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Christopher Morris. *The Big Muddy: An Environmental History of the Mississippi and Its Peoples from Hernando de Soto to Hurricane Katrina.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. xii + 300 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-531691-9.

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Defining the Liminal Landscape

The Mississippi River is really a vast, mobile wetland, Christopher Morris explains in *The Big Muddy.* Neither channel-bound river nor standing swamp, its valley is a vast artery that pulses with flood and ebb, a muddy throughway existing someplace between water and earth. As conceptual conceits go, the Mississippi as mud is an apt and especially powerful one (in additional to possessing a great deal of technical merit). Morris defines the fundamental tension of history throughout the Mississippi River basin–at least following Euro- and African American colonization–as an inability to conceive of the valley as a naturally wet place. In these visions, floods, even if annual and predictable events that lasted months on end, were disasters that muddied fundamentally dry land.

The Big Muddy follows centuries of human efforts to conceptualize this landscape of mud as a place with firm barriers between water and land, and then make these conceptions reality. A few examples: early French explorers repeatedly failed to locate the mouth of the Mississippi out of an inability to imagine a vast, multi-channeled delta. Rice, and then indigo, tobacco, and sugar encouraged settlers to drain, divide, and levee the landscape. The rise of New Orleans as a commercial and cultural center created an urban environment reliant on permanently dry land, while spurring ever-stronger levees up and down the river. King cotton relied on the exclusion of floods even more than did rice, yet eventually depleted soils no longer subject to the renewing tide of spring inundations. Professional engineers staked their reputations on defining, firming, and then reordering the boundaries between wet and dry. By the late twentieth century, the dichotomy of river and bank was so ingrained that alternate understandings were all but inconceivable.

The book's title is a bit deceptive. *The Big Muddy* is actually a history of the lower Mississippi Valley and its tributaries rather than a study of the river system as a whole, and is thus decidedly "southern" in its perspectives. Still, the book is broader in scope than most existing environmental histories interested in the river, which tend to focus either on New Orleans or particular rural regions, such as the Mississippi-Yazoo Delta. In conceptualization the book brings together such studies as Ari Kelman's intellectual history of nature in New Orleans, *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans* (2003), with more material environmental histories, such as Craig Colten's *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wresting New Orleans from Nature* (2005) and Mikko Saikku's *This Delta, This Land: An Environmental History of the Yazoo-Mississippi Floodplain* (2005).

Morris's use of sources is particularly impressive. The standard letters, diaries, and memoirs are present in abundance, but, particularly in the latter chapters, he also draws heavily on a variety of scientific sources, including the work of ecologists, geologists, hydrologists, geographers, and natural resource managers. Environmental historians often pay lip service to the importance of using interdisciplinary sources, but mastering a wide-ranging body of professional literature and translating its disciplinary terminology into palatable history is no easy task; Morris does it with a grace that masks the herculean research evident in the endnotes. It is also noteworthy that *The Big Muddy* pays more than just passing attention to Native American interests in its analysis of the valley's environmental history. The first four chapters all explore Native American land use, their visions of the river and its valley as a place to make a living, and the changes to these systems wrought by contact.

The shadow of declension hangs over the majority of Morris's narrative, but he does offer some hope for the future in the final chapter and conclusion. He notes that recent trends suggest that many watershed residents are at least considering a return to blurrier boundaries be-

tween river and land. Catfish and crayfish farming in the Mississippi-Yazoo Delta and Louisiana suggest the possibility of agriculture that might work with the river's hydrology rather than against it (though at present crayfish farming is much more diverse and sustainable than catfish aquaculture). And declining human populations–and thus political power–in many river counties make it more politically feasible that the levees-only agricultural lobby will succumb to people interested in letting the river reclaim portions of its former floodplain, at least in the impoverished Mississippi-Yazoo and Arkansas Delta counties. Ultimately, as Morris explains with a nod to the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina, all efforts to dry the valley are temporary, though this is certainly of little reassurance to the valley's current residents.

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