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Kansas City, Missouri, is the preeminent city on the longest river in America, but you would never know it from talking to the inhabitants, not because of their usual modesty but rather their forgetfulness of the Missouri. In the self-proclaimed City of Fountains there is no spiritual link between them and it and only a distant awareness of its connection to their iced tea, potted geraniums, and baptized babies.


Only blocks away from the confluence of the Missouri and Kaw (Kansas) Rivers stands the Muse of the Missouri, one of over 150 fountains in the Kansas Cities. For perspective, only Rome, Italy, has more. The Kansas Cities’ construction of fountains dates back to the Progressive Era, when the city made water more accessible to horses and residents without plumbing. Over the twentieth century, as public water became ubiquitous, the fountains became artwork and status symbols. The rivers literally ran through the cities—fountains included—because urbanites were reliant on the rivers for drinking water and sewerage. The Muse of the Missouri depicts a fisherwoman, her net abundant with fish, symbolizing the river’s service to the city. It was installed in the 1960s—a time when the Kansas Cities were abandoning the river districts. The rivers became invisible to Kansas Citians, even though they hide in plain view—in fountains, as drinking water, and under expressways. In the 1990s, a period of renewal, Kansas City, Missouri, appropriately
branded itself the “City of Fountains,” each fountain a celebration of the river that has given the city life.

This book is about how intertwined the city and river are and how, despite the difficulty of seeing the Missouri, the river and city are actually in a long-term, intimate relationship. This book aims to make the river more visible and to explore the reasons the city came to ignore its most important asset. If you aren’t from Kansas City, or you’ve never visited, then know that this story is replicated in many cities and on many rivers. What makes Kansas City unique is that it’s an extreme example of a river city. I hope that, by the end of this book, readers will want to see—literally and symbolically—the Missouri River, or whichever waterway is at the heart of their lives.

I use the term urban environment to describe a physical and cultural middle ground that avoids the human/nature dichotomy. It is easy to conjure the difference between the proper nouns Kansas City and Missouri River, but I wish to draw your attention to the built environment that mediates. The river-city relationship can be explored through infrastructure, fountains, a water purification process, a well-plumbed suburban neighborhood, and a concrete company owned by a political boss—all of which have acted as arbiters between people and the river. A sewer, for example, required technology and human labor to convert a clay deposit into a pipe that blends the city and river and lies at the heart of urban function. The location and service of that sewer was influenced by political power.

The river has been (and is) ubiquitous; its waters have been found in pipes, toilets, public bathing pools, breweries, blocks of ice, and fire-hoses—even the streets were paved with sand dredged from the river. The city has been present in the river as human and industrial waste and as engineering. What we have is a complex relationship in which the social matrix is constantly and inseparably interacting with the ecological system, and together they make the urban environment.

The Kansas Cities consist of Kansas City, Missouri, and Kansas City, Kansas, as well as dozens of other smaller cities that make up the metropolitan area. Sometimes I generically refer to the collective “Kansas City” or cities, but when the evidence refers to only one of the cities, I am specific. Kansas Citians used to fondly refer to their particular place with
the phrase “at this bend, atop these bluffs.” The physical characteristics of the landscape provided the base for a river city. We know that earlier heartland cities grew along rivers—like Cahokia on the Mississippi, Etzatnoa on the Arkansas, and the Mandan villages on the Missouri. William Gilpin, a nineteenth-century booster, believed that the American West would develop a “Centropolis” and that Kansas City, due to its “natural advantages,” would be it.¹ (Spoiler: Chicago won.) Early historians rooted the origins of Kansas City’s greatness in its geography, topography, and natural resources.³ Later in the twentieth century, historians pointed to cultural explanations for Kansas City. The best historical understanding of this river city melds environmental and human agency.

Through the nineteenth century, the Missouri River was a liquid freeway for tribes, traders, and explorers, and Kansas City served as the “jumping-off” point to overland trails. The Kansas Cities have been a regional hub in the continent’s breadbasket since the Civil War. Despite the decline of steamboats and the rise of railroads and then automobiles, political and
economic interests in the Kansas Cities continued to promote river transport. It amounted to a century-long obsession with managing the river for navigation and flood control. During the twentieth century, these leaders led the campaign to enlist the federal government and billions of public dollars to engineer the Missouri River in support of the industrial economy. These powerful Kansas City interests are the entity most responsible for reshaping the Missouri River, especially in the lower basin.

The Missouri River has been too narrowly managed for the last one hundred years; the current shape of the river is not working for the majority nor to the benefit of human and environmental health. The river is controlled for barge navigation, which is not essential to the economy, whereas the river is essential to the region’s health and to the daily function of the urbanized Missouri basin. Millions of people rely on the river for drinking water. This fact was the basis of the 2016 protests by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, who worried that the oil in the Dakota Access Pipeline would put the tribe's water supply at risk as it passed under the Missouri. Although urban and environmental concerns now receive more attention in river management, even today, public health is not the priority but a competing interest.

Cities of the early twentieth century figured little in the shaping of broader resource policies although they shaped landscapes and health delivery systems (like municipal services) within their own jurisdictions. The Missouri and Kaw Rivers were the most important elements of Kansas City health, yet local public health officials had little power over river management or water quality. Ultimately, the way local, state, and federal governments did (or did not) work together was decisive in determining human and environmental health. Because they lacked control upstream, individual cities and states could not guarantee high water quality, nor would they sacrifice and cooperate with each other. This bind caused Progressive Era public health officials (then called sanitarians) to call for federal aid to coordinate and oversee environmental and public health issues. Not until later in the century would federal policies (like the Clean Water Act) and agencies (like the Environmental Protection Agency) play an increasingly important and positive role in health.
This urban environmental history adds the complicating layers of multiple political jurisdictions and expands beyond city limits to better see the river as a force. Political boundaries complicated the watershed because the river respected no city, county, or state lines in its run from the Rockies to the Gulf. Like many rivers in the United States and world, the lower Missouri forms the border of several states and in so doing reinforces the idea that rivers bound, not bind. I show that the river is not a border—it is the connective matter between places and people.

Today, residents, researchers, and visitors undoubtedly notice the socioeconomic segregation in the metropolitan region. This stark urban geography has historical roots. The racial and class inequalities of the Kansas Cities have been reinforced by an urban system that unevenly distributes public resources, infrastructure, and risk, all of which relate to the rivers. The cities’ urban innards—like drinking water and sewerage—have always been tied to the river. Political boundaries were a reinforcement tool for the Kansas Cities. In general, the city and river are organized to keep power flowing to the powerful. Environmental justice activists connect social and environmental issues and make the power flow visible, seeking to interrupt it. By pointing out the high incidence of environmental risks in poor neighborhoods and those with people of color, environmental justice activists argue that urban resources and good health should be more equitably distributed. They are in agreement with those officials who thought that public health was the most important attribute of the river, and who were concerned with the equitable distribution of the essential resource of water.

The Missouri River is a captured resource, managed in order to serve an industrial economy, but the river's most important function is health. A healthy river sustains wetlands that reduce flooding, enrich bottomland soils, and provide wildlife habitat for species that are commonly hunted or are uncommon and protected by the Endangered Species Act. A healthy river protects the millions who rely on it for drinking water. Water quality matters more than whether or not the Corps of Engineers can barge gravel to maintain its levee system or the occasional barge loaded with corn can get to New Orleans. Kansas Citians, midwesterners, and all urbanites
design their economies through planning, policy, regulation, and daily choices. If we want a healthy river city, then we need to design and develop an economy that supports good human and ecological health.

Flood events have been far too influential in resource management and policy. This has been detrimental to both city and river. Take note that a flood does not best characterize the relationship Kansas Citians have with the Missouri River, though that may be the first thing that comes to mind. Floods showcase exceptional ways the river affected the city, but ordinary uses—like slaking thirst or flushing a toilet—best represent the river-city relationship. These daily uses are so central and mundane as to be invisible until disrupted. The river and city did more than meet at the banks—they mingled. This makes the invisibility of the river, the historical amnesia that leaves the region’s residents alienated from its innards, all the more fascinating. Looking beyond the river’s identity as a flood threat, I wish to reframe the river-city relationship as one of intimate intertwining.

The primary way this book evaluates river-city intermingling is through health. An (un)healthy body is a tangible way to examine urban environmental interaction. The majority of Americans are urban; the city is the environment we know best. Yet there has been an American cultural tendency to see cities as the antithesis of nature—as unnatural. That is not a very accurate or useful way of understanding our urban surroundings. The river, as it flowed through infrastructure and entered and exited bodies, has always been at the core of public health in Kansas City.

Not all bodies in Kansas City are equal. Because social structure is a determinate in health, those Kansas Citians who are advantaged (for example, white middle-class professionals moving into newer neighborhoods far south of the river) and those who are disadvantaged (working classes and minorities who work in industry and live in older homes nearer the river) experience public health differently. Race, class, and gender influence exposure to risk, sanitation, healthcare, and access to city services. Therefore, disparate socioeconomic groups have had differing relationships to the Missouri River. The intersection between people and their environment is historically evident to us through public health reports and typhoid fever cases.
Similar to the human body, the city has a circulatory system of underground arteries that nourish and cleanse the city. A city’s infrastructure must deliver resources to a dense population within a limited space. Urban historian Martin Melosi relays the wonder of the city’s body when he writes about the “pipes, conduits, and wires creating a hydraulic, pneumatic, and electrical maze below the streets” that are “integral components in a dynamic environmental system.” Lewis Mumford called this physical and technological system the “invisible city”; I call it the “urban innards.” Drinking-water flow lines and concrete sewer pipes are extensions of both residents and the river and constitute the intimate river-city relationship. Next time you walk around your city, look for the iron manhole covers. They are evidence of the network of urban innards that connect you to upstreamers and downstreamers. In Kansas City, manhole covers are emblazoned with the fountain logo of the waterworks. Ultimately, I hope that readers—wherever they may live—will see the river in the city, and the city in the river.

The late nineteenth-century Kansas Cities underwent explosive population growth and began a formative era of city building. This era gave the city its shape and established the indissoluble connection of the two cities while revealing the different political characters of their respective states. The urban innards built at the turn of the twentieth century would form the basis of urban environmental interactions for the coming decades, and in that the river was critical. While this work is not meant to be a comprehensive urban history, it lends a new angle to our understanding of the cities. It reassesses urban politics and city growth by integrating insights from recent social histories. Unlike other works, this one integrates the river and recognizes the importance of relationships—from neighborhoods to the basin. The resource of water was a powerful tool to enable wealth and health for some, and deny it to others.

Just as the city cannot be understood without the river, the city can’t be understood without both sides of the border. Kansas City, Missouri, has received a fair amount of historical attention, but there is little on Kansas City, Kansas, or the Kansas Cities—a problem for understanding the region historically. Though politically divided, the Kansas Cities have been an economic, social, and environmental unit, and their history
cannot be dissected neatly along the state line. The bias toward Missouri obscures economic and social issues. In the early twentieth century, the means of production—the industries and diverse workforce—were more apt to reside on the Kansas side of the river bottoms, whereas the owners and wealth tended to concentrate on the Missouri side, above and away from the river districts. Slighting the Kansas side historically has been a convenient way to ignore socioeconomic disparity and the costs of industrialization. Daily, people have traversed boundaries for jobs, recreation, and shopping, making the border less relevant. This bistate social geography has been inextricably tied to the Missouri and Kaw Rivers. Lastly, the environment has not adhered to political boundaries; the contour of the bluffs and bottoms, the flow of water, and movement of microbes have all permeated the state line.

The state boundary that bisects the city has had a far-reaching and sometimes negative impact. While the political boundaries have been stable, the social geography has shifted. One hundred years ago, Missouri residents held most of the wealth. By the late twentieth century, city, county, and state lines further accentuated a socioeconomically fractured city. Today, the wealth has shifted to the Kansas side—particularly suburban Johnson County, which is among the nation’s wealthiest counties. Whereas Kansas City, Missouri, boomed in the early twentieth century, today the city proper is losing population compared to its outlying suburbs. This “hollowing out” has contributed to segregation, sprawl, a loss of economic base, an educational crisis, and other costs associated with a loss of density. Though socially divided throughout the century, the Kansas Cities have functioned as an environmental whole—the best evidence is the common water supply. Rather than continue as an exaggerated example of the way political borders undermine public health and resource management, this study suggests that a focus on commonalities, like human and environmental health, can transcend boundaries and aid metropolitan governance. The Kansas Cities showcase federalism’s challenge to protect health. States have eagerly sought federal aid for economic development but have played the states rights’ card when it comes to protecting human and ecological health.

At the turn of the century, the Kansas Cities were a politically progressive
place—the most progressive in Missouri and the least progressive in Kansas. The cities contributed to the regional and national flavor of progressivism. During an era of reform, from the 1890s to the 1930s, Kansas City, Missouri’s urban growth was shaped by the presence of one of America’s longest-running urban political machines. The Pendergast brothers, first Jim and then Tom, controlled voting blocs and influenced the city’s purse strings. Municipal services and city building set the machine’s power in concrete—literally. City departments like streets and water became infamous nests for political favors and corruption, and Pendergast’s own investments included local construction companies. Though never elected to office, “Boss” Tom Pendergast would go on to hold a commanding seat of power in the state of Missouri during the New Deal.

Social reformers were another powerful influence in Kansas City, usually counter to the machine. Reformers displayed their white, middle-class values as they sought to steer the populace, notably through public health campaigns and institutions. Economic interests and boosters also focused on aspects of urban reform. Thus, at the center of political struggles were resources like river water. At times, these disparate interests aligned to “Make Kansas City a good place to live in,” as the Kansas City Commercial Club advocated. This phrase was the progressive watchword of twentieth-century Kansas City. Opinions differed about how to achieve a “good place”; nevertheless, most could agree upon the end result: a city that was “up to date.” The 1943 Rodgers and Hammerstein Broadway musical Oklahoma! features a song sung by Will, a young rural man who traveled to Kansas City:

Ev’rythin’s up to date in Kansas City.
They’ve gone about as fur as they c’n go!
They went and built a skyscraper seven stories high—
About as high as a buildin’ orta grow.
Ev’rythin’s like a dream in Kansas City.
It’s better than a magic-lantern show!
Y’ c’n turn the radiator on whenever you want some heat.
With ev’ry kind o’ comfort ev’ry house is all complete.
You c’n walk to privies in the rain an’ never wet yer feet!"
This popular description of Kansas City reveals its reputation for being well planned and progressive, a definition tied to the built environment, municipal services, and indoor plumbing.

The Missouri River has a rich environmental and social history, but it has been overshadowed. Although it received attention during the bicentennial years of the Corps of Discovery, compared to the storied Mississippi, the Missouri continues to surprise the unsuspecting. John Steinbeck described with surprise his first encounter: “Someone must have told me about the Missouri River . . . or I must have read about it. In either case, I hadn’t paid attention. I came on it in amazement.” Fans of the Missouri are fond of pointing out that it is North America’s longest river, it is the world’s fourth-largest river (it used to be third—engineering shortened it), its basin comprises 40 percent of the continental United States, and the Mississippi River incorrectly assumes the title at the confluence near Saint Louis. Technically, it should be the Missouri River from the Continental Divide in the Rocky Mountains, all the way to the Gulf of Mexico.

The Missouri River of today little resembles the wide, shallow, meandering, and unpredictable river that Lewis and Clark wrote about in their journals. State and federal governments have tried to put the river in a straitjacket. During World War II, a multiple-use plan was adopted, commonly referred to as the Pick-Sloan Plan. Combining the US Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation, Pick-Sloan technocrats dramatically altered the landscape and how residents interacted with the river. Six large mainstem dams were built in the arid upper basin to hold back spring flow for irrigation and downstream flood control. In the lower basin, from Sioux City to Saint Louis, a series of levees and wing dikes straightened, narrowed, and deepened the channel to make it ideal for barge navigation. This engineering organized the river to produce profits but not to protect health. The river ceased to function as it had historically and a loss of habitat and wildlife followed. Most astounding is that, despite the costly straitjacket, navigation is negligible and flood risk is exacerbated.

Two visions of the Missouri River have competed throughout the twentieth century. I call one the Economic River. Its principles, policies, and
management were organized around a capitalist model of economic development and focused on interstate commerce. I call the other vision the Healthy River. It was held by sanitarians and, later, environmentalists. This vision was organized around society and public health; later in the century the vision embraced environmentalism and ecosystem restoration. Readers will note that, similar to these dueling visions of the river, health and wealth could be competing ideologies. This stripped-down dichotomy pits the Economic and Healthy Rivers against one another. The profit of economic development came at the risk and cost of health, whereas prioritizing environmental and public health dampened economic growth and profits. In this history, though we see that the Economic River had an advantage, the river’s history runs nearer the middle; neither vision of the Missouri fully materialized, nor was health inimical to wealth.

Most histories about the Missouri River are political and economic works interested in engineering and the Economic River. There is a paucity of consideration for social and urban aspects or the mundane uses of the river, meaning that people have been missing from the river’s history. Notable exceptions are literary travel writing and nineteenth-century history, when heroic exploration dominates. The river appears in Kansas City’s past but is absent in its present and future, as if nature no longer influences modern humans in their urban endeavors. But all this time, the Missouri is there, vital to the city and its citizens. “We’ve turned our backs on it, but we’re looking over our shoulders at it now,” as a modern river rat put it; “maybe we should take another look.”

* Since the late twentieth century, the river has seen a resurgence of interest. Worldwide, we see how rusty industrial cities like Glasgow, Bilbao, and Portland, Oregon, have worked to revitalize their waterfronts. These vital urban landscapes reorganize the relationships residents have with rivers and watersheds. Kansas City is amid this process of revival. Despite the continued importance of the rivers in their daily lives, most postwar Kansas Citians had not been near the Kaw or Missouri and knew very little about them. They associated the river bottoms with floods, poverty, and pollution. The river districts were once inaccessible to all but the hardiest souls who didn’t mind crossing the tracks, traversing the industrial
district, and putting in on a mud bank. Slowly, with public support, federal legislation forced cities and states to address water quality and abate pollution. Urban redevelopment has recaptured valuable real estate and brought people nearer the river. Recreationists have also made demands for access and young people are thirsty for knowledge about their surroundings.

From the bluffs today, we can observe the basic elements of this study. With this bird’s-eye view, the three historic locations of the Kansas City waterworks are visible along the rivers. Surveying a wide swath, the observer sees watersheds creasing the urban landscape. Most streams have been buried underground as sewers, but topography and gravity reveal where the main lines are laid. The raw sewage outfalls no longer exist, but the round basins of one of the city’s seven wastewater treatment facilities is visible in the West Bottoms, as is the roaring outfall from the plant. The
Blue River’s treatment plant has a white stack standing as a beacon of the technology and infrastructure that mediates the river-city relationship. In sum, from the bluffs, we can still see that the river runs through the city.

To investigate these topics, I have organized the book in concentric circles of relationships, from the local to the regional. The chapters broaden in time and place, from the city to the bistate metropolitan region and related boundary-crossing social issues, and finally to the lower Missouri River basin. In short chapters that punctuate—the way floods interrupt—I examine the 1903 and 1951 floods and then will conclude with the 1993 flood. I hope to illustrate how the lens of environment can help us see the river and city not as distinct entities but as a system with feedback loops. Concentric circles, from the neighborhood to the watershed, show everyone has lived upstream and downstream.

To illustrate the importance of the river-city relationship, and to present the main themes in this book, I begin locally, with a view from the Kansas City bluffs during flood time. The flood of 1903 is a cultural benchmark—it punctuates public memory and was a common way to perceive river-city interaction. A flood illuminates both the well-known dramatic and the lesser-considered daily uses of the river, all in a span of weeks. By looking at this cycle of flooding in 1903, we will see that the function and physical layout of the city was predicated by waterways, that the river was central to public health, how social geography correlated to environment, and how the river-city relationship was mediated by power and social status. City dwellers need to know that urban environments have sometimes been managed to reinforce socioeconomic inequity.

The following chapters discuss the history of the city and river and, to help tell the story, they highlight a few people who left behind a paper trail. By following the lives and careers of engineers like Robert E. McDonnell and public sanitarians like Dr. Samuel Crumbine, we can better understand formation of the urban innards and the process of the river running through. These were well-educated Anglo-Saxon men who successfully shaped their world. Driven by civic-mindedness, McDonnell became wealthy building water and waste infrastructure in the region and he wielded his political power to achieve progressive goals. Crumbine was a medical doctor who became a Kansas state public health official. He was
at the cutting edge of applying progressive ideals to public health governance and took his ideas and talents to the national level. In the postwar era, Melvin Hatcher and Murray Stein advocated for water quality and, from the local to the national level respectively, struggled to protect it with weak regulatory tools. In the final chapter, we come to more recent times and follow Vicki Richmond, an organizer of river cleanup events. After leaving behind her corporate job, she has devoted the last twenty years to getting Kansas Citians, especially the young ones, down along (and sometimes in!) the Missouri River. Each of these people is part of a tradition that believes in a democratic public health, connects human and environmental health, links the local and regional, and, lastly, each saw the river as a common force that accomplishes all this.

The city cannot be seen in isolation. We must connect local neighborhoods to the bistate metropolitan region, and then to the multistate watershed in order to understand the complex social and ecological system of which the Kansas Cities have been a part. Everyone was an upstreamer; everyone was a downstreamer. The river has connected people and placed them in wider environmental and social relationships—particularly through public health. The relationship between the river and the city is a simplification of a complex system, one with cycles and feedback loops, which allows us to connect micro and macro. No single resident of the basin was isolated; every person within the city, and every city along the river, was located downstream or upstream from everyone else. In using the river as that which ties everyone together, we gain a social and ecological microcosm. The river becomes a metaphor, a method of understanding complex processes and relationships, to unite the social and environmental.
A resident of Kansas City [Kansas] is under the control and supervision of four governments. . . . But the one which touches his daily life most closely is the city government. When he washes his face at the bathroom faucet, when he turns on the electric light in his home or office, when he takes his family for a picnic in one of the parks, when he turns in a fire alarm or calls the police, he is in contact with the city government. The paving of the streets, the sidewalks, the sewers, the drives, the public swimming pools. . . .

Kate Cowick, The Story of Kansas City