

Voicing Rivers

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Welcome to this Special Issue of *River Research and Applications*, entitled Voicing Rivers. As an editorial group, it has been a great privilege to read and consider responses to our call for contributions and share with readers, authors and reviewers involved in this journey (Figure 1). We invited proposals for articles and creative work to focus on stories of, by, from and for rivers, from a variety of perspectives. This Special Issue has been a collaborative project involving nearly 20 rivers and over 50 people. We thank contributors, reviewers and the *River Research and Applications* journal editorial and production team.



Figure 1 Editorial group of Voicing Rivers Special Issue

In our call for papers we invited perspectives on rivers that offer alternatives to the prevailing business-as-usual view. We proposed that rivers are living, culturally and socially engaged beings. We suggested they hold songs, stories, histories, health or illness, emotions, ecosystem complexity, and animate spirits. These perspectives challenge persistent, dualist and Cartesian, thinking that contributes to conceptions of rivers as denatured, denuded water delivery mechanisms separate from people. We called for papers that celebrate the integrity and authenticity of rivers as living beings, with the right to live and flow. The aim was to illustrate the relational interdependence among humans, non-human beings, river systems and waterways, showing that land, water, people and all beings intrinsically entwine in complex and intricate situated ways.

This set of papers contributes to regenerative transformation for ecosystem health, socio-economic recovery, place sensitivities and cultural restoration for the greater good. It includes transdisciplinary Earth-centred research and practices, and portrays Earth governance for justice, peace, respect and restitution. It features perspectives from writers who are Indigenous to place, and writers whose ancestors are Indigenous elsewhere. There are diverse modes of academic expression, including traditional articles, poetry, film, and narrated artistic works. The ‘how’ of sharing research is significant, since the message is for

academic and general readers. We believe that collectively this Special Issue offers a hopeful direction for humanity's relationship with rivers.

As a whole, an important contribution of this Special Issue is that it brings together humanities with social and natural sciences while adopting creative methodologies to announce the river voices, and enable respectful hearing of these by humans locally, regionally and globally, therefore holistically (Davis, this issue) and interdependently (Parkes, this issue; Ryan, this issue). We anticipate that, by publishing a collection of reflections and papers on this dynamic, this special issue will sit alongside other work currently underway, which aims to gain a greater visibility and enhance conceptual and material changes in the ways in which rivers, and their memories (Jones & Green, this issue), are considered. By celebrating rivers as living socially, emotionally engaged cultural beings, these and other innovative works broaden the theoretical, methodological and creative narratives of rivers.

We started this journey with very basic questions, such as, what are we dealing with when we speak of Voicing Rivers? What is the ontological status of accounts from Indigenous people, from poets, from artists? Are these 'real' river voices (whatever real might mean) or, as some might say, 'mere' metaphor? Or do we have to expand our notion of metaphor to encompass Imagination in the sense that William Blake used the term—an Imagination that refuses to pin down the world in abstraction but to 'unfold the endless tale of reality' (Cheetham, 2015, p. 31; see also Vernon, 2020). Similarly, biologist Weber (2016) uses the term 'poetics' to convey that feeling and expression are necessary elements of a living world (p. 3).

Further, if rivers are living beings with living waters, as the writers in this Special Issue imply, how do rivers make themselves heard? How do people hear rivers? How do we *relate* to rivers? What does it mean to be sensing rivers in all ways—feeling, smelling, hearing, touching and seeing? Does River¹ 'experience'? Indigenous writers will argue that, of course, rivers are living hence they can communicate and reciprocate care (Bawaka Country et al., 2019 & 2020; Poelina et al., 2020; Redvers et al., 2020). Some western writers such as Mueller (2017) adopt a similar perspective. Inspired by Indigenous Australian friends from the Northern Territory, and drawing on the work of Charles S. Peirce, anthropologist Povinelli (2016) argues to "uncouple the commonsense binding of human forms of life and thought and see all life as a mode of thinking" (p. 110).

In exchanges about this Special Issue, philosopher Freya Mathews writes of the importance of addressing the ambiguity between the metaphorical and the ontological as key to the topic of Voicing Rivers. We must indeed address the ambiguity; but we cannot hope to resolve it, for it raises questions about which whole books might be written. In their different ways, all the papers in this issue face these questions; and we hope that readers will make different judgements—according to background and interests—as to how successfully each paper does this.

The world's rivers are in a dreadful state. They have been deepened, widened, diverted, drained, channelised, filled-in and built over, and dammed. River water and river sediments have been extracted and distributed for a multitude of uses. Flow regimes have changed. Very few of the world's large rivers reach the ocean without interruption (Grill et al., 2019). Rivers mirror the way humans are with the land, so that water quality downstream takes on

¹ We capitalize River when used as a proper noun.

the modern signatures of industrial approaches to agriculture, urban development, and mining upstream. As much as humans are fed, nourished and structurally, culturally and spiritually supported by rivers, growing populations have become utterly and locally reliant, and have treated rivers through various combinations of (mis)understanding, ignorance and neglect. The state of rivers is directly dependent upon how people think about them, not just at a surface but at an ontological level. As Kurio and Reason (this issue) argue, our worldview is the fundamental basis of our perceiving, thinking, valuing, and acting; it impacts on how we see our world. If we see rivers as utilities and resources, we will treat them as such; if we see River as a living being to whom we are related, perhaps as sacred, then our whole approach must change.

In this issue, we ask, what happens if we extend the societal view of rivers beyond the orthodox Western perspectives? How might Aboriginal and Indigenous perspectives inform and enhance the mainstream view? Poelina et al., (2020) describe the Nyikina Australian Aboriginal concept of *liyan*, and the Noongar Australian Aboriginal concept of *wirrin*, a way that human and earth wellbeing come together in feeling and intuition, like a moral compass. Country² also has intuition and is communicative. As Harvey (2017) puts it in his review of contemporary animism, in this view ‘The world is full people, only some of whom are human’ (p. 17). Such perspectives are drawn on in papers in this issue (Wooltorton, Poelina & Collard; RiverOfLife et al., this issue; Manikuakanishtiku, Gagnon, Desbiens & Kanapé, this issue).

This does not mean that the Western world has nothing to contribute here: there is a long undercurrent of thought which is fundamentally opposed to the dominant mechanistic (dualist or materialist) perspective. Bateson (1972a) points to ‘a very wide range of philosophic thinking, going back to Greece, and wriggling through the history of European thought over the last 2000 years... [T]he argument took the shape of “Do you ask what it's made of—earth, fire, water, etc? Or do you ask “What is its pattern?”’ (p. 449). This line of thinking originated with the Pythagoreans, followed by the Gnostics, the alchemists, the romantics; in current times by deep ecologists and Gaia theorists (Harding, 2009) and complexity theorists (Boulton, Allen, & Bowman, 2015). To mainstream thinking this perspective can appear both mystical and functionally irrelevant. It must struggle for acceptability and its distinguished philosophical lineage is usually unacknowledged and unrecognised. However, often expressed through poetics as much as logic, this perspective provides for a re-enchantment of the world and an honouring of the rights of the more-than-human. It challenges us to discover a new form of knowing, and utilise methodologies that honour the integration of mind, matter and politics with epistemology and ontology. It is a stream of thought carried historically by philosophers such as Giordano Bruno (Yates, 1964), Baruch Spinoza (1994 (1667)), Henri Bergson (1911), Alfred North Whitehead (1929), Gregory Bateson (1972b); and in current times by panpsychist and feminist philosophers such as David Abram (1996), Freya Mathews (2003), Deborah Bird Rose (1996), Val Plumwood (1993) and Karen Barad (2007); and is often expressed through art and poetry such as the epilogue by Moore (this issue).

While the papers we have included draw on these alternative worldviews, they are also about practice; not only how we *think* about voicing rivers, but what is the practice of voicing? This would seem to point us in the direction of methodology. As an editorial group, we suggest that the emphasis on methodology is often based on a fundamental skepticism and mistrust of

² Capitalised, Country refers to an Aboriginal Australian understanding of one's place that is holistic, relational, spiritual and inclusive of people and more than human kin.

the human capacity for critical thought and sense making based on experience and phenomena. While some contributions in this issue draw on methodological traditions such as action research (Bracknell, Horwitz, Ryan & Marshall; Kurio and Reason; Manikuakanishtiku et al.; all this issue), we also believe it is important to trust traditional wisdoms and careful everyday observations, using methodologies which enable foregrounding of more-than-human beings and the decentring of human interests; as for example, Woollorton et al. (this issue). Views from participatory (Billings, Lovett, & Wasserman, this issue) and post humanist (Wintoneak & Blaise, this issue) perspectives address everyday observations and experiential relationships; as well as views from Indigenous worldviews and cosmologies which accept that if people care for Country, Country can respond (RiverOfLife et al., this issue).

Once we stop objectifying rivers and begin to treat them as ‘living, culturally, socially engaged beings’, we can no longer reach for a scientific proof, for truth versus falsity. Contemporary postmodern and posthumanist perspectives would in any case doubt this is possible, always incredulous toward grand narratives (Lyotard, 1979). We would argue that an ‘objective’ worldview is itself a distortion that arises from paying attention to some aspects of the world and denying others. The politics of a reductionistic and mechanistic science that regards humans as separate from nature is instrumental in this problematic context. Yet for the last 50 years reference to it has well exceeded its relevance, as extensively treated, for example, by environmental philosophers (Matthews, 1994; Plumwood, 2008), philosophers of science (Latour, 2017; Stengers, 2014), social-ecologists (Berkes, Colding, & Folke, 2008), and sustainability economists (Ostrom, 2009).

However, this does not mean ‘anything goes’, that we have thrown all notions of quality research and scholarship out of the window. We can reach for what philosopher Timothy Morton calls ‘truthiness’ (2018, p. 17), that necessarily ambiguous place where the radical mystery of the world, of River in so many guises, meets the human perceiver and sense-maker with their constructs and worldviews. Gregory Bateson described something similar long ago, writing of ‘a region where you are partly blown by the winds of reality and partly an artist creating a reality out of inner and outer events’ (in Brockman, 1977, p. 245). Of course, for researchers embedded in a sentient worldview, this issue rises in different ways from those socialized within a materialist Western worldview. But both, in their different ways, must exercise some form of ‘critical subjectivity’, a notion originally developed within the action research community (Reason, 1988; Reason & Rowan, 1981) to guard against wish fulfilment and consensus collusion.

For these reasons, we point to the careful research and scholarship of Bracknell et al. (this issue) as they uncover and perform the traditional songs and dances of the Noongar people in southwest Western Australia; and to the systematic engagement and careful reflection of Billings et al. (this issue) in their artistic engagement with the Connecticut River and the inhabitants of Brattleboro. We refer to the reflections on quality in panpsychic engagement of Kurio and Reason and their co-operative inquiry colleagues (this issue); and to the art project and deep mapping of tidal patterns and rhythms of the River Severn Estuary and Bahía Adair of Jones and Green (this issue).

We have ordered the articles in this Special Issue to begin with research that features the ‘everyday’. Kurio and Reason (this issue) provide an account of a cooperative inquiry to explore the experience of a world of sentient beings rather than inert objects. The co-researchers ask whether we humans, through intentional engagement, can relate to the rivers

as beings, subjects, or other-than-human persons in their own right? They inquire into how rivers might speak. In the following article, Davis (this issue) meditates on the notion of ‘thinking like a river’, to ask how rivers and other waterways might be conceptualised in the human imaginary. Exploring a sense of holism, he asks, how might a re-thinking and re-theorising of rivers facilitate a re-connection between human history and natural history, and between humans and other non-human species? Still within the idea of ‘everyday’ research, Wooltorton et al. (this issue) offer Indigenous perspectives and nature writing as an everyday possibility for reconnecting people now estranged from their riverine kin. They suggest that our relationships may be ‘in our faces’ such as the wind, or the air, water or bushes nearby.

Whilst Indigenous narratives and perspectives characterise several papers, three papers develop Indigenous concepts to explain living waters and places. The first is by Bracknell et al. (this issue), who argue a case for re-establishing connections among culture and nature by drawing on Indigenous perspectives. They ask how relationships between living water bodies—underground, estuarine and riverine—can be performed to give voice to relationality between river systems and people. The second paper, co-written by Manikuakanishtiku River et al. (this issue), relies on Indigenous landscapes, names and stories to demonstrate the deep value of toponyms in Innu cultural intergenerational memory of Manikuakanishtiku Manicouagan River in Québec (Canada), which experienced extensive transformation through the flooding that created the Manicouagan Reservoir. The third paper using Indigenous concepts is co-written by two Rivers, being the Martuwarra Fitzroy RiverOfLife and the Unamen Shipu Romaine River (this issue), as well as by Poelina et al., (this issue). They write *as River*, explaining the difference in human attitudes towards River before and after colonisation in two countries, being Australia and Canada, where Indigenous knowledge systems and narratives for healing bring together findings of this intercultural river learning journey.

The next group of papers feature learning and rethinking relationships and connections. Wintoneak and Blaise (this issue) voice an estuary through three river-child stories as part of an ongoing river-child walking inquiry that is concerned with generating climate change pedagogies. They find the need to respond to the estuary’s invitations, paying attention to pastspresentsfutures and forming attachments through naming. In the next article Parkes (this issue) offers a reflection on the influence of two rivers and their role as respected and highly valued ‘ecosocial elders’. She asks if a river has ‘voice’, what can be learned from the emergence arising from rivers ‘in conversation’? Weaving themes of confluence and emergence allow her to use science to characterise ongoing conversations among different rivers and their teachings. Jones and Green (this issue) work with two rivers, the Severn on the border between England and Wales and the Bahía Adair in the Gulf of Mexico. They use an art project to reveal the key themes of the role of memories, shared memories, and relationships to place. Even with enhanced notions of ecology, they notice that shadows including wider senses of ecocide and extinction run through their narrative.

The next group of papers feature the arts and poetry, still working with an Indigenous influence. The first, by Billings et al., (this issue), begins with the notion of *Ask the River* to intertwine people and place once again, on the Connecticut River. To guide their research, they use the Abenaki understanding that people and place are one. Three artists and multiple community partners create public art, using the River as inspiration and guide. The next article by Ryan (this issue) features *hearing* rivers through hydropoetics. Rather than *giving voice to* rivers, Ryan’s framework recognizes the inherent language of rivers and, in this way, presents a medium to hear their voice(s). Through the transformative capacity of language,

new words and therefore new wor[ld]ds, Ryan shows how hydropoetics can inspire new visions of rivers and openness to rivers, as they exist as well as in their potential to emerge and transform. He calls attention to the cultural, social, and spiritual significance of riverscapes. The epilogue of the Special Issue is an ecopoem called *Fluvial*, by Moore (this issue), written as part of a project bringing scientists and artists together to develop a cultural response. She foregrounds ecological community in speaking up for rivers. “Don’t call us ‘river’ as if we were singular...”.

It is likely that the biggest hindrance as society turns towards more holistic and fulfilling ways of seeing, hearing and feeling, including voicing rivers, will be the politics connected with this emerging worldview. It is intensely threatening to those with excessive economic and political power, for people to disconnect from a neoliberal way of understanding our places as mere resource, towards a sensual engagement of love and relationship. Nonetheless, there is no doubt this transformation is underway. Thank you to the authors, reviewers and readers of this Special Issue for your contribution to this evolution in thought and practice in relation to rivers on our fragile planet.

Acknowledgements

Figure 1 designed by Mourad Djaballah, cartographic technician at the Geography Department of the Université du Québec à Montréal.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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