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Rivers as Witnesses: Sacred Geography, Historical Memory, and American Indian Sovereignty along the Missouri River

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Abstract

This paper is about the Missouri River and the Oceti Sakowin: Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota peoples and others who lived along the river, especially the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara. It examines spatial change in the Missouri river - treaties, dams and reservoirs, drowned communities, and continuing ceremonial significance - to make the case that it is a living historical document, reflecting contestation of land and water use and management regimes. Tribal lands were curtailed in the nineteenth century through treaties, and considerable bottomland was flooded in the twentieth century when dams were constructed under the Pick-Sloan Missouri Basin Program, resulting in the loss of cultural features. Water protection is connected to treaty rights and historical survival through oral history, tribal commemorations and cultural practices, and the Standing Rock movement against the Dakota Access Pipeline. It foregrounds and refocuses American Indian knowledge and sovereignty and reveals that environmental change is also political and cultural history.

Keywords

American Indian history, Missouri river, Sovereignty, Sacred Geography.

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1. Introduction

In U.S. history, rivers are frequently depicted on maps, as routes of travel, as a source of water for irrigation, or as locations for dams. These descriptions are incomplete and are symptomatic of a specific manner of knowing that is more concerned with Western notions of cartographic rationality and resource extraction frameworks. The river Mni Sose (Howe and Young) is more a geography of relationship than a system of property to the Oceti Sakowin, the Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota peoples.

The term ‘river as witness’ highlights the fact that rivers have evidence that is often segregated and even made inaccessible in conventional archives. The metaphor of the river as witness does not imply water has a human voice and anthropomorphic consciousness. Rather, it is a material inventory of reshaped shorelines, inundated cities, cultural landscapes and place-names, graveyards and memories in the landscape. This archive can be accessed via hydrological and ecological data, historical documentation and, most importantly, through the testimonies and knowledge carried forward by communities whose relationships to the river are integral to their lives.

This paper contends that the Missouri River is not only a living archive but also a contested space of sovereignty, plural, because multiple nations still assert and enact their sovereignty within the Missouri River. In contrast, the government of the United States increasingly used the river as a territorial boundary for administrative purposes and an engineered resource for commodity extraction and development. Still, the American Indian river nations have unrelentingly preserved and continue to claim their historical memory, political sovereignty, and rights to govern in response to these dispossessions. The Standing Rock movement’s cry to “defend water is to defend life” was not a slogan. It was a distillation of a longstanding history of relational sovereignty (Estes, *Mni Wiconi* 14-17).

2. Sacred Geography and Relational History

Sacred geography is the geography of a territory as understood and shaped by its spiritual and historical experience, its ecological knowledge and ethical responsibility.

This idea is not to claim that all communities view all rivers in the same way, or that sacred geography is the same in all “Indigenous” worldviews. American Indian nations have unique histories, celebrations, governments,

and languages that are rooted in a place. A responsible historical approach would therefore steer clear of the essentialism of generic pronouncements that “American Indians are naturally close to nature”, and the romanticism that would lump all Indigenous peoples into something like a generic stewarding of the environment. Rather, rigorous historical scholarship seeks to understand specifically how certain communities characterize their responsibilities toward certain places, how place-based knowledge is passed on and preserved, and how it actually becomes embodied in political action, particularly vis-à-vis the state.

Memory is tied to place: burial grounds, village sites, ceremonial locations, and places of prayer are all ways in which this is the case, and when this is broken, there is no easy way to recreate those places elsewhere. Theory is provided by Vine Deloria’s premises that American Indian religious beliefs often stress the sacredness of place over the belief of a universal sacred time (61-77).

From a very legalistic point of view, sovereignty is about government powers, jurisdiction, and treaty rights. But there is another dimension to river sovereignty that cannot be captured by the law: the capacity or the responsibility of a people to meet commitments with water, with the future and with more-than-human life. Based on Mishuana Goeman’s scholarship on American Indian spatial practices and nationhood, American Indians create national identity not just by borders put on the map by colonialism, but also by living relations and by stories that are passed on through time (1-15).

The archive of Missouri River history is a simultaneous engagement of multiple documentary forms. Therefore, it is necessary to consider written treaties, federal agency records in conjunction with and against oral histories, tribal publications, place-name systems, and ecological changes over the landscape through the lens of the genealogical record.

The methodological approach of sacred geography illustrates a sense of loss and endurance in relation to language systems, memory practices, ceremony, and political action.

3. The Missouri River Before European Colonization

The Mandan people built a row of farming villages along the middle Missouri River, mainly in the present-day state of North Dakota. In the rich bottomland soils, which are recharged each spring by flooding, women grew corn, beans, squash (the “three sisters” polyculture system), and sunflowers. Similar agricultural economies and regional trade systems were shared by the Hidatsa, whose villages were clustered near Mandan villages. Along the Missouri, especially in the present state of South Dakota, the Arikara nation also lived in earth-lodge villages and had similar agricultural systems (“Earthlodge”).

The Missouri River served as a meeting center for trade. Archaeological and ethnohistorical data show that trade goods, such as shells from the Pacific coast, copper from the Great Lakes, and obsidian from volcanic areas, found their way to these villages via networks that were in place for centuries before the arrival of any Europeans in the region.

It was an inhabited system of production, exchange, and political authority in which a number of nations had advanced skills in the management of their resources, in diplomatic protocol, and in governance.

River valleys and their tributaries were significant resource zones, seasonal grounds, and routes for bands of Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota peoples. Hunting territories, gathering places, and sacred sites were found throughout the region, and were not related to present federal reservation boundaries. In fact the river did not only help to divide the territories, it also helped them to be connected for commerce, diplomacy and ceremonial assembly.

The world of indigenous nations and their knowledge was the foundation of early Euro-American travel along the Missouri. Today, the National Park Service's historical documentation has recognized that the Lewis and Clark expedition, so often described in popular histories as an "exploratory trip" into the wilderness, was in fact dependent on the hospitality, food gifts, trade, and guidance given by American Indian communities that they met along the river.

Steamboat traffic grew in the nineteenth century, carrying commerce and the military up the river, along with disease. Smallpox reached upper Missouri communities via the St. Peters steamboat in 1837. Some estimates suggest that most of the Mandan nation perished, and the tribe was almost wiped out. The waterway, which for centuries had provided a means of sustaining relationships, trading, and exchange, came to provide access to outside power and biological disaster in indigenous territories.

4. Translation of Indigenous Space into Colonial Territory

Rather than being merely a technical means of mapping what was already there, cartography was a technology of colonial rule that rendered the river and its lands legible to a federal government wanting to delineate lands for settler benefit. Such cartographic style of permanence, of acres measurable, boundaries clearly defined, of jurisdictions made distinct, was in contrast with the relational geography of communities that lived and worked on both sides of the river, that stretched out in their seasonal camps across the land, whose villages, meeting places, and sacred sites were linked by kinship, trade, and ceremony.

The 1858 Yankton Sioux treaty gave over a vast tract of land to the United States and made much of what is now south-eastern South Dakota

open to non-Indian settlement. The Yankton Reservation was limited to a smaller portion along the Missouri River itself, and their territory and access to the river resources and hunting grounds that had sustained them were cut down. The treaty was negotiated under conditions of coercion and inequality, and the treaty itself used language of "cession" and permanent transfer ("Treaty with the Yankton Sioux").

Decade later the treaty of Fort Laramie was negotiated after fighting on the northern Plains, and in the treaty's text, the land was to be kept apart for the undisturbed use of the Sioux Nation with the creation of the Great Sioux Reservation. The description of the reservation, contained in the treaty, started from a definite point on the east bank of the Missouri River; and the course of the river was used as a fixed boundary between Sioux country and the lands beyond the river ("Treaty of Fort Laramie"). Eventually, the treaty negotiated was broken by the federal government which took the Black Hills for themselves, despite treaty obligations. The treaty is of great importance today legally and historically; it is referred to in the political and legal claims of the Sioux. But federal actions and the appropriation of the Black Hills clearly showed that treaty recognition could be revoked when American Indian land was in the way of settler desires and resource exploitation.

Federal maps represented a reservation as a finite area that was isolated from and under the jurisdiction of the United States, thus obscuring the historical and continuing significance of hunting territories, kinship territories, and important sacred places that lay outside the boundaries of the reservation. Maps can thus be interpreted as technologies of power which render indigenous sovereignty illegible and naturalize colonial claims.

Tribal lands were further divided and weakened through federal Indian allotment policies, especially following the Dawes Act of 1887. Allotment involved dividing reservations that were held in common by the Indians into individual allotments given to every tribal member, and "surplus" land for non-Indian settlement. The policy, based on the concepts of "civilization" and individual property rights, was used to dispossess and marginalise the indigenous people ("Dawes Act").

5. The Pick-Sloan Missouri Basin Program and the Transformation of Indigenous Homelands

Following the destructive floods of 1943, which caused extensive losses in the Missouri Valley, Congress passed the Flood Control Act of 1944. This act placed the Pick-Sloan Missouri Basin Program, an integrated plan of development which integrated the plans of the Army Corps of Engineers (Pick Plan) and the Bureau of Reclamation (Sloan Plan) (United States, Congress 887-907). The combined program was touted as having many advantages: flood control, improvements in navigation for commercial shipping, irrigation development for agricultural production, hydroelectric power

production for regional electricity supply, and a general enhancement of regional development. But benefits were hugely inequitably distributed and costs disproportionately experienced by indigenous nations and their territories.

Several dams were built on the Missouri and flooded rich American Indian lands of significance. Federal and tribal officials say the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation's reservation at Fort Berthold was inundated by the flood by about 25 percent ("Supporting Question 3"). The submerged area encompassed the most productive Missouri bottomlands, fertile floodplain lands on which families farmed, raised livestock, harvested wild plants for food and medicine, cultivated gardens, and lived near their extended family.

Communities were isolated from each other by broken roads, extended families had disrupted social networks, and the reservation itself was broken up with isolated parcels.

Burial grounds, archaeological sites of village history and occupation, ancestors' gravesites, homes, and gardens were flooded. Moving a house building did not and could not move the relationships that are found in a place: the relationship between living people and the ancestors buried there, between a family and a landscape formed by years of living and working there, between a community and a river. The tribes Standing Rock Sioux and Cheyenne River Sioux had land inundated by Oahe Dam. The dams changed the physical nature of the river, its current, sediment load, temperature and seasonal variations, which adversely affected aquatic and riparian ecosystems.

The new, modified river, with its reservoirs, regulated flows and modified thermal regimes, did not provide the same support for older methods of seasonal harvesting and hunting. Federal planners viewed the Missouri as water to store and distribute bureaucratically, while indigenous nations saw it as a homeland governed by treaties, kinship, ceremonies, and reciprocity with more-than-human life. In the face of significant limitations on their power, American Indian leaders and governments responded with legal claims, economic analysis, lobbying, historical evidence, and political organization to confront the development regime which disregarded tribal sovereignty and considered American Indian territories as available for sacrifice. Annual events and family stories mapped the displacement of communities to memory, and to current consciousness; younger people were taught where people used to live and where the ancestors were buried.

6. The River as an Alternative Archive: Material Evidence and Tribal Knowledge

The Missouri River implies a much broader notion and conception of the nature of an archive and of what historical sources can tell us. Material

evidence of decisions taken over many generations and centuries can be seen in the banks, reservoirs, islands, altered ecosystems, and modified hydrology of the river. The locations of submerged settlements indicate decisions made regarding whose land could be inundated with the arrival of development and federal power. Eroding shorelines can cause cultural materials and burial sites to become exposed and be available for study and, in some instances, return to the communities for proper reburial.

By contrast, tribal place names show relations and historical memories that official maps seem intent on ignoring, if not rendering invisible. History has fundamentally transformed the material form of the river, and that material transformation carries embedded decisions, power dynamics and historical contingencies, making the river an archive. Without oral history and community testimony, that material evidence is illegible, uninterpretable.

The contemporary surface of a reservoir is linked to the world that was there before it was built and that has been “frozen” in the landscape by memories of gardens and their productivity, ferry crossings, homes and their locations, and experience of forced relocation. Tribal testimony is not just personal recollection to supplement what otherwise could be considered a complete governmental documentary record. It might document aspects of historical experiences not captured in official sources, such as federal project reports, treaty documents, survey documents, such as the emotional meaning of a burial ground, the time to rebuild a household or community, the loss of certain plants or locations of gathering that formed part of foodways and medicinal practices, or what the relocation meant in terms of relations among and within communities.

Narrators are restoring communities and places to public history and resisting federal efforts to exclude them in the process of naming submerged places and teaching younger generations where their ancestral homes had stood. Archival reading of the river is a process that must be done with care and consideration of ethics and boundaries. Some ceremonial knowledge, spiritual teachings, and sensitive historical information may not be subject to scientific documentation and disseminating to the public.

Tribal governments and recognized knowledge keepers have a legitimate authority on what kinds of information can be shared, with whom, and under what conditions. Rigorous scholarship thus is based on consent, and on an explicit recognition and celebration of difference between nations and communities, and a primary recognition of tribal sources as intellectual and historical authority rather than as an add-on to “official” archives (Smith 15). The process for conducting research must be organized from start to finish in a manner that will involve consulting with and respecting tribal sovereignty. The river archive is a way to bring together processes that are

ecological, legal, cultural and political and that are frequently separated and treated as distinct by federal bureaucracies and academic disciplines.

7. Standing Rock and the Return of Sacred Geography

The Dakota Access Pipeline protests of 2016-2017 thrust the history of the Missouri River, historically marginalized and erased from consciousness by colonial dispossession and environmental change, into unprecedented global public view. The Dakota Access Pipeline passes near the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation and crosses beneath Lake Oahe, a reservoir on the Missouri River. Tribal leaders and other water protectors then raised a number of overlapping concerns about the project: a spill would pose a threat to water supplies needed by people for drinking, irrigation and livestock. The project would damage cultural and sacred sites, including burial grounds and places of prayer; and the federal consultation process, required by law and facilitated by the Army Corps of Engineers, was inadequate to include tribe's contention (*Standing Rock Sioux Tribe* 8-9).

In the Tribe's public history documentation and statements, they explicitly named this river as Mni Sose, and tied their defense to the principle of Mni Wiconi, which translates to "water is life" and encompasses both biological needs and spiritual connection (Estes, *Standing Rock* 1-25). The encampments that were set up in opposition to the pipeline brought together members of several American Indian Nations-Oceti Sakowin Nations, as well as members of nations throughout the continent, and their non-Indian allies and supporters. The camps served as places of prayer and ceremony, direct action and resistance, media production, legal advocacy, and political deliberation. The participants referred to themselves as "water protectors", as opposed to "protesters", thereby conveying not only a negative sense of opposition to an individual pipeline project, but a positive sense of obligation to protect water for collective survival and spiritual connectedness. These were not solely instrumental, in the sense of being only about stopping the pipeline; they were also constitutive, as places where intertribal diplomacy, political education, and historical knowledge could be passed on from one generation to the next.

The pipeline controversy unfolded directly in the lands of Standing Rock that had been appropriated decades ago by the federal Oahe Dam, which created the lake reservoir, and which had changed the physical and ecological nature of the river (Whyte 320). The site was correlated to two different historical periods of energy development: the mid-twentieth century with the flooding of tribal land for hydroelectric generation and flood mitigation to communities below the dam, and the twenty-first century with the Dakota Access Pipeline's potential threat to the environment and spirit of the reservation. It is this continuity in space and time that accounts

for the ability of the movement against the pipeline to invoke and carry forward past experiences of dispossession, and for the significance of water in the movement as a site of ongoing sovereignty.

Scholar Nick Estes puts Standing Rock in the context of the Oceti Sakowin resistance to colonialism and dispossession (Standing Rock 1-25). The movement linked to contemporary treaty claims of consultation and environmental protection with previous treaties, such as Fort Laramie, and demonstrated the intrinsic connection between sovereignty and ecological protection. “Water is life” was not just a biological statement (water is a requirement for life), but a relationship and ethical obligation: the responsibility for protecting water was seen as a responsibility of the ancestors and a responsibility of the descendants, who did not yet exist. Camps were the site of the struggle, which was documented in real time using drone footage captured by the members of the water protectors, social media, tribal statements and press releases, court filings, interviews, and artistic productions, thus creating new archives.

Lake Oahe was at the same time a drinking water source, a federal reservoir built at the hands of previous dispossession, a site of pipeline risk, a place of prayer and a sacred relation.

8. Reframing Western Expansion, Infrastructure, and Sovereignty

A focus on the Missouri River radically recalibrates familiar histories and periodizations of the histories of the western United States. Water isn’t just a supporting cast to a story that is mainly about land; water is a key to understanding how colonialism operated and how indigenous nations responded. Federal planners and policymakers took action within a much longer history of systematically devaluing American Indian property rights, treaty promises, and political authority when the bottomlands of reservations were made available for inundation to support the federal infrastructure initiatives.

When called unfortunate side effects or costs of progress, the outcomes of dams—displacement, cultural damage, ecological transformation- are pushed out of sight and ignored, along with the governmental decisions and power relations that caused them. These are revealed as choices within the structures of colonialism and continued dispossession when attention is given to the river. Lastly, sacred geography and relational history can account for sovereignty in a more comprehensive way than law and jurisdiction. Relational sovereignty is not a substitute for legal sovereignty, but rather, it is an account of the cultural, spiritual, and social bases that constitute legal claims, and makes them real and playable in the lived experience of communities.

9. Conclusion

The Missouri River has been an eyewitness and a document of great historical transformation: of its agricultural villages and broad regional trade networks; of the steamboat, the epidemic disease and the military power; of treaty negotiation and violation, of flooding and inundation of reservation homelands; of thousands of river protectors gathering to defend the river and its peoples. These are not isolated historical incidents, but are events in the one history, united by the one geography.

Even though the physical shape of the Missouri was altered by the power of the federal state, state power did not eliminate its tribal meanings, knowledge systems or political authority.

Submerged places and broken promises have survived in public memory and in communities' memory of their historical responsibilities through oral histories, treaties, annual commemorations, cultural practices and political movements.

To invoke the river as witness is thus to make a historical and a methodological claim. The physical and ecological transformations of the Missouri's material, the changed channel, reservoirs, dams, and changes in the ecology, show who had the authority to reconfigure the land and water to suit their will, and who paid the price. At the same time, indigenous oral histories, testimonies, place-names and political movements exposed the official state narratives that were systematically omitted. To read these various types of evidence together, recognizing each as a legitimate source of information, is to bring American Indian sovereignty into the middle of environmental history, rather than to the margins or as a footnote. The duties to the river are not just for the living, but for future and past generations as well; the relationship of care and accountability binds past, present, future.

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