

River Relations

The Columbia rolls down from the mountains, a silver blue line in a valley cut by ice and rushing waters. Tributaries join the main flow and the river swells. People have lived along the Columbia for millennia, capturing its salmon, drinking its waters, using languages and arts to describe and reflect upon its centrality to life in the region. Depending upon their vantage point—their place, culture, gender, time and perspective, amongst other influences-- people have known this river, valued it and tried to make sense of it, differently.

One of the great challenges of meaning for large rivers around the world, but on this river in particular, arises from the relatively recent presence of dams which cross the main stem. Massive concrete structures wrapped around rebar and weighted into bedrock span this river at many points. They protect against floods, provide water for irrigation and calm the river for barge traffic. Some divert water to powerhouses where turbines convert the river's kinetic force into electricity. This river of energy flies across transmission wires, lighting homes and factories at a distance, producing aluminum here, plutonium there, and powering server farms to keep the internet working. These river uses in turn make others difficult. Salmon no longer migrate to the headwaters. Hatcheries have replaced spawning beds in many sections. Indigenous fisheries have been displaced.

The contemporary economic uses of the dammed river suggest why Canada and the United States have sought over time to optimize water flows to make dams on either side of the border as productive as possible. A Columbia River Treaty signed in 1961 and ratified in 1964 aimed to align divergent national interests so that competing uses of the river might be managed cooperatively. As Canada and the United States now contemplate cancelling and revising this treaty, people who live along this river and those who connect with it at a distance look to the river again for meaning. How should these dams be managed and governed? Who should benefit from the riches they bestow? What lives can be made along the river now that the river has been dammed and in many ways transformed? Whose voices should be heard? Whose imaginations can be enrolled in the making of a future river?

River planning invokes community participation and engages “stakeholders” often in creative and meaningful ways. But there should be room in our discussions about the governance of rivers for arts and the imagination. Rivers are not just economic instruments. Light reflects on them. Fish glide in and out of view beneath the surface. Rivers bear words as well as barges.

As an environmental historian who trades in texts and letters, archives and “fieldwork”, I have participated in *River Relations* as a curious interlocutor asking questions about photographs, paintings and poems informed by my reading of the river's history. I'm not sure what role my questions have played, but I know my perspectives on the river have been informed and changed by the insights yielded through artistic representation. Step outside your own vantage point as I have tried to do, and you may find some of your own assumptions challenged.

Matthew Evenden



Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

