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That Which Guides Us

Wire, Plaster, Acrylic Paint, Bristol Paper, Ink, Glue

Rivers and humans aren't as different as one may initially think. The piece *That Which Guides Us* is based on my research paper, "Movement: The Relationship Between Two Entities," in which I looked at the theme of movement through human practices and activity in comparison to the characteristics and behavior of flowing bodies of water (specifically rivers). I analyzed people and rivers through a philosophical lens that allowed for similarities and comparisons to be drawn between the two entities. For instance, rivers flow towards the path of least resistance and humans often move for the same reason. My multimedia work leans into the concept of bodies of water being sentient and how they would communicate to us and what choices they would make if they could choose for themselves. My process involved creating a wire mesh armature shaped after a mountainous landscape with rivers carving through the "land." I then layered and adhered plaster tape to the armature and air dried the work. I next applied a layer of white acrylic paint and glued down illustrated symbols of artificial and natural aspects of our world. Ranging from skyscrapers and dwellings, to cacti and snakes. It all comes together to create a bustling landscape encompassing an anthropomorphic river's attempts at communication, and humans and their artificial additions to the land, mostly oblivious to these ventures.

Movement: The Relationship Between Two Entities



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OS49

Writer's Note: The following paper discusses the theme of movement and how it pertains to human behavior and the characteristics of flowing bodies of water such as rivers. Furthermore, in comparing bodies of flowing water and human behavior, especially through a philosophical and narrative lens, deep connections and ties between people and water arise that may not have previously come to mind. Opening up a unique perspective on the relationship between water and people. The writing goes on to highlight my own personal connections to water and being a human always on the move. Altogether telling a story of human movement, rivers' importance to us as humans, the relationship between water and people, along with philosophical fruit for thought on creating dialogue between person and water.

Introduction - I

Humans have been on the move for as long as we've existed. From the first move out of Africa some 60-90,000 years ago to spreading and covering nearly every corner of the globe. We've always been on the move. A National Geographic Article called *Global Human Journey*, says, "How far and fast they went depended on climate, the pressures of population, and the invention of boats and other technologies." and "Less tangible qualities also sped their footsteps: imagination, adaptability, and an innate curiosity about what lay over the next hill." So many different facets have always been at play. Even today, we as humans move constantly. Whether that be house to house, state to state, country to country, we are always on the move and will probably never stop.

Water is also always moving, and will probably never stop. Even when it looks still in a pond or lake. It is always moving. Splashing against the shoreline, slowly eroding away at the edges of land. Carving deep into the ground, nourishing and altering local ecologies, breaking

through the most stubborn of materials. Water is a force that works in its own time and in its own ways. The relationship between water and humans has always been vital and influential. More specifically, rivers and people. They aren't as different as one may initially think. Looking at rivers' behaviors and characteristics through a more philosophical lens brings deeper meaning and life to these bodies of water that ties them and people much closer. If a river could speak, what would it say? If a river could choose where to flow, where would it go? These questions bring up similarities and not as many differences between people and water as one may think.

What is a River - II

From a more scientific point of view, a river can be defined as, “A large natural stream of water flowing in a channel to the sea, a lake, or another such stream” according to the Oxford dictionary. An admittedly boring definition. When looking closer and below the surface of this definition, different behaviors and characteristics stand out. For instance, as rivers form, the water flows towards the path of least resistance. It's information like this that gives rivers a more personified feel. There is more to rivers than just the flow of water.

In recent history, people have been trying to find more novel and innovative ways to protect endangered species and habitats from the destructive touch of humans. Bees are now legally considered fish in California for the sake of giving them similar protections to other endangered species (Sanders) or how rivers are increasingly being given a personhood so that they can have similar or equal protections to people. In focusing on rivers, a complex system has to be put in place in order for rivers rights to be upheld and protected. In a peer-reviewed paper from 2018, co-authors Erin L. O'Donnell and Julia Talbot-Jones stated, “As pressures on water resources increase, the demand for innovative institutional arrangements, which address the

overuse of water, and underprovision of ecosystem health, is rising.” They go on to discuss how giving rivers a legal personhood can be a step towards protecting natural resources such as water. One recent example is the Magpie River located in Quebec, Canada. In 2021, it was granted personhood. Under this distinction, the river gained new protections through the form of nine different rights ranging from the right to be free of pollution, to flow, to being able to sue (Berge). Enforcing and maintaining rights granted to these resources is a complex and equally important step. These solutions remind me of what a river would look like and behave like if they could exist in a similar way to humans.

Giving personhood and human rights to rivers reminds me of the philosophical questions: If a river could choose where to flow, where would it go? If a river could think, what would it say? Sitting back and imagining for a moment the ways in which a river flows, slowly carving away at rock and the land. Washing away decaying things and transporting aquatic critters. Feeding the cat tails and satiating the tangled mess that are willows. As a river flows, its curves become more dramatic, eventually creating oxbows. I wonder, in imagining how a river would behave, if instead of curving and carving through landscapes like a snake, it would decide to instead flow and carve out symbols, shapes, or even words to communicate to other beings able to listen or understand their wants or needs. What would the Ganges river, the Citarum river, or the Passaic river form to tell us? Would these waterways be angry for all the pollution poured into them? Would these flowing bodies of water retaliate by flooding human settlements or choosing to flow in a different direction, away from human activity? It’s a curious way of looking at nature and different aspects of the natural world. A river can mean and be many things to many different people. Although an interesting perspective to imagine, some do believe that rivers are sacred beings or at the very least, a valuable resource in need of protection.

For decades, scientists from many different fields ranging from morphology and geology to hydrology, have worked to more closely and intimately understand rivers. It's important to try and understand every aspect of rivers to better inform people of how to best manage and utilize them. From a morphological standpoint, rivers can be argued as being "the product and architect of its environment" (Oltman, 22). The ways in which they have reacted to the landscapes gives insight into the geology and climate of the earth's crust. Depending on weathering agents, such as temperature change and water, as well as the erodibility of rock and soil, a river will form by taking the path of least resistance (Oltman, 22). So, even as a river carves out and redefines the landscape, the ways in which it does so is influenced by other factors of the environment. A river is both the architect and product of its environment. Bodies of water are a character not too different from another creature scattered across the lands of the globe. One with a mind to drive movement. One with the thought to take advantage of the natural world beyond the reach of bodies of water. One with the body to become architects in a whole other light from rivers.

Human Movement - III

What is commonly referred to as the Global Human Journey, began roughly 60-90,000 years ago when a species called Homo-Sapiens migrated out of Africa and slowly spread across the globe. Today, humans cover nearly every continent. Different factors such as climate, population pressures, and access to resources have and still do influence human movement (Micalizio). But from a more intimate and less tangible perspective, people have moved out of curiosity, restlessness, and from a sense of adventure. People still move for these reasons. With the advancement of technology, especially in regards to transportation and tools, the movement of

people has become more complex, varied, and nuanced than the primitive ages our ancestors faced thousands upon thousands of years ago.

On a smaller and more specific scale, in the contemporary landscape, moving homes has been a common and impactful form of movement for many people. According to research conducted by Becky Pettit found in the paper, *Moving and Children's Social Connections: Neighborhood Context and the Consequences of Moving for Low-Income Families*, she states “Nearly one in five children in the United States move homes every year.” Clearly a common undertaking. Becky Pettit goes on to highlight how depending on where and the circumstances surrounding moving homes, children may face disadvantages or negative side effects such as a higher likelihood of failing in school or altogether dropping out, and losing different kinds of social connections altogether. So what may be the path of least resistance for parents, may not be for their children. Speaking from personal experience, I have always felt unable or like it wouldn't be worthwhile to try and socialize and become friends with neighbors because I knew at some point we would move again. But for me, I actually felt more motivated to work harder in school with the goal that I could one day get a well paying job and feel secure when it came to housing and finances.

On a larger scale, the UN Refugee Agency reported that by the end of 2022, roughly 108 million people were displaced globally. This displacement is caused by factors such as persecution, violence, human rights violations, to name a few. It is an unfortunate fact of life that humans fight each other over disagreements, resources, and power. Innocent lives become entangled in the horrors of war and conflicts. The UN Refugee Agency goes on to report that “despite children only making up roughly 30% of the world's population, they account for over 40% of displaced people.” Furthermore, the majority of displaced people are taken in by

low-income to middle class countries. The point in mentioning these statistics is to point out that moving isn't always just from house to house, state to state, or country to country. That is just the tip of the iceberg. Surface level, if you will. In our modern world, with the advancement of humans and our tools, for better or for worse, our movements have become a much more multifaceted and complex undertaking and experience.

Considering how rivers move through our world on their own time, I wonder what watching humans develop and advance over the course of human history has been perceived by them. Do they sense our growing activities like dams, bridges or encroaching settlements like cities? Do they see us come and go in the blink of an eye? Because to them, eroding away land over thousands of years to humans may be just a few years to them? I imagine as a river, the ways in which humans have reshaped and altered the landscape to their will and ways would be like watching a timelapse video. They would seem fickle in the grand scheme of things. It would be like watching a carcass nourish and give back to the land. The flies and maggots work tirelessly to speed up the decomposition process. The mold, spreading and offering an outstretched helping hand. Breaking it down into nothing more than nutrients in the soil. Does a river see us similarly? Eating away at the land tirelessly, outstretching our arms of roads and buildings. Only to crumble and return to the earth one day? I wonder.

Rivers & People - IV

If you take a moment to look at a map, look for the bodies of water first and then take note of the location of cities and large packs of human settlements. More often than not, wherever the water is, people will follow closely. According to the NOAA office for coastal management, over 40% of people in the U.S live along a coast despite coastlines only making up about 10% of the

contiguous United States overall land area. Globally, roughly 3 billion people live within 200 kilometers of a coastline (Creel). Statistically highlighting the pull and influence of water on where people go. Water moves people.

A river holds different purposes and importance to many different kinds of people. This is best put by Roy E. Oltman, who says, “A river is many things to many people - success or failure to an irrigation farmer, play area to the water-skier, waste-way to the sanitary engineer, and a complex, dynamic challenge to the hydrologist.” But aside from scientific and agricultural value, rivers have also held a sacred and spiritual place for many cultures of people for thousands of years. “Ancient Egyptians believed the Nile Floods that fertilized their crops were the tears of a goddess.” or “The Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest, who revered the Columbia river and the salmon that swam its water.”(Lawrence, 248). The different values and significance that people place on rivers is an important aspect of understanding rivers from a more cultural and societal standpoint. In the contemporary world, people still place a spiritual and physical tie to rivers.

The exploitation of resources isn't something new to human history and rivers aren't any safer than a plot of land from the grasp of humans. There are nearly 80,000 dams in the United States alone. (Lawrence, 248) People have been finding ways to exploit water for thousands of years. There is evidence dating back to ancient Mesopotamia where small irrigation channels rerouted water to feed crops over 6000 years ago (Lawrence, 248). Over time, with the aid of scientists and engineers, these crude irrigation systems evolved into huge looming and more refined, advanced systems such as dams made of concrete and metal such as the Hoover Dam. But the economic gains and promises surrounding projects like dam construction overshadow their issues.

By exploiting rivers through means such as dams, negative implications follow. Mainly towards people who hold spiritual ties to a given river or place surrounding a river. According to *Damming rivers, damming Cultures* by Michael P. Lawrence, “What is often missed in the “Balance Sheet” approach to dam development is the impact to whole societies who have lost access to natural resources and cultural heritage.” Altering the ways in which rivers flow naturally can flood land that may be considered a sacred burial ground, traditional lands, e.t.c. In effect, cutting off many people from important sites. But natural resources can be significantly hampered and affected too. Entire ecosystems change. Hampering important resources such as local fisheries. But the worst part is that the people most negatively impacted do not receive compensation or even some of the gains created.

The short novel, *A Long Walk to Water*, By Linda Sue Park, tells two stories of movement. One, about a girl named Nya who walks many miles to the nearest source of water just to keep her family alive. The other, about the true story of Salva Dut, who, in the aftermath of the 1985 Sudanese civil war, was dislocated from his home and family and struggled to find basic resources such as water and food, while staying off dangerous animals and rebels. In the end being taken in by an American family in the United States and returning home later to take care of his remaining family and communities by bringing running water through wells to villages. The intersection between these two characters' stories happens when Salva drills a well and brings running water to Nya's village. These stories highlight the tug and pull of water on people. Without water, the community that Nya calls home would dry up and die and its people would need to move elsewhere or risk the same fate. Where water goes, people follow. Water moves people.

Bringing back the philosophical lens, imagine what a conversation between a body of water and a person would be like. There aren't any right or wrong answers or ways of imagining this hypothetical encounter. To me though, I imagine a person sitting along a shoreline, watching the exchange of rock, mineral, and water. The water would give off a passive feeling. Still enough to act as a mirror. The person would carve into the sand whatever they wanted to say, and in turn, the water would wash over the indented and carved forms, absorbing, taking in not just the eroded rock that is the shore, but also the message. Slowly taking it in, wave by wave. Until it fades away. The shore, reforming back into its original self. The message received. But rivers move in their own time and direction. It could be just a few hours or days before the person would hear back. It could be hundreds or thousands of years as the river slowly reshapes the land and shares its side of the conversation.

Personal Reflections - V

Curious Movement

The sky was nearly cerulean blue with only two thin wisps stretched out. The breeze was crisp and subtle. The low-lying Juniper trees providing shade to the occasional lizard or rabbit. The only sound was the dry and rocky soil under our feet and heavy breaths as we climbed. The heat was stifling and relentless. But that wouldn't matter for long. As the minutes went by, a new sound grew more prominent. Somewhat like white noise, but with a thunderous flair. As I hopped from one boulder to another, I saw it at last: a small stream of a waterfall was flowing through a crevice between two nearly white boulders.

The stream splashed down playfully into a spring shaded and hidden by looming rock hugging its edges. Directly across from the little waterfall, a small stream of water poured out

from the spring and flowed along a shallow and thin channel away into the Junipers and through the sandy soil. I stared at this thin stream for a while, contemplating. If it continues to flow, it will slowly carve deeper and wider into the ground. Gaining strength and eventually turning into a river. I was seeing the start of something new. I went on to build a small dam and fill the spring even more. My family and I splashed around and sat in the cool water under the hot and persistent gaze of the sun. By the time we left, I realized the dam I had made had left the stream parched. Only an imprint of its work remained in the soil. I removed a boulder so that it could flow again. I watched as the water stretched and rolled across the soil and into the distance.

Moving Day

The spring air still had a wintry crispness to it. The air was still that day. The puddles filling the potholes were undisturbed. A natural mirror. A rumbling noise started. Growing louder. Birds started to squawk in protest before flying off. The puddle rippled, distorting the perfect reflection. The big lumbering truck came down the road. A postcard and touristy part of the country illustrated and wrapped along its boxy exterior. My mom, behind the wheel, expertly maneuvered the bulky thing into the parking spot right outside our front door. She had grown comfortable driving these Uhaul moving vans over the years. Next came the boxes and trashbags and conversations around what to keep and what to toss out. The house was empty within days. Everyone moved easily through the process. There wasn't much unease. Everyone knew what to do. It was like a standard protocol at this point. At the end of it all, the moving van ready to go, our cars loaded to the brim too, we were off. Down the road and across town to the next place.

Conclusion - VI

Human Movement and the flow of water, especially in the form of rivers, hold philosophical and deep connections not obvious from a surface level glance. We are more alike and behave in more similar ways to one another than we think to credit. The path of least resistance, for instance, isn't exclusive to the ways water moves, but also applies to the ways people move. There is a clear affinity between us and water, and there always will be. If people saw rivers as equals in this relationship, what would we sit down to discuss? What kind of conversation or connections would rise from our words? What kind of conversations would you have?

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