Sawyer Seminar

Argument/Abstract—August 2014

By any measure, the Mississippi River is one of the great rivers of the world. But it is also one of the world’s most heavily managed large rivers and is, arguably, one of the most controversial. Advocates for revitalizing the river as a navigation corridor clash with activists intent on ecological restoration. Dozens of communities along its length see the river as integral to their community’s future, while no single federal agency or nonprofit organization has accountability for the whole river. In fact, no fewer than four networks or collective efforts of dozens of smaller groups are vying for a dominant voice in planning the river’s future.

The Sawyer Seminar sees these challenges as problems of incomplete, inadequate, or outdated narratives. Nearly all of the public discourses about the river are animated by urgency imposed by pending legislation, economic decisions, or planning frameworks. Few, if any, are self-reflective. If we were to summarize the bulk of the narratives of the Mississippi River into some common stories, they might look something like these:

- The River is a fragile ecosystem which must be protected from further industrial-based degradation and restored wherever possible.
- The River is a navigation system that is crucial to the Nation’s economy, and therefore warrants large investment to protect property, ensure timely commerce, and support jobs and prosperity.
- The River is “America’s River,” part of the national mythology at least since the writings of Mark Twain reached an international audience, and quite possibly before, symbolizing such American virtues and values as freedom, opportunity, and connection to nature.

All of these are true, and none of them are true. It can be argued that all of these narratives are fundamentally mythic, grounded in past conditions in order for proponents to use them to make sense of present and perhaps future dilemmas and challenges.

The Sawyer Seminar will not address these narratives directly, but will explore writings and images that suggest a new way of seeing the Mississippi, one that may be useful as communities grapple with grand challenges like climate change, changing demographics and transitions in community and regional economies.

Our fundamental question for exploration is this: Given that we cannot “go back” in any real sense to restore the ecology or the cultural meaning of the Mississippi River, what conditions on the river shall we highlight and value as we move forward toward a deliberately chosen “new nature” for the Mississippi and its basin? More pertinent for our immediate discussions, since as academics we have only indirect influence on the material conditions of the river itself, what are the narratives that can animate action by others toward such a new nature?

We’ll begin our exploration with brief excursions into the literatures of science, of “nature writing,” and of American Indian cultures before we take up texts that allow us to grapple with how we might best talk about the Mississippi River in an age termed the Anthropocene. We’ll close the seminar with a symposium that brings invited scholars to campus and broadens and extends our discussions.

The Sawyer Seminar kick-off week begins with a public lecture on Tuesday, September 9 at 7 pm in Northrop’s Best Buy Theater. Bi-weekly faculty seminars will meet Thursday mornings, 9-11 am in 125 Nolte, beginning September 11. The Sawyer Seminar symposium will take place April 8-10, 2015. Program updates will be available on the Institute for Advanced Study website (http://ias.umn.edu). Contact us at rvrstory@umn.edu with questions. The IAS is grateful to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for funding the seminar.