

Introduction to *Political/Hydrological*:
A Watershed Re-mapping of the Continental United States

I grew up in suburban Philadelphia, just a few blocks away from the city limits. As a young person, the closest thing that I had to an experience with nature was at the private swim club where the only bodies of water were lined in concrete and treated with chemicals, which really isn't very different from the present state of many rivers. Looking back, I imagine that my experience splashing in the pool was probably remarkably similar to my country counterpart's dip in the local swimming hole. Still, at that time I didn't know where tap water came from or where toilet water went, and I definitely would not have understood what the word "watershed" meant.

Now, living in central North Carolina where rural land is rapidly being swallowed by suburbia, I can't get through even one day without thinking about these river networks that flow over, beneath, and through the land. Since moving here, I have spent weeks at a time camping on the banks of the Haw River, headwaters of the Cape Fear, which flows eastward from piedmont to coast and into the Atlantic Ocean. This river is dammed about twenty miles south of my home to form Jordan Lake, a reservoir used for recreation and drinking water. Its contents run via the local water treatment plant to my apartment's three faucets, showerhead and toilet tank, and the water that exits my drains returns back to the Haw's streams. In this way, I am essentially hooked up to the river through a circuitry of plumbing and sewers, extensions of the local creeks that my dog and I walk along daily. Therefore, my water use habits affect the river's health, my health, and the health of every other organism within this ecological system.

It has taken me almost twenty-seven years to recognize these vital connections that so many of us take for granted. In recalling my personal transition from ignorance toward active awareness I am compelled to ask, "How does a person's consciousness change in terms of his or her relationship with the natural world?" It is this mental evolution toward holistic thinking that drives me to make my artwork, in order to both deepen my own understanding as well as encourage such a transformation in the hearts and minds of my audience.

In *Political/Hydrological*, I have imagined and illustrated a world where water is the basis for America's social structure. In this river-centered vision, watershed divides act as State boundaries, allowing citizens to locate themselves within the river networks upon which they depend instead of the arbitrarily designed political districts in which we currently envision ourselves. By giving priority to rivers, not as resources to be exploited, but as an integral part of the health of a social/biological system, I hope that this project might provoke dialogue and stimulate change around how we construct both the physical and social landscapes in which we live.

As an artist in the postmodern age, I have been told that it is no longer possible to make anything unique. Instead of feeling discouraged, I am excited by the possibility for discovering connections between what I create and that which others have created before me. I happened upon one such link this winter while reading *Cadillac Desert*, Marc Reisner's seminal work about the history and management of water in the western United States. I was reading on an airplane, headed for Albuquerque to show some early versions of the images from *Political/Hydrological* when a reference to one of John Wesley Powell's writings jumped off the page and nearly jolted me out of my seat. I

could not have been more delighted to find that Powell, one of America's most famed naturalists, explorers, and public servants had proposed the very same ideas at the turn of the twentieth century that I am posing with my current artwork. Upon returning home, I rushed to the library in search of the original document, which was published in *Century Magazine* in 1890. Powell's words are clear and beautiful, and I have included them here to help express what this project is really all about,

In a group of mountains a small river has its source. A dozen or score of creeks unite to form the trunk. The creeks higher up divide into brooks. All these streams combined form the drainage system of a hydrographic basin, a unit of country well defined in nature, for it is bounded above and on each side by heights of land that rise as crests to part the waters. Thus hydraulic basin is segregated from hydraulic basin by nature herself, and the landmarks are practically perpetual...Such a district of country is a commonwealth by itself. The people who live therein are interdependent in all their industries. Every man is interested in the conservation and management of the water supply, for all the waters are needed within the district. The men who control the farming below must also control the upper region where the waters are gathered from the heaven and stored in the reservoirs. Every farm and garden in the valley below is dependent upon each fountain above...Thus it is that there is a body of interdependent and unified interests and values, all collected in one hydrographic basin, and all segregated by well-defined boundary lines from the rest of the world. The people in such a district have common interests, common rights, and common duties, and must necessarily work together for common purposes. Let such a people organize, under national and State laws, a great irrigation district, including an entire hydrographic basin, and let them make their own laws for the division of the waters, for the protection and use of the forests, for the protection of the pasturage on the hills, and for the use of the powers. This, then, is the proposition I make: that the entire arid region be organized into natural hydrographic districts, each one to be a commonwealth within itself for the purpose of controlling and using the great values which have been pointed out. There are some great rivers where the larger trunks would have to be divided into two or more districts, but the majority would be of the character described. Each such community should possess its own irrigation works; it would have to erect diverting dams, dig canals, and construct reservoirs; and such works would have to be maintained from year to year. The plan is to establish local self-government by hydrographic basins.¹

Powell's vision for the western United States was ahead of its time. After years of overpopulation and development in these desert landscapes, where the price of water is on the rise and groundwater stores are quickly vanishing, it might finally be possible for people to see the sense in placing rivers at the center of our social construct. The following pages present a visual depiction of how the Continental United States might look if we followed such an organizing principle. Here's to the hope that someday we will.

¹ deBuys, William, ed. *Seeing Things Whole*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2001.