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## Editor's Review of "Muddy Thinking... An Immersive Account of Urban Reclamation"

Mallika Sardeshpande  
mallika.sardeshpande@gmail.com

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### Keywords

book review, political ecology, riparian systems

Randolph, N. (2024). *Muddy thinking in the Mississippi River Delta: a call for reclamation* (270 pp). University of California Press.

Muddy thinking in the Mississippi River Delta starts off as a bold endeavour to tell the story of a river delta through mud. Not the water, not the land, but the mud. The book is, per the introduction, a culmination of years of undergraduate and graduate work by the author. This makes the prose dense with detail in some places, but that's par for the course when you're paddling in the world's fourth-largest river catchment. There is not a word wasted, however, as the opening pages succinctly summarise the nature and extent of the social-ecological system the book will delve upon, in all its brazenness. This includes a look at the archaeology, engineering, geology, history, and political ecology of the Mississippi River Delta. If that sounds like a lot, it is, and the author handles the complexity and intersections with flair. Much of the happenings in the book centre around the city of New Orleans, making it a valuable reflection on urban ecology.

If you ever have trouble sleeping, try counting the ox-bows and tributaries on the Mississippi River. I have spent a considerable amount of time fascinated with the course of the river, visualising the landscapes through which it flows. Indeed, the cover of Muddy thinking is an intricate and colourful Fisk map depicting the meandering of a stretch of the Mississippi over time. For a river so continuous and long, one would expect significant lore, mythologies, and rituals dedicated to its awesomeness. The beginning of the book traces odes to the river from popular literary and musical works (e.g. Twain 1884) to the ancient monuments and cultural relics found in the Delta. We learn that channel avulsions led to the river altering its course radically every 1,000 years or so. We meet the various Indigenous Peoples who inhabited the dynamic floodplains of the river, feeding off the seasonal bounty of animals, and themselves migrating when the pestilence of flies and mosquitoes surged. It then winds back at considerable speed to the first human alteration (a mile-long canal cut to bypass an ox-bow) in 1831, the thousands of flood control structures (cutoffs, levies, spillways) erected by 1927, and the 50,000 dams that dot the Mississippi today.

The book draws on the human/nature divide as a key force driving the politics of the region, particularly the foundation upon which New Orleans was built. For example, perennial outbreaks of contagious diseases like dengue, malaria, and yellow fever plagued inhabitants of New Orleans for at least a century and half until the completion of a draining plan in 1905. The position at the time was that high rainfall combined with miasma in the marshes fostered breeding grounds for disease, and that draining the land using pipes and pumps would curtail it. This drastic drainage plan had the effect of not only drying up the soil, but opening up more land (previously too waterlogged) for building of houses and roads. The economic boom that followed was accompanied by the same issues of waste management (Hendrickson et al. 2019), socioeconomic segregation (Nijman and Wei 2020), and flood risk (Rentschler et al. 2023) that we witness in cities worldwide, a hundred and twenty years on. Up to a century ago, man's complete mastery over nature was an ideal for humankind to aspire to. Today, we term the excessive fear or dislike of nature biophobia (Soga et al. 2023), and are increasingly recognising

the importance of allowing nature to perform some ecosystem functions unhindered (Seddon et al. 2021, Lebrun et al. 2021).

From mapping to management, the Mississippi River became a pivotal project of nation-building for the United States government, and the Army Corps of Engineers in particular. Whereas local levee boards were delegated flood control on the river previously, the 1850s saw the Corps undertaking the building and maintenance of grey infrastructure en masse across the country. This state-sanctioned approach was deemed scientific, and used the same technical protocol across sites, refuting the use of marshes and lakes as natural infrastructure (Ellet 1853) to divert floodwaters. You read that citation right - the evidence and the proposition for blue-green infrastructure was presented, but it was not taken up by the Corps, who favoured hard engineering solutions. This brings us to the relationships and rhetoric surrounding science, policy, and practice (Gluckman et al. 2021). The use of science as a singular fact shorn of socio-cultural considerations constitutes risks, as observed in the grey infrastructure campaign of the 1850s as well as the pandemic crisis in the 2020s (Greenhalgh and Engebetsen 2022). Power relations mediate the translation of science to policy and practice, and one would hope that intergovernmental bodies like the IPCC and IPBES that have emerged this millennium wield enough power to drive planetary policy in desirable directions. The onus to implement these policies locally would be on cities, the epicentres of human activity and governance (Freeman et al. 2023).

The author takes serious issue with the fact that capitalist interests and mechanisms underlie the efforts to manage and restore the New Orleans coastline. It is argued that there is an inherent conflict in valuing the working coastline, consisting of mainly of petrochemical industries, and the non-extractive ecosystem services afforded by this very coastline, using the same dollar. Further, the very same industries that claim to create economic opportunities for people are not held accountable for their role in the rising incidence of cancers and respiratory illnesses among the residents of the region they operate in (also known as Cancer Alley). There is an undercurrent of righteous indignation at corporations being allowed to 'offset' their polluting extractive activities, while being funded and supported with tax breaks to do so in the name of restoration or rebuilding (from natural disasters). Yet all is not doom and gloom, as we are introduced to the voices resisting this status quo. The city offers people avenues to unite against exploitation, to seek recourse, to work towards ecological justice and multispecies coexistence (Pineda-Pinto et al. 2021).

The narrative of the book engages the reader with some evocative mudscapes along the lines of follow the thing technique (Hulme 2017). This perspective is quite effective in portraying mud as a passive subject of capitalist commodification (e.g. hunting and logging, oil wells), as much as it is an active shaper of the commons (e.g. waterways, arable and habitable land). The political rhetoric around draining the swamp is illuminated by historical context - such endeavours have birthed large swathes of farmland and cities around the world, and they continue to do so (Bagheri-Gavkosh et al. 2021). The extent and speed of what happened in Louisiana is astounding. The nexus between climate disasters, sea level rise, and fossil fuel extraction takes on a whole new depth when one reads about the tens of thousands of

orphaned oil wells that precipitate land submergence and severely curtail the adaptive capacity of wetlands to sequester hurricanes. This is the scale at which intergovernmental bodies ought to push for ecological restoration with greatest urgency. No amount of job creation or clean energy arguments (e.g. Boehm et al. 2015) can atone for the devastation routinely and repeatedly wreaked upon these landscapes.

The author artfully intersperses eventful and genre-spanning chapters with short, reflective, personal vignettes. The technically and philosophically intense prose is also laced with some poetic relief:

Do bed-load particles leap along the bottom like ballet dancers across a stage, or do they slide along in a layer like maple syrup across a stack of pancakes or roll along like bowling balls?

The book ends on a speculative note, inviting readers to envision sustainable trajectories for the future. For the Delta, for New Orleans, and for the landscapes and cities we inhabit. Perhaps the answer lies beyond deconstructing the problem, and in working towards fragments of futures we personally believe in and collectively aspire to. In keeping with the mud, I hope that one day, tourists to the Delta may be able to bathe in the mud without fear of contamination (e.g. Choi et al. 2015); that the Indigenous Peoples and residents of the Delta may honour their sacred connection with the wild mud (e.g. Sudarsana et al. 2021). Because ultimately:

[Wildness] arcs beyond the Anthropocene to an unfolding that collects and layers its t rash and chips into a planetary compost like a "mad gardener".

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