surfaces, depths, and the extra-terrestrial dimensions of planetary resources and relations.⁷

No less significant in this regard is Kimberley Peters and Philip Steinberg’s 2015 proposed concept of “wet ontology,” born from “oceanic thinking”: “not merely to endorse the perspective of a world of flows, connections, liquidities, and becomings, but also to propose a means by which the sea’s material and phenomenological distinctiveness can facilitate the

⁵ See <https://1Mississippi.org>

⁶ John Gillis, “The Blue Humanities”, *Humanities: The Magazine of the the National Endowment for the Humanities* 34:3 (May/June 2013). Accessed at: <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2013/mayjune/feature/the-blue-humanities>

⁷ Hester Blum, “Introduction: Oceanic Studies”, *Atlantic Studies* 10:2 (2013), 151-155, 151.

reimagining and reenlivening of a world ever on the move.”⁸ Of particular significance is the degree to which these currents transcend borders. To borrow Blum’s terms again, “The sea is geographically central to the hemispheric or transnational turn in American studies and to Atlantic and Pacific studies [...] working against notions of American exceptionalism by observing the transnational dimensions of cultural and political formulations and exchanges in the United States.”⁹

But what about rivers? Where do they fit in the blue humanities conversation? Where do we go if American Studies, or Area Studies more broadly, takes a fluvial turn? For whilst oceans are connected by rivers, rivers can also take us to places that the open seas cannot. While they share similar properties of flow, of connection, of movement, rivers remain in a dynamic relationship with the land and those that populate it. To use Martin Knoll, Uwe Lübken, and Dieter Schott’s terms, rivers have a “peculiar rhythm”—of, say, flood and drought—and create “unique spaces,” all of which are subject to “multitudinous human interventions into these natural dynamics.”¹⁰ While they are closely implicated in national narratives, they are also relatively unacknowledged, though highly potent, transnational entities: as Christopher Morris has rightly highlighted, in relation to one particular American river but applicable more broadly: “Since Europeans first settled in the interior of North America over three centuries ago, the Mississippi River has rarely been considered in any way other than through a global perspective.”¹¹ While they are made to serve as (inevitably porous) borders, they also cross state lines, carrying multiple cargoes with them. Oceans

⁸ Kimberley Peters and Philip Steinberg, “Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces: Giving Depth to Volume through Oceanic Thinking”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 33 (2015), 247-264, 248.

⁹ Hester Blum, “The Prospect of Oceanic Studies”, *PMLA* 125:3 (May 2010), 670-677, 670.

¹⁰ Martin Knoll, Uwe Lübken, and Dieter Schott, “Introduction”, in Martin Knoll, Uwe Lübken, and Dieter Schott eds, *Rivers Lost, Rivers Regained: Rethinking City-River Relations* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017), 7.

¹¹ Christopher Morris, “The American River? The Mississippi River in Global Historical Perspective”, in Markus Koller, Achim Lichtenberger, and Johannes Bernhardt eds, *Mediterranean Rivers in Global Perspective* (Paderborn: Brill, 2019), 303-321, 304.

operate on superhuman proportions which—to appropriate Flaubert’s descriptions of mountains—can sometimes seem “out of scale with our little selves [...] too big to be useful.”¹² But even the most grandiose rivers still flow intimately through human lives, in human dimensions, vital to all life.

To borrow Robert Burroughs’ phrase, “seldom do rivers run the colour of the ‘blue humanities.’”¹³ As a recent study has discovered, that statement is profoundly true. Satellite analysis of America’s rivers since 1984 has demonstrated that only 6% of river mileage can be considered blue. America’s rivers run yellow, brown, green, red; they change colour with the seasons, and in response to human behaviour. Two-thirds have changed colour in the last few decades. They take on the hues of soil erosion, pollution, algae blooms, snow-melts.¹⁴ River studies, then, needs to operate on a spectrum beyond the blue range; it has its own set of pressing concerns and needs its own methodological nuances. So what new perspectives, what new ways of thinking, might emerge from following the river, whatever colour it runs?

The articles in this special issue answer those questions in a variety of compelling ways; taken together, they offer a striking, multidisciplinary panorama of approaches and methodologies which make a profound claim for the task of paying more attention to rivers—from source to sea, from the mainstream to neglected backwaters. Alison Maas opens this issue with an essay that explicitly explores “the intersection between river studies and oceanic studies” in her fascinating examination of the “unique estuarial imaginaries” in the work of Sarah Orne Jewett, H. D., and Louise Bogan—coastal spaces that both generate

¹² Gustave Flaubert, *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert, 1857-1880*, edited by Francis Steegmuller (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 214.

¹³ Robert Burroughs, “Travel Writing and Rivers,” in Nandini Das & Tim Youngs eds, *The Cambridge History of Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 330-344, 343.

¹⁴ John R. Gardner et al., “The Color of Rivers”, *Geophysical Research Letters*, 48:1 (2021).

“imaginative other-worlds” whilst also containing within their waters “very real and material competing global, national, and industrial interests.” In so doing, Maas uncovers illuminating “modes of brackish possibility” in the image of the estuary and other “mixed flow environments” which point the way forward beyond the ocean / river divide. William Palmer, through a deep exploration of “The Dry Salvages”, also blurs the line between river and ocean by unpacking the way that T. S. Eliot “explored the Atlantic with all its attendant histories through the Mississippi.” Palmer examines the way that “Eliot writes back to the river of his youth while simultaneously living and imagining his transnational, migratory subjectivity in other bodies of water and geographies.” In my own essay, I also pursue Transatlantic currents to examine American accounts of the Thames in the late nineteenth century. I attempt to demonstrate the deeply transnational, intertextual nature of river writing during a cultural moment that was profoundly interested in their power as national and imperial symbols, finding in one particular travel account the unrecognised use of the Thames as a site of Transatlantic critique. In very different ways, and with very different stakes, Jorge Cuéllar also positions rivers as sites of Transnational contact and flow. In his powerful essay, he analyses the way that “mobility in Mesoamerica is today punctuated by encounters with rivers, transboundary waters, riparian ecologies.” Border rivers, Cuéllar argues—subject to “ongoing securitization efforts” and “radical terraforming”—have become in their “very fluidity” exemplary spaces “for the reproduction of socio-ecological vulnerabilities in migration.”

The “crisis of nature and society” identified by Cuéllar is also discernible in the riverways of Daisy Henwood’s article. Elucidating the ways in which “rivers are key vehicles for thinking through human relationships with the nonhuman world” in the works of Rebecca Solnit and Kathleen Dean Moore, Henwood also finds them to be essential “figures for the era of

ecological crisis in which we are currently living.” In exploring those themes, Henwood also provides an illuminating account of the way that the “riverine style” of the texts in question might “provide a model for environmental thought and action as we move closer and closer towards climate breakdown.” The other authors in this collection also explore the sites, symbols and style of rivers in the work of specific writers in ways that connect to much wider themes in American life and culture. Catherine Gooch excavates the still underexamined subject of Black cultural life on America’s rivers in ways that also have transnational resonance. In her illuminating analysis of Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, Gooch explores the multivalent significance of the Mississippi tributary that runs through the text: it is “a site of slavery [...] a site of economic disparity and social stratification [...] an individual site of trauma.” Yet it is also “a potential source of empowerment” and a space for folklore and cultural memory that allows for the possibility of healing. Water is similarly multiple in Barbara Miceli’s sensitive evocation of rivers in the poetry of Raymond Carver. Beyond evincing a “connection with the sounding environment”, they work as an Eliotian “correlative objective of memories, reflections, fears and resolution.” Appropriately, William Carroll’s revelatory examination of the titular river in Edgar Lee Master’s *Spoon River Anthology* brings us to an end of sorts. For Carroll, rather than figuring it as a node in a system of connection and flow, Masters implicates Spoon River in his “uncompromising portrait of rural confinement and stasis,” situating it as a stagnant “confluence between notions of the pastoral and the antipastoral.”

In the pages that follow, then, following the river takes us across America and far beyond its borders; it takes us deep into the roots of America and brings us face to face with the most pressing global problems of the current moment. As ever, its scale is both intimate and infinite. Eschewing straight lines, except where imposed by human intervention, the river

presents us with a sinuous model of interdisciplinary scholarship—forming networks, connecting disparate people and places, scouring and fertilising established channels and carving new ones, always flowing, circulating and communicating, from source to sea. And it is clear, as the river rolls out before us, that we are still only at the beginning of our scholarly journey along its waters.