

## Cherry River: Art, Music, and Indigenous Stakeholders of Water Advocacy in Montana

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**ABSTRACT** The 2018 performance event, *Cherry River, Where the Rivers Mix*, designed by Indigenous scholar, Dr. Shane Doyle, a member of the Apsaalooke Crow community, in collaboration with artist Mary Ellen Strom, a founder of the nonprofit Mountain Time Arts program, endeavored to address the surging environmental problems associated with water in Montana. Drought and water scarcity impacts a diverse population, including Indigenous communities and the life of nonhuman plant and animals beyond the urban and rural populace of landowners, ranchers, and farmers. In 2021, the U.S. Department of Agriculture declared a federal emergency of drought disaster in a majority of Montana’s counties, and the recent disappearance of glaciers at Glacier National Park is of great concern. Doyle and Strom sought the opportunity to foster relationships and greater dialogue among regional constituencies, particularly among Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, and they were successful in raising awareness regarding the need for equitable water use and conservation. *Cherry River* brought an audience of local people to the banks of the Missouri River Headwaters, where the Gallatin, the Jefferson, and the Madison rivers converge to present a mix of American music—Crow and Northern Cree singing, Métis violin, Big Band Jazz. The sound of the music of the rivers, however, was the all-encompassing engagement for those who attended. Drought and environmental crisis impels us to think more broadly about the role of the arts and humanities in environmental studies. Can the arts and performance contribute a different model for environmental advocacy, acknowledge a different perspective for understanding ecologies, and therefore expand the transdisciplinary process for engaging in environmental studies? **KEYWORDS** drought, Montana glacier, water disparity, performance art, Indigenous ceremony, art activism, community activism, art in environmental studies, climate generation, climate anxiety, Metis music, big band jazz, water advocacy

### INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2018, the performance event called *Cherry River, Where the Rivers Mix* brought an audience of over 300 local Montanans to the banks of the Missouri Headwaters State Park in Three Forks. A collaborative project, created by Indigenous scholar Dr. Shane Doyle, a member of the Apsaalooke Crow community, and artist Mary Ellen Strom, a founder of the nonprofit Mountain Time Arts (MTA) program, the aim of *Cherry River* was to address the surging environmental problems associated with water in the Upper Missouri River Basin (UMH; see Appendix). The ongoing conditions of severe and frequent drought resulted in the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s 2021 declaration of a federal emergency in 31 of

Montana’s 56 counties because of drought disaster (City of Bozeman n.d.). Water scarcity impacts a diverse population in the UMH region encompassing the Headwaters and Three Forks (Boots 2014; Montana Drought Demonstration Partners 2015). This includes the Indigenous populations and the life of nonhuman plant and animals beyond the rural populace of landowners, mostly ranchers and farmers, also urban city dwellers, newcomers, and tourists lured to Montana’s big sky landscape. As scientist Jamie McEvoy and others (2018, 1) have noted, “water laws and drought plans . . . have historically been human-centric, failing to account for non-human water needs,” such as the needs of plants and animals. Since the formation of Montana’s State Water Plan Advisory Council in

1987, many different initiatives were created by separate stakeholders of water to confront the oncoming environmental emergency, and those like the Gallatin River Task Force represent different communities distinct from Indigenous stakeholders, such as the Apsaalooke Water and Wastewater Authority at Crow Agency (Doyle et al. 2018; Montana Watercourse 2015). Geologists warn that only 25 of the 150 glaciers surveyed since 1850s remain extant at Glacier National Park in 2017 (Casey n.d.; Montana EcoSystems Institute 2017). All of Montana's rivers and water sources derive from glaciers and snow pack.

*Cherry River, Where the Rivers Mix* sought to meet the challenge through entirely different perspectives, strategies, and methodologies. Dr. Doyle worked with Strom and Dede Taylor, also a founder of MTA, to devise a "critical and conceptual process" for using an art event to develop environmental advocacy through "community meetings and social gatherings, research in diverse archives, engagement with musicians and music director Ruby Fulton, conversations with historians, politicians, Native American scholars, geologists, attorneys, archeologists, water lawyers, conservationists and ranchers" (MTA 2018). Presented in three acts held over consecutive evenings on August 23 and 24, the event would use art and performance's form of public engagement to bring 300 members of diverse communities together for a unique shared experience centered around the sounds and sights of the converging rivers. With the river as the connective element, each of the three scenes presented a visual, aural, and phenomenological experience in the backdrop of nature amid the mixing of different types of American music, from Northern Cree singing to Métis violin to Big Band Jazz. The event succeeded to bring together the Indigenous community and the varied city and rural populace to convene at the place of the rivers, the important entity whose survival depends on the human management of water resources.

For this article, *Cherry River* serves as the case study for testing the potential of art and the efficacy of the performance medium as a viable means to address the environmental issues that affect disparate communities in southwestern Montana. The main concern is the divergent interests of water stakeholders, notwithstanding the efforts of the National Drought Resilience Partnership (NDRP) to develop the Montana NDRP Demonstration Project. Begun in 2013 as a partnership between

Montana's then governor Steve Bullock and the Obama administration, their mandate was to "work closely with the Governor, tribes, local communities and watershed organizations. These folks are on the front lines of dealing with drought" (Boots 2014). But to look at the published efforts of the Gallatin River Task Force in 2018, the unity remained implicitly unfulfilled since stakeholders continue to be separated by groups, representing the "Big Sky residents, local businesses, developers, public & private land managers, public & private water managers, property managers, realtors, nonprofits, conservation groups, and state & regional agencies" (Casey n.d.). It should be noted that the distribution of 98% of the surface water is diverted for irrigation to the Missouri River Basin's 474,000 acres of agricultural land, exemplifying the priority (Cravens et al. 2021). While the history is clear that colonial treaties, beginning with 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty's "complete abrogation of Indian land title between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains" would eventually reduce the "Crow Reservation to its present 2.3 million acres" in present-day Montana, the Indigenous initiatives, such as those by John T. Doyle for the Crow Environmental Health Steering Committee, acknowledge the need to find solutions for the deteriorating quality of the river water on their lands specifically (Doyle et al. 2020, 62; Lee 1934, 5). From *E. Coli* in drinking water to contaminated groundwater from dilapidated mines, Doyle recorded decades of experience "wrestling with the complex bureaucracy necessary to address water issues is common on Native American reservations" (Kaljur and Beheler 2017). As well, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai communities have been in the courts since 1979 to fight for Federal water rights in their lands (Walker and Baker 2013). The disparities related to water, descending from settler colonization, remain separated at the borders of the reservations.

The ability to bring these communities together through holding an art event at the location and shared space of *Cherry River* represents the effort to build consensus, knowing that Montana's historical record of the Crow, Northern Cheyenne, Assiniboine, Gros Ventre or Atsina, Blackfeet, Kootenai, Salish, Chippewa, and Cree is generally absented from greater public discourse (Library of Congress 1864). Acknowledging the colonialist past, the event also functioned as a symbolic renaming of the Gallatin river back to its historical place name, *Cherry River*, signifying the chokecherries referenced by all

Indigenous communities. Through the naming gesture, Doyle and Strom sought the opportunity to foster relationships among the diverse Indigenous communities as well as greater dialogue with non-Indigenous constituencies. Opening new lines of communication could support the goal of developing more equitable solutions for water use and conservation. Drought and environmental crisis compel us to think more broadly about the role of the arts and of the humanities-at-large in environmental studies, a category that increasingly extends beyond the scientific disciplines to encompass nonscientific fields of scholarship. The study of performance in the discipline of art history and global cultures provides a way to understand the affective emotionality of environmental issues in a public way—argued as a more empathetic approach to bring together disparate stakeholders.<sup>1</sup> As exhibited by *Cherry River*, the distinct ceremonial use of performance in Indigenous cultures expresses a completely different relationship with nature and the environment; meanwhile, performance among non-Indigenous artists in the United States has functioned as a form activism since the 1970s on behalf of environmental advocacy, awareness, and restoration. Through *Cherry River's* innovation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous forms of expression, this case study examines the potential that the project represents, the different model of connection among constituencies that performance offers, providing an example of the significant contribution that art can serve for environmental studies. In addressing the most pressing problems facing global society today, the qualitative analysis of *Cherry River* as an environmental case study can function to expand the field of environmental studies to include the arts, art history, and the humanities.

### CASE EXAMINATION

*Where the Rivers Mix*, translated from *Aashalaxxua*, is the place name long used by the Crow community to locate the “three forks of the big river,” where the three principal tributaries of the Gallatin, the Madison, and the Jefferson rivers converge at the headwaters of the Missouri river (Linderman 2002). At this dedicated place, Strom and Doyle presented the first act of the *Cherry River* program, begun at the ridge of Fort Rock overlooking the merging

1. It should be noted that the Art History and Global Cultures program at California State University, San Bernardino, is a new and growing field that breaks from the west/nonwest model based on European art history (Chin Davidson 2017).

Jefferson and Madison. In the late afternoon of August 23, 2018, audience members consisting of a diverse crowd of Bozeman vicinity residents, Montana State University students, local business representatives, and mostly groups of families, many from different Montana Indigenous tribes, assembled at the Headwaters State Park. I noticed children playing together next to a line of patrons in wheelchairs and a group of elderly being transported by bus from the Trident Factory parking lot nearby. Guides are assigned the task of leading people up the trail to the ridge on the side of the Madison and Jefferson, where they are met with a commanding 12-foot tall art installation in the form of chokecherry colored “dress,” staged to look like it is being worn by singer Shakira Glenn, a member of the Apsáalooke Crow (figure 1). The deep reddish purple color represents the chokecherries that grow in the region. For the event, this use of color symbolizes on many counts, especially on behalf of the objective to restore the place name *Cherry River*—or, in Crow, *Baáchuuaashe*—in order to replace the name *East Gallatin River* officiated by Lewis and Clark in 1805 (Doyle 2021). Descriptive naming such as *Baáchuuaashe* defers to the natural characteristics of the site, and the other two rivers, the Jefferson and the Madison, were once called Crooked or Horse River and Straight River, respectively, by many different Indigenous communities. *Cherry River* was a ceremony to enact the place name through an art event that was resonant with symbolism throughout. Strom and Doyle explain that the return to the Indigenous name of the river not only “honors and describes the numerous chokecherry trees growing on the river’s banks” but also represent its “sustenance for bees, birds, small mammals, and bears and venerates Indigenous history, the ecology of running water, and riparian systems in the Northwest” (Doyle 2021). Foregrounding the Indigenous conception, the emphasis on the place name and the ecological system aligns with McEvoy’s scientific advocacy of the needs of plants and animals that are endemic to this region. The Indigenous reverence toward a wholistic human and non-human ecology is vastly different from the general acceptance of the categorical separation of species in modern industrial life.

As Glenn stands waiting above the audience, the arriving viewers sit next to each other and also stand atop the overlooking hill while facing the river as the proscenium (figure 2). The sense of waiting in anticipation becomes the pervasive sensibility of a performance so unique that



**FIGURE 1.** Shakira Glenn speaking with audience members at the start of *Cherry River: Where the Rivers Mix*. Platform designed by Jim Madden and Mary Ellen Strom, costume by Alayna Rasile. Source: Photo courtesy of Jane Chin Davidson.

the audience knows not what to expect of the experience. Eventually, the sound of violins begins to waft from the small speakers placed on the knoll as the program has already started downstream. Barely visible are the four drift boats carrying the Fox Family Fiddlers (figure 3) who are playing in the Métis tradition (a Native-Celtic-French culture), and as they move up the Madison, their songs *Louis Riel Reel* and *White Buffalo* are being projected from the boats to the listening audience. Simultaneously, four other boats on the Jefferson can be heard as they transport the Brass Band including a trumpeter and a tuba player along with orchestral singers from the Montana State University's (MSU) School of Music. The convergence of these different types of music is somehow made mellifluous by the river's overarching, encompassing sound. When the boats arrive in front of the ridge, now fully in view, fiddler Jamie Fox stands up in her boat anchored against a sudden surging wind. She plays the

song *Sitting Bull*, while her violin's phrases are followed by Glenn singing them in echo. A complex sensory experience, the beautiful melody that emerges results powerfully from both the instrument on the water and the voice high up on the ridge. The audience hears the music from afar and from close proximity much like the experience with the performers, who the audience engages from afar and from so near. Performance art relies on the methodologies of dance and the use of bodies in proximity to create an experience. The first act ends with Glenn singing solo, *It's Been Days*, a mournful Native round dance cover about longing for one who is lost. I looked around at the audience who were visibly touched but who did not know whether to give applause or a reverent moment of silence during this finale.

For the second act, the audience is led down the hill to the riverbank, where they view the program continuing across the river on the inlet where the rivers converge.





**FIGURE 2.** Arriving viewers sit next to each other and also stand atop the overlooking hill on Fort Rock while facing the river as the proscenium.



**FIGURE 3.** Left: Fox Family Fiddlers drift boats on the Madison. Right: Brass Band drift boats on the Jefferson. Source: Photo courtesy of Jane Chin Davidson.

The Brass Band is playing Sam Cooke’s *A Change is Gonna Come* as viewers congregate (figure 4). Then, Shane Doyle sings a haunting solo, the AIM song representing the intertribal American Indian Movement. The Fox Family Fiddlers play the traditional Métis tune, *Empty Canoe*, the Brass Band plays the traditional spiritual septet, *Wade in the Water*, and the Choir concludes by singing *Without Water There Is No Life*, an original composition by Ruby Fulton, accompanied by the Brass Band. The audience standing at the river’s edge have become the chorus, singing along to the infectious tune

and lyrics “Without Water There Is No Life.” In every culture, connecting through singing is an important way to congregate and come together, give praise, and this moment arrives right before the program’s interlude presenting a recorded dialogue with Shane Doyle, Karin Boyd, and Jim Madden. Boyd is a geologist who works on “restoring river systems affected by channelization, dams, dewatering, bank armoring, fire, floods, floodplain development, agriculture, and mining” and Madden is a designer who uses art, architecture, and rural planning to engage the Montana community in creating



**FIGURE 4.** Audience is guided down the hill to the riverbank to view the second scene. Source: Photo courtesy of Jane Chin Davidson.

environmental solutions (Boyd 2021). Exemplifying the educational aim of the performance, the following transcript documents the spoken text that was interspersed with the chorus who sang the words of the refrain:

Bridge 1 (recorded audio of Karin Boyd, Shane Doyle, and Jim Madden)

*So we've just talked about thousands of years of Indigenous history, and I think the Indo-European history here, it's a snap of the fingers in comparison. And we all think about this place, we think about Lewis and Clark, and of course Lewis and Clark renamed everything. At this point, Gallatin was the secretary of war, and Madison and Jefferson were politicians . . . .*

Refrain 1 sung by the choir:

The Jefferson  
The Madison  
The Beaverhead  
The Big Hole

The Ruby  
The Gallatin  
The Cherry River, where the rivers mix  
Without Water There Is No Life

Bridge 2 (recorded audio of Karin Boyd, Shane Doyle, and Jim Madden)

*Without water, there is no life. It has its own life, that is much older than ours, and will go on for much longer than ours. It's the beginning of a new way of thinking about water, and how we're all connected to it, and how each and every one of us needs it so much.*

*In addition to this being a meeting place and crossing place for humans over centuries, it's also a gathering place for all sorts of animals—muskrats, otters, deer . . . all come through here and drink from the waters.*

Refrain 2 sung by the choir  
Muskrat



Otters  
Deer  
All come here to drink from the waters  
Tiny songbirds  
Ducks  
Beavers  
Geese  
Bison  
Raptors  
The eagles migrate through here

Bridge 3 (recorded audio of Karin Boyd, Shane Doyle,  
and Jim Madden)

*If you look in this direction, you see a massive watershed over the upper Missouri. The rivers up here include the Jefferson, the Beaverhead, the Big Hole, the Ruby, the Madison, the East Gallatin, the West Gallatin, and by the time we get here, all of the water from that entire upper Missouri is headed right down this notch . . . north, becoming the Missouri River. And so we really have this sort of tree of life above us, and we're staring down the trunk, heading downstream. And so everything is heading down the river, between power lines and the railroad and the road down towards Trident, and so it always just strikes me as this kind of giant funnel that we're looking down, with all this complexity above us and then this sort of nexus here of water and culture and electricity and powerlines and railcars. . . .*

Refrain 3 sung by the choir  
Water  
Culture  
Electricity  
Powerlines  
Railcars  
The Cherry River (6x)  
The Cherry River, Where the Rivers Mix

The finale of the second act presented three professional dancers, Melissa Dawn, Michael O'Reilly, and Elly Stormer-Vadseth, whose choreographed dance is showcased toward the end of the monologue as their bodily movements are synchronized with the music: first with their arms, then through a vaunted walking to and from, eventually gesturing in the water, kicking water, and finally diving into the river. Like any baptismal ceremony, their immersion into the water is also the audience's, who feel the wet and cold as their own. The

phenomenological function of performance art aimed to enlist the audience's full sensory perception, what the viewer *sees* can also be felt by their own bodies in an experience that was meant to elicit an empathetic perspective toward the problem that affects humans and nonhumans alike (figure 5).

For the third and final act, the audience is guided to the other side of the Headwaters Park to the east location and the banks of the Cherry River (E. Gallatin River). Facing the final stream of the three rivers at Headwaters, the audience congregates and waits on the Cherry River's edge, which is inside the park. Soon, the sound of the Northern Cree Singers performing their iconic *Cree Cuttin* song can be heard but not seen as they come up the river on four drift boats. The singers arrive to the shore of the park and subsequently disembark from their boats (figure 6).

Then, Grace King and her daughter Jaya King from the Blackfeet community dedicate a prayer to the river and to the four sacred directions of the earth, the creator, the land, and the water, they offered berries to the water, offered tobacco to the land, because tobacco is sacred. They explained to the audience their actions on behalf of Blackfeet culture (figure 7). The audience appeared reverent, quiet, and prayerful, clearly moved by this moment that would eventually lead to the closing scene. The rivers have long been sacred to Indigenous communities, and they are the source of ceremonial drinking water and thus vital to the spiritual process. The mood shifts as Steve Wood from the Northern Cree introduces his drumming group who presents a performance for mother earth and for cleaning the water and for taking care of the water. They are later joined by Chontay Mitchell Standing Rock who sings solo alongside their drumming. The event closes with a Sundance-like circle dance enlisting the whole audience to join in the dancing and singing. But the event is not entirely finished as the audience is invited to join in the evening meal of Indigenous food, prepared and offered to everyone in attendance.

## DEFINING PERFORMANCE AS A NATIVE AMERICAN PRACTICE

During the evening meal, the author interviewed Grace and Jaya, and husband Brian King, an artist and Blackfeet educator who has long been active in supporting health care in the Native American community (Cantrell 2014).



**FIGURE 5.** Dancers, Melissa Dawn, Michael O'Reilly, Elly Stormer-Vadseth, and Choir members with Shane Doyle. Source: Photo courtesy of Jane Chin Davidson.



**FIGURE 6.** Northern Cree singers playing while moving up the Cherry River (E. Gallatin River) arriving at the Headwaters Park. Source: Photo courtesy of Jane Chin Davidson.

Since the Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990 prohibits misrepresentation of Native American expression or any “product of a particular Indian tribe or Indian arts and crafts organization,” it was important to question how Grace and Brian saw the event, especially the finale which ended with the performative blending of Cree and Black-foot ceremonial expression. Grace felt that her part in presenting the prayer was powerful and people told her how much the ceremony moved them, the sense of seeing themselves as part of nature is a distinct form of identification that reveals how separate humans have become in

industrial life. Brian thought that *Cherry River* was different and not exactly an Indigenous ceremony, but he considered it to be a good thing for nonnatives to somehow create a way to come closer to the river, to the land, in a spiritual way. His view was that it is now up to artists, they must serve in the role of the spiritual, they “somehow create symbolic things, singing, dancing, that we do at Sundance, we come together in circles, it’s a good feeling, a good time, nice to connect to people . . . non-natives have lost touch with that.” King’s acknowledgment of the spiritual difference in Indigenous ceremony is important





**FIGURE 7.** Grace King and her daughter Jaya King from the Blackfeet community dedicate a prayer to the river and to the four sacred directions of the earth, the creator, the land, and the water, they offered berries to the water, offered tobacco to the land, because tobacco is sacred. Source: Photo courtesy of Jane Chin Davidson.

because of his deep understanding of the earth and the environment as sacred, an attitude that would change the current dynamics of the acceleration of environmental crisis in the Anthropocene. As explained by Jack D. Forbes of Powhatan-Renapé and Delaware-Lenápe descent, “ecology, then, in my interpretation, must be the holistic (and interdisciplinary) study of the entire universe, the dynamic relationship of its various parts. And since, from the Indigenous perspective, the universe is alive, it follows that we could speak of geo-ecology as well as human ecology, the ecology of oxygen as well as the ecology of water” (Forbes 2001, 290). Forbes points to the narrow definition of ecology under the norm of science with its emphasis on environmental “impacts” and yet “very seldom do we hear about *sacredness* or the rights of the earth” (LaDuke 1999, 2). When Grace King offers her prayer to the four quarters of the earth, she performs the ancient prayer for the relative, the earth as kin. According to the Anishinabe leader Winona LaDuke, “Native American teachings describe the relations all around—

animals, fish, trees, and rocks—as our brothers, sisters, uncles, and grandpas . . . These relations are honored in ceremony, song, story, and life that keep relations close—to buffalo, sturgeon, salmon, turtles, bears, wolves, and panthers. These are our older relatives—the ones who came before and taught us how to live” (Chin Davidson 2019). While *Cherry River* sought to visualize and enliven this understanding throughout the program, Brian had distinguished the different way in which its ritual is not actually based on this spiritual system of belief in the understanding of ecological kinship of all living things, of humans who are relatives of the earth. Montana’s problems with water can function to elevate this distinction to support a more wholistic kind of knowledge about sustainability.

#### DEFINING PERFORMANCE AS AN ACTIVIST ART PRACTICE

Since the 1970s, artists from around the world have implemented performance art as an activist practice, one

that emerged during the Civil Rights era in the United States. Often called environmental happenings, performative eco-art/eco-feminist art, these interactive events usually involved audience members in a range of environmental advocacies, from cleaning up polluted rivers to restoring and replenishing ecosystems. The focus on rivers and issues of water have been in the forefront of performance art activism and advocacy. For instance, artist Dominique Mazeaud's 1987–1994 performance *The Great Cleansing of the Rio Grande* was a personal 7-year ritual in removing garbage from the Santa Fe River in New Mexico. Likewise, Shai Zakai's 1999 *Concrete Creek* restored a streambed in Ellah Valley, Israel, that was long used as an industrial dumping ground (Chin Davidson 2020). While *Cherry River* was not a sited restoration project, the event shares affinity with performance art initiatives, such as Wu Mali's 2011 *Art as Environment—A Cultural Action at the Plum Tree Creek* in Taiwan and Ichi Ikeda's 2012 performative installation *Wheel of Hope*, part of the *5 Greenscapes* project in Tokyo (Bo 2016). Wu Mali's *Plum Tree Creek* began when the artist saw the stream she grew up swimming in turn into a polluted dump. Like Doyle and Strom in the Bozeman community, Wu mobilized the community in Taipei to rethink their relationship with the river, eventually developing a broader program of advocacy. She worked with others to create primary and secondary school programs, dance, theater, and performative events “so that people can rediscover and imagine the local” in a social movement that began with a series of breakfast gatherings (Shimizu 2012). *Cherry River's* strategy to unite members of the community has long been used by artists in other locations to create awareness.

In the year following the 2011 Tōhoku-Oki earthquake and tsunami and the Fukushima nuclear accident, Ichi Ikeda brought together 500 participants to create *Greenscapes* including *Wheel of Hope's* three life-sized vertical rings made from reeds grown in Tokyo. The performers who are also audience members were led by Ikeda to reshape the entire Shinobazu Pond in Ueno Park as they created a lotus pond with four “water paths,” each envisioning a different landscape. Scientists have documented the way that “green space functions to reduce air pollutants, to reduce temperatures, and to improve rainfall types,” which greatly affects global warming (Shimizu 2012). In his effort to confront the

Fukushima tragedy, Ikeda brought people close together, conveying comfort in solidarity, he recognized how greenscapes could engage humans in an embodied communal action. Most importantly, the artist saw the need for emotional catharsis, shared grief evolved into a constructive sense of belonging as the audience worked together to create the green space. Aligning with Indigenous concepts of human kinship with the earth, the artist is known for his 1990s explorations involving the human's “primary relations to water.” He has long advocated for people to “realize that water, source of our lives, is the medium to move beyond borders, everyday customs, histories and cultures, in order to realize the profound exchange between human beings and environment” (Shimizu 2012). While Ikeda's recognition of this relationship still differs from Indigenous kinship between humans and ecology, the importance of this integrative approach to environmental consciousness cannot be denied.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

*Cherry River* serves as a case study for testing the efficacy of the arts in communicating the complex problems of water and drought in Montana and how human and nonhuman life is affected. By creating a different ecological experience that involves both Indigenous and non-Indigenous performance, the role of the arts in environmental studies can be further assessed. To this end, the qualitative analysis of performance engenders two distinct contexts that can foster a more wholistic approach to environmental studies. First, *Cherry River* exemplifies the long-used art/humanities strategy for bringing diverse communities together through the nonprofit organization's hosting of the performance art event. MTA functions as an organizing forum for many of the different stakeholders in Montana, from the Association of Gallatin Agricultural Irrigators to the Montana Wetlands Council. The efficacy of MTA was the nonprofit organization's ability to convene “a diverse group of participants, including Indigenous scholars, a geologist, local politicians, lawyers, ranchers, and an archeologist” (Madden 2021). Their partners include the City of Bozeman Department of Public Works, Association of Gallatin Agricultural Irrigators, Greater Gallatin Watershed Council, Gallatin Local Water Quality District, and the Gallatin Valley Land Trust.

Begun in 2015, MTA's collaborations with Indigenous artists and researchers included Northern

Cheyenne member Bently Spang who plays an active role in MTA's programming, especially the 2017 *Waterworks* events such as *Wetlands*, whereby the artist developed a four-part series involving multimedia images of aquatic habitats (for plants, animals, birds, and fish) and guided tours of the wetlands in the Gallatin valley. Other *Waterworks* events included *Gabriel Canal*, a sound and light installation accompanied by historical photographs in addition to performances by a local choir and guided tours of ranch irrigation systems. One of the most ambitious *Waterworks* performances was *The Symphonic Body/Water* led by Ann Carlson's artistic dance, a movement-based orchestral work performed by 54 water workers from the Gallatin area, such as participants from the Apsaalooke Crow community, Sariah and Joshua Stewart, and Delano Falls Down. Among Carlson's dancers were young Dakota Access Pipeline protesters Delroy, William, and Leroy Pine. In the year after the initiation of the 2016 Dakota Access Pipeline protests, the solidarity movement on behalf of water rights extended from the Standing Rock Indian Reservation to the demand for fair water distribution in Flint, Michigan. The year 2016 was literally a watershed year for coalitional protests on behalf of water advocacy for underrepresented communities.

*Cherry River* reflected this moment of coalitional strategy in the arts, combining both Indigenous ceremony and elements of performance art's environmental activism. *Cherry River* represented an innovation of both kinds of performance practice as every audience member recognized the primacy of the river's music, the river's sound united *Cherry River's* blending of Crow and Northern Cree singing, Métis violin, and Big Band Jazz. Such a unity represented coalition, not only among Montana's stakeholders in water conservation but also the entity of the river. The challenges are distinct for each jurisdiction of water, region, state, and country as humans confront environmental problems like drought, and in Montana, its colonial past is reflected in the disparities around the authority of water not to mention the greater loss of homeland. Under Montana law, however, every student in public school must be taught "the unique and important cultural heritage and contemporary life of the Indigenous tribes of the state," as phrased by Doyle (2019). This legislated education constitutes the potential bridge to move beyond the inequities from the past in order to build consensus around the urgent ecological problem of

drought, especially the diminishment of the glaciers that feed the watersheds of the UMH.

*Cherry River* effectively created a human-to-ecology connection as viewers experienced the rivers through the musical encounter. "Without water, there is no life" is a contemporary chant, a type of spiritual engagement that could change the way that the audience viewed their own relationship with the river. The blending of different types of American music represented the idea that there are many different cultural contexts and systems of belief connected to nature and human care. Through bringing disparate members of the community together, the dialogue among *all* stakeholders that Strom and Doyle created becomes essential if indeed the environmental issues of drought and water in Montana can actually be addressed in an equitable and viable way.

The second context that *Cherry River* informs is also related to social practice. As environmental disasters—droughts, tsunamis, floods, and wildfires—become more and more ordinary in occurrence in locations all over the world, the increased likelihood that humans are personally affected led researchers to study the impacts on the Climate Generation, those born from the 1990s onward who are considered as the first to experience an entire lifetime under the influence of climate change. The Fukushima nuclear accident that followed the 2011 Tohoku-Oki earthquake and tsunami illustrates the environmental disaster scenario that scientists connect to melting glaciers (such as those in Montana's Glacier National Park), since rising sea levels are thought to have impact on tsunamis (Li et al. 2018). While scientific knowledge is very important, establishing the reality of climate change, it has also perpetuated the effects of climate anxiety, the sense of doom and hopelessness, leading to depression (Ray 2020). The periodization of the Anthropocene's "human-dominated geological epoch" attributing climate change to human intervention adds to the overwhelming sense of responsibility and guilt that humans in this epoch undertake (Crutzen 2002, 23). And according to Sarah Jaquette Ray, climate anxiety affects a generation that is also the most racially and ethnically diverse in U.S. history. The *Cherry River* project aimed to make more people aware of the water problems in Montana in such a way that it would affect every participant, resident, and stakeholder to act on behalf of conservation and environmental sustainability.



As noted by Grace and Brian King, the strategy succeeded to engage residents to view themselves as actually part of the ecosystem rather than as completely separate entities in industrial life.

The profound effect that ecological disaster has on humans as well as on the environment is not usually studied together because the research disciplines, even in the broad scope of the sciences, diverge based on their individual subjects and objects of discourse. The arts and humanities, however, as exhibited by the *Cherry River* case study, engages analysis on the Indigenous belief in the human-ecology kinship under the philosophical premise of representation in the arts. This kind of research can provide a more wholistic perspective for environmental studies, whereby the analysis of environment issues could be integrated to study impact on *all* humans, plant life, animal species, and ecological sites. In conclusion, *Cherry River* exhibits the role of art and ceremony in native and non-native cultures as one of activating faith, empathy, care, and emotion. Indeed, if the problems of equitable water in Montana were to be addressed, the *entire* community had to see the need, which *Cherry River* fulfilled by initiating the dialogue among the diverse stakeholders. The immersive quality of performance's engagement with vision and touch constitutes a methodological study of emotion elicited from music, song, sound, and dance. Climate anxiety and the scenario of disaster require different kinds of approaches to understanding their meaning and impact. The creative solutions of performance and the arts have the potential to implement the emotional labor not only to raise awareness of the dire situation around water in Montana but also the foresight to understand the oncoming disasters that will affect human and nonhuman life. Already, performance artists have done that work and they are creating ways to support community in the advent and aftermath of environmental crisis.

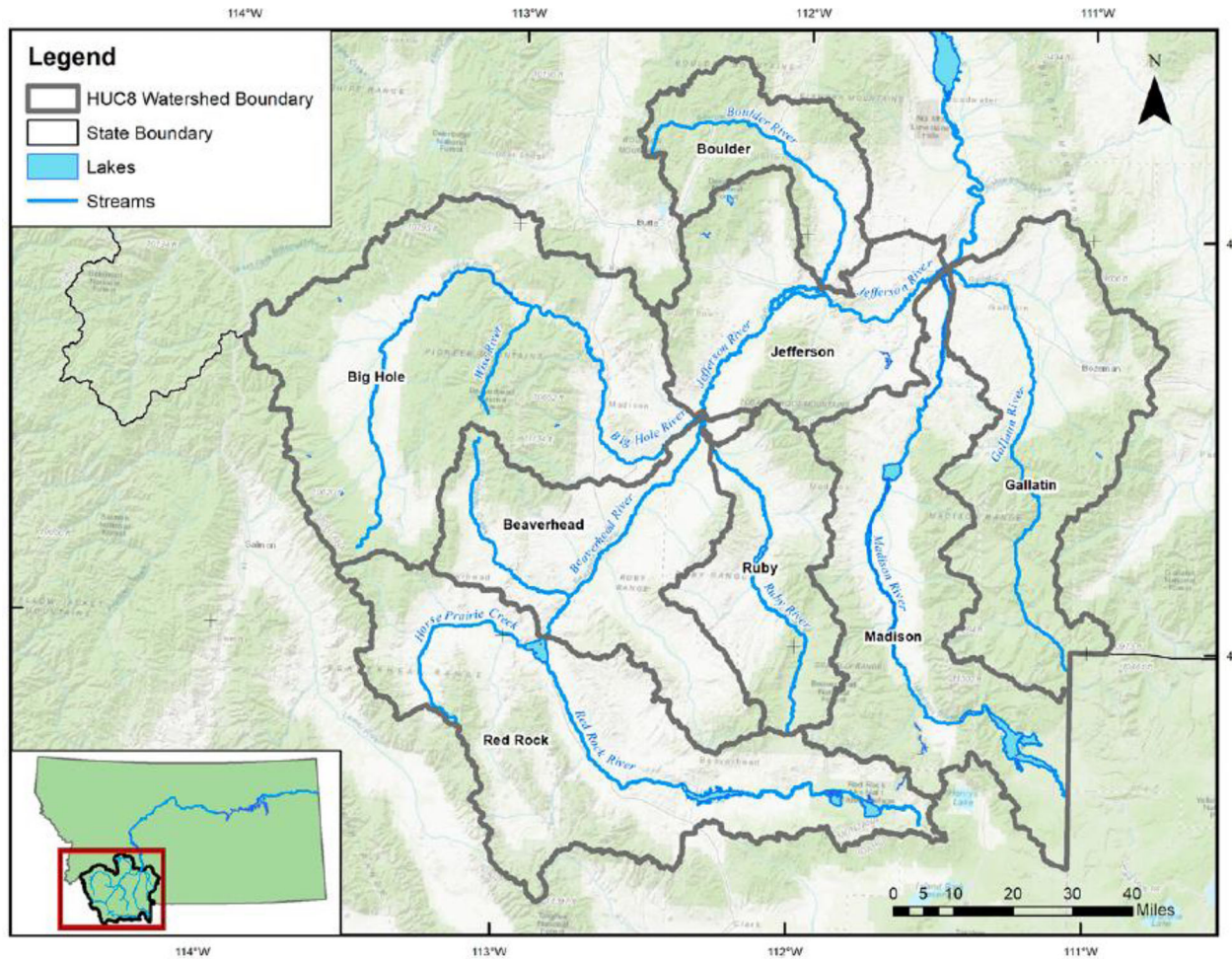
### CASE STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Locate the Gallatin, Jefferson, Madison rivers on the map of the Upper Missouri River Basin (UMH) and identify the inequity in respect of

the stakeholders of water authority, resources, and drought. Would the renaming of the *Cherry River* change the viewer's perspective in respect of the psychological idea of removing the name of the colonizers in Montana?

2. Explain the overall aims and objectives of the performance, *Cherry River: Where the Rivers Meet*. What was the historical context in relation to the exigencies of the 2016 moment of the Dakota Access Pipeline protests and the Flint, Michigan, water rights protests?
3. In regard to the *Cherry River* project, what kind of community building could be accomplished through organizations like the MTA and their use of diverse types of cultural music and performances? Can you identify the different artistic forms adopted by Strom and Doyle?
4. Can you place yourself as an audience member at the three different scenes of *Cherry River*? Are you able to visualize the experiences offered by music, singing, and dance in each of the three acts, and what was the point of placing the viewer at the convergence of the rivers while listening to the diverse types of American music?
5. Can you explain the tenets of Indigenous knowledge regarding human and nonhuman life? Would it make a difference if people saw the river, animal, and rocks as their kin, their relative in the spiritual sense?
6. What can the engagement with art and music provide in the scope of "climate anxiety" and the sense of hopelessness from environmental crisis? What is the potential of the arts in creating innovative solutions for advocacy, awareness, and communications?
7. Can art, music, and performance make a difference in understanding and addressing environmental crisis; through the emotionality of art, does *Cherry River's* engagement offer the possibility of bringing people together around these issues? Why is that necessary?

## APPENDIX



Map of the Upper Missouri Headwaters basin (Courtesy U.S. Geological Survey). The UMH is a hydrologic unit code 8 (HUC8) equivalent to a medium-size river basin.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author is an art historian who researches performance art and environmentalism as a distinct method of representation and as an activist form of expression. Her investigations focus on contemporary artists in the global context working in the performance medium since the 1970s up through present-day. She attended the *Cherry River: Where the Rivers Mix* event at the invitation of Mountain Time Arts coordinator Dede Taylor. Appreciation goes out to many who helped with the research for this essay, including Dede Taylor, Mary Ellen Strom, Shane Doyle, Grace, Jaya, and Brian King. The author wants to thank and acknowledge the support of the non-profit environmental organization WEAD: Women Eco-Art Dialogue (<https://www.weadartists.org/>).

### COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests exist.

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