



WORKING LIVES ON THE MISSISSIPPI AND VOLGA RIVERS

Nineteenth-Century Perspectives

By the early nineteenth century, the Volga and Mississippi Rivers were enclosed within the national boundaries of Russia and the United States, respectively¹. In addition to being national rivers—exempt from the transboundary issues that characterize other major rivers—the rivers share several physical characteristics. Part of the world’s major river systems, both are similar in length as the Volga begins at the Valdai Hills, located above Moscow, and courses through a diverse Russian landscape for 2,193 miles before discharging into the Caspian Sea. The Mississippi’s headwaters can be found at Lake Itasca in northern Minnesota, where the river begins its 2,350-mile descent until finally reaching the Gulf of Mexico. The Volga River is the longest river in Europe, while its largest tributary to the East, the Kama, is longer than the Volga. The Mississippi is the second longest in North America with its major tributary, the Missouri River, which is the longest, extending an additional one-hundred miles. Both the Volga and Mississippi, due to their lengths, are surrounded by varying landscapes. In the case of the Mississippi, after leaving the headwaters, the river is soon surrounded by imposing bluffs that dominate the Upper Mississippi before expanding into the rich Yazoo Delta and finally weaving through the bayous and swamps of the Lower Missis-

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Mississippi Valley. Forested landscapes line the Upper Volga before the river widens and nurtures the expansive steppe lands and finally ends with the Astrakhan delta lands.

In addition to distinct landscapes, the rivers are physically very different rivers—the Mississippi is known for its unpredictability and frequently shifting riverbanks, its rapid currents and sheer volume of water, all of which pose a challenge to navigation. In contrast, the Volga, affectionately known as *Matrushka Volga* (Mother Volga)—implying a gentler stream—while expansive and wide hindered travel through its shallows, testing those transporting goods. Despite differences, the Volga and Mississippi Rivers informed riverine cultures that shaped a nationalist ethos in the emergent nation states of Russia and the US during the nineteenth century. For each river, the unique landscapes became proof of the nation’s exceptionalism, shaping a nationalism that prevailed in the politics of western nations. Poets, artists, and writers extolled the beauty of the Volga and Mississippi Rivers; framing their praise in nationalist rhetoric. According to one historian, by the early 1800s, when Americans determined “to establish a national culture” they looked to “the landscapes of America as the basis.” (Sears, 1994:4). For example, in the US, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow captured American sentiment in his famous poem, “Evangeline” (1847). In one well-known stanza, describing Evangeline’s descent down the river, Longfellow wrote: “It was the month of May. Far down the Beautiful River, / Past the Ohio shore and past the mouth of the Wabash, / Into the golden stream of the broad and swift Mississippi” (Longfellow, lines 741–743). Scenery unique to Russia or the United States represented an alternative to other scenic vistas such as the long-revered European Alps. Or in the case of Russia, the poet Constantin Balmont immortalized the Volga’s place in Russian history, comparing the Volga to other classic rivers.

Water is a mirror of beauty that is eternally created in our inexhaustible, inexhaustible universe. And glory to the country that has found a mighty river for its face. There is no Egypt without the Nile, there is no India without the Ganges, there is Russia among the greatest and most beautiful countries, because it has the Volga. (Balmont)

As steamboats replaced the bulky flatboats, travel on the rivers increased as tourists experienced their national rivers, rhapsodizing upon the beauty found in each. For example, the Mississippi was captured in the following praise from one well-heeled traveler in 1855:

The trip up the Mississippi to St. Paul [...] was unalloyed enjoyment [...] It is, indeed, a panorama of unequalled yet ever-varying beauty, and the world may be safely challenged to show its like. The “Father of Waters” has no peer among all the mighty rivers which furrow the surface of the globe. (qtd. in Busch, et al. 2004: 12)

The Volga received equal praise, such as the following penned by Russian journalist Vasilii Nemirovich-Danchenko in 1877: “The Volga is an endless poetic song, an endless epic poem. Nature is such a poet and artist that [the Volga] only has especially striking places and no prosaic details” (Ely 2003: 674). Thus, for many living during these times (and subsequent generations), a narrative emerged valorizing the Mississippi and Volga Rivers, seeing in each river a unique beauty, a contribution to a national epic and becoming the lens through which major rivers were perceived.²

Concomitant with the celebratory aspects of each river were the long-standing practical roles each played in the economies of the US and Russia. As a national river, the Volga with its two major tributaries, the Oka and Kama, served as Russia’s economic highway and one of the principal means for Russian commercial success beginning with Ivan IV (the Terrible) and his expulsion of the Mongols in 1552. The river gained importance under Peter the Great in the eighteenth century when he moved the capital to St. Petersburg, prompting construction of canals to link the capital with the Volga and its commerce. As Russian merchants dominated the Volga, the riverfront cities of Nizhnii

2. The literature on landscape in the context of nationalism is a growing field. Several scholars who explore riverine landscapes or “riverscapes” and their influence on the national narrative include Tricia Cusack, *Riverscapes and National Identity* (2010, 2019); Peter Coates, *A Story of Six Rivers: History, Culture and Ecology* (2013). For works that explore the Volga and Mississippi Rivers, see Christopher Ely in *This Meager Nature Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia* (2002); Thomas Ruys Smith, *Imagining the Mississippi River Before Mark Twain* (2007).

Novgorod, Iaroslavl, Astrakhan, and Rybinsk became the principal trading centers enabling Russian trade to the East and Europe. Some of the most valued commercial goods transported by boat on the Volga included Russian furs, salt, grain, timber, hemp and iron. By 1830, almost 24,000 ships travelled the Volga. (Vino-gradov 2015) Further nineteenth century estimates, testifying to a robust economy, documented that merchants in the most popular trading city, Nizhnii Novgorod, located at the confluence of the Oka and Volga Rivers, realized a revenue of thirty million rubles. Nizhnii Novgorod hosted an annual trade fair that became the largest in Europe.³

For the Mississippi River, merchants in the southern states bordering the river experienced unprecedented growth in the nineteenth century facilitated by the nation's major transportation artery and its two major tributaries, the Ohio and Missouri Rivers. With the arrival of steam in 1811, paired with an increase in cotton production, the river supported one of the richest economies in the world. Put another way, in the early 1800s, an estimated 5 million pounds of cotton were shipped from the Mississippi Valley compared to 200 million pounds by the 1830s. The city of New Orleans, which had grown almost ten times since 1810, became one of the busiest ports in the US as southern cotton fed the British textile industry. By 1860, steam traffic on the river was robust as over 3,500 boats arrived at the New Orleans levee annually, compared to twenty barges in 1817. For both rivers, "improvements" that would enhance commerce were continuous throughout the nineteenth century. While the Volga underwent ongoing improvements through the construction of canals linking major Russian cities with the East and West, the Mississippi River

3. For further discussion regarding Imperial Russia's use of the Volga River in the transport of commodities, see Robert E. Jones, *Bread Upon the Waters: The St. Petersburg Grain Trade and the Russian Economy, 1703-1811* (2003). The hydrology of the Volga River, particularly around the area of Nizhnii Novgorod, is considered by Catherine Evtuhov in *Portrait of Russian Province: Economy Society, and Civilization in Nineteenth-Century Nizhnii Novgorod* (2011). Evtuhov's work is well-known for its characterization of Russian provincial life apart from a Soviet Union context. The Volga River and the annual trade fair at Nizhnii Novgorod played significant roles in her portrayal of an active, enterprising province.

was buffeted by two-thousand miles of levees before the Civil War to improve navigation and deter flooding. Both rivers served utilitarian roles, facilitating the transformation of Russia and the US into modern nation states. Even with the advent of the railroad, the Volga and Mississippi Rivers remained integral to the economic health of each country as the principal arteries for the internal movement of goods for most of the nineteenth century.⁴

Often overlooked in the abstract retelling of each river's revealed place in the national discourse or in the pragmatic statistics of an economist, however, are the stories and folklore of laborers who produced the robust economies and shaped the imagery of each river. Unlike the cultural merchants of the nineteenth century who marketed the aesthetic attributes of each river, those laboring on the river possessed a multi-dimensional understanding of the river. They depicted a river that might be demanding and nurturing while also aesthetically pleasing. For example, the burlaki or barge haulers in Russia, portrayed through song a Volga River that was a harsh taskmaster. In one of their songs, they pleaded with the river to ease their suffering.

Volga, my little mother, Russian river,
spare the strength of a barge hauler, my dear!
Ekh, my legs are tired, the strap is tight on my chest,
order the wind to blow, my dear [...]
Volga, my little mother, sorrowful river, my benefactress,
don't forget an old burlaki. (Ziolkowski 2020)

For African Americans working on the Mississippi River during the nineteenth century, their songs also depicted a river that was exacting. In the "Roustabout Holler," two of the refrains lamented.

4. For an early history of commerce on the Mississippi River, see E.W. Gould's *Fifty Years on the Mississippi or Gould's History of River Navigation* (1889). In recent years, scholars have revisited the institution of slavery in the context of global capitalism. Their findings indicate that the cotton industry in the Mississippi River Valley was a very lucrative market that contributed to the South's emergence as one of the profitable capitalist economies in the nineteenth century. Slave labor facilitated the South's economic successes. See Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (2013); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (2014); Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (2014).

Oh, Po' roust-a-bout don't have no home
 Makes his livin' on his shoulder bone.
 If yo' shoulder bone gits so' this time,
 Git you a little sody an' turpentine.
 I left my home in '84,
 And I ain't never been dere no more.
 Oh-h-h-h
 Po' roustabout don't have no home,
 Here today and tomorrow gone. (Botkin 1955: 571-572)

In both instances, the intersection of labor and the environment, specifically rivers, resulted in perceptions that differed significantly from those of nineteenth century travelers, writers, poets and artists. Working on the river produced mixed responses; alternating from the reverential, to resentful to wary. For example, in another popular Russian barge hauler song, “Dubinushka” or “Little Club,” the men sung these lines in time to moving the barges. (The song began as a song related to the forest but the burlaki adapted it to describe their labor and sung it in time to moving the barges.)

Yo, heave ho, heave ho!
 We will uproot the birch tree, we will uproot the leafy tree [...]
 We go along the shore, we sing a song to the sun [...]
 Hey, hey, pull the rope harder!
 We sing our song to the sun [...]
 Oh you, Volga, mother river, wide and deep [...]
 Oh, you who are dearer than everything to us, Volga, Volga, mother river.
 (Zeisler-Vralsted, 2014: 67-68)

Black men and women, with a rich history that included references to rivers as liberators, had similar songs that could be applied to the Mississippi or its tributary, the Ohio River, such as ‘Crossing Over Jordan,’ ‘The Old Ship of Zion,’ or ‘Down by the Riverside.’⁵

5. The connection between music and/or slave spirituals and the Mississippi River has been studied by numerous scholars, including Catherine Gooch “*I’ve Known Rivers: Representations of the Mississippi River in African American Literature and Culture* (2019); Shane White and Graham White, *The Sounds of Slavery: Discovering African American History through Songs, Sermons, and Speech*. (2005); Jon F. Sensbach, “The Singing of the Mississippi: The River and Religions of the Black Atlantic” (2013). In his discussion of the spiritual, “Down by the Riverside,” Sensbach contended that although the spiritual was sung in other geographical regions, “the song distills the notion of the con-

but regardless which characterization of the rivers dominated, for the burlaki and African Americans their initial experiences were mediated through their labor.

River laborers, however, were not the only social group for which labor was the linkage to their environment. In a relatively new sub-field, scholars reflect upon the role that labor serves in environmental and labor history. Richard White set the stage by encouraging environmental historians to “reexamine the connections between work and nature” (White 1996: 171) And in White’s classic, *The Organic Machine*, which traced the history of the Columbia River, he looked at how energy tied humans and the river together. In his history of the first explorers to the Columbia, trying to navigate upstream, he observed how they experienced the river through the energy they expended. This aspect of White’s book, in particular, paralleled the experience of the barge haulers (White 1996). Since White’s work, there have been others including Gunther Peck’s analytical work in finding commonalities between labor and environmental history (Peck 2006). Adding to the field is Chad Montrie’s anthology of scholars examining the linkages between labor and the environment in the US from the times of slavery to the twentieth century—although in each of his selections, the workers “confronted an industrial transition” (Montrie, 2008: 8). In Stefania Barca’s article in *The Journal of Environmental History*, she identified three junctures where work and nature intersected and offered some “possible new paths of investigation” for environmental history (Barca 2014: 3). Barca’s most relevant study, however, where comparisons to the work performed by barge haulers and African Americans can be drawn, was her 2018 article on the “ecology of labor.” In this article, she concluded that “ecological consciousness, in general, is also a diversified experience, fundamentally mediated by labour and class.” Still, the main concerns of recent scholarship, examining the relationship between work and the environment, is how the arrival of industrial capitalism with its wage labor class alienated workers from nature.

Yet there are a few scholars that offer different insights including Cheryl Dyl’s work on hoboes. Although Dyl looked

stant, intertwined presence of water and Jesus, and the Mississippi River was the omnipresent water in the lives of thousands” (31).

at their lives within the context of industrial capitalism, she went beyond this frame as she demonstrated that hoboos expressed an appreciation of the wilderness. Dyl's convincing scholarship challenged Roderick Nash's critique that "lumberman, miners, and professional hunters [...] lived too close to nature to appreciate it for other than its economic value as raw material" (Dyl 2014: 99). Applying Dyl's observations, the hoboos' experiences corresponded with that of the barge haulers and African Americans as both were marginalized groups. The barge haulers, in particular, endowed the Volga with qualities apart from the physical environment, recognizing its strength and nurturing qualities. Dyl's work is also of comparative value in that, like the hoboos, African Americans and barge haulers "viscerally experienced outdoor living and the vagaries of climate" (Dyl 2014: 98). but the most significant exception in this relatively new area of scholarship and one that corresponded with the experiences of African Americans and Russian barge haulers was Thomas G. Andrews' work, *Killing for Coal*, in which he traced the history of the 1914 Ludlow Massacre and the "Great Coalfield War" with an in-depth look at the lives of the colliers. By studying this group of laborers and the subculture that developed as a result of the work they performed underground, Andrews outlined a new framework for environmental historians. He coined the term "workscape" as opposed to landscape, defining a workscape as "something more complex: not just an essentially static scene or setting neatly contained within borders, but a constellation of unruly and ever-unfolding relationships—not simply land, but also air and water, bodies and organisms, as well as the language people use to understand the world, and the lens of culture through which they make sense of and act on their surroundings" (125). By looking at the colliers' experiences through worksapes, Andrews blurred the artificial distinction between humans and nature and instead showed how each influenced the other. Andrews' work also allowed scholars to go beyond the tendency to look at pre-industrial labor's relationship as one that simply emphasized sustainability or at best, traditional ecological knowledge. but whether in the context of industrial capitalism or Andrews' worksapes, all these environmental historians agreed that

the relationship between labor and the environment invites new ways of understanding the dialectic between humans and nature and warrants study (125).

Adding to the literature is the complex world of those who labored on the Mississippi and Volga. River laborers, like the colliers, created a waterscape that was all encompassing. For the burlaki and African Americans, life on the Volga and Mississippi Rivers produced subcultures that reflected their kinship with the rivers. Similar to Dyl's hoboes, they "viscerally experienced" their environment—an important distinction from their contemporaries, such as the tourist, steamboat pilot, merchant or plantation owners. For the river laborer, their intimacy with the river, derived from demanding, often brutal work cultivated an "ecological consciousness," informing a subculture that produced a rich repository of song and folklore. Thus, for laboring African Americans and barge haulers, the Mississippi and Volga Rivers emerged in a variety of roles—taskmasters, nurturers, enslavers, and liberators. but work on the rivers also resulted in cultures bound by different norms than those of the traveler, artist or writer. First and foremost, however, for free and enslaved black men and women, the river represented the journey into the bowels of slavery in the Deep South. While this imagery predominated, the river also signified a liberating influence. For example, for African Americans working on steamboats, their lives were often less circumscribed than those enslaved on the plantations and under the watch of an overseer. Court cases and popular accounts from nineteenth-century records in the middle Mississippi River Valley indicate that the area offered mobility to many of the enslaved. The same forces that enslaved, namely a robust market economy and Mississippi River transport, also allowed for a greater degree of freedom for black men and women. In the words of one scholar, "River-centric commerce facilitated by the steamboats that ran the Mississippi River and its tributaries not only shaped women's experiences in the river valleys, it also provided them with the opportunities to pursue freedom for themselves through river work" (Hines 2018: 103). Also, work on the steamboats allowed for greater communication among black communities; another venue to carry news from one area

to another.⁶ For the burlaki, seasonal work on the Volga produced a subculture with its own folklore, poetry, song and even vocabulary. At times, the burlaki were portrayed enjoying a life free from convention, while other depictions showed a lazy, dissolute underclass. Within each group—African Americans and the barge haulers—their perceptions of the rivers reflected a complexity often missing in other texts. Much like Dyl’s discussion of twentieth century hoboes in the US, both groups attributed several roles to the rivers. The rivers were demanding yet nurturing, confining yet liberating. In contrast, in 1863 Mark Twain lamented that once he knew the river as a steamboat pilot, his appreciation of the river’s beauty had diminished. In his words, “Now when I had mastered the language of this water and had come to know every trifling feature that bordered the great river [...] I had made a valuable acquisition. but I had lost something, too... All the grace, the beauty, the poetry had gone out of the majestic river!” (2001: 54). He elaborated further by writing that, while a sunset that would have once filled him with awe, now indicated “we are going to have wind tomorrow; that floating log means that the river is rising, small thanks to it; that slanting mark on the water refers to a bluff reef which is going to kill somebody’s steamboat one

6. In *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World* (2004), Thomas C. Buchanan argues that work on Mississippi River steamboats allowed for more mobility and opportunities for escape for the enslaved. In Gooch’s 2018 dissertation (cited above), she challenged his conclusions and concluded that “While it seemed that access to the river would offer the chance at escape—or at least improve the conditions of slavery—this was rarely the case” (36). For support of Buchanan’s work, however, consult John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (1999). In their review of runaway advertisements, they cited numerous instances in which slaveholders warned that runaway bondspersons would attempt to reach the river. Also supporting Buchanan’s thesis is a recent dissertation by Alicia Hines, in which she looked at court records, newspapers and other primary sources from the Middle Mississippi Valley region and found that the evolving capitalist economy of the nineteenth century exposed black women to the legal possibilities of attaining freedom. In river cities, such as St. Louis, black women were exposed to contemporary ideas, people and public spaces which facilitated increased opportunities for economic mobility and in some cases, freedom. See Hines, *Geographies of Freedom: Black Women’s Mobility and the Making of the Western River World* (2018).

of these nights, if it keeps on stretching out like that” (2001: 55). In Twain’s remarks, perceptions were divided by the constructed boundaries of the aesthetic and pragmatic. For those marginalized laborers on the river, the distinctions were absent. Regardless which imagery is the most convincing, the remnants of the past expressed through song and folklore are another way of knowing a river that deserves a place in history texts, contributing further to an ecology of labor, where class and race inform consciousness.

Beginning with the barge haulers, by the early nineteenth century, they would be common fixtures in towns along the Volga River. As Russia’s economy grew, so did the labor force, and by 1815, there were 400,000 burlaki on the Volga. By 1822, the governor of Nizhnii Novgorod, a city wholly dependent upon Volga River commerce, stated there were 652,000 burlaki (Ziolkowski 2020: 110). The labor force grew, in part, because of additional financial burdens Russian peasants faced. Their taxes had increased from two rubles in the mid-eighteenth century to seven rubles by the end of the century, forcing many to leave their homes and seek seasonal work. The practice became so commonplace that a Russian proverb evolved, “To pay a debt, go to the river Volga to become a barge-hauler” (Vinogradov, n.d.). but the increasing number of barge haulers also reflected a strong Russian economy in which goods, particularly grain, was shipped in large amounts upriver to Nizhnii Novgorod and from there to other Russian cities. With the increase in taxes, the labor force changed and by the nineteenth century burlaki were drawn from all over Russia. Most claimed Russian origins although there were also Kazan and Simbirsk Tatar men (Bogolyubov 2015). Within Russia, the Penza province supplied the most barge-haulers and the Volga River absorbed most of this labor force, although barge haulers worked on other Russian Rivers, such as the Don. Within barge haulers’ circles, they had nicknames for those coming from different provinces, an indication of the world they created. For the burlaki coming from the village of Reshm and the Kostroma province, they were referred to as *ahseen-ovi pyest*, loosely meaning “aspen pest.” Or, for those from the Vladimir province, they were nicknamed *star-o-doob* or a “star-borer.” There were other names, of course, distinguishing a burlaki’s home village or province. Geographically

derived nicknames were only one aspect of an emerging vocabulary derived from burlaki vocabulary. According to one scholar who compiled the Russian Volga Dictionary, he found “400 words identified as ‘burlatskie’” (Vinogradov 2015). For example, barge haulers assigned nicknames to each other reflecting a personal characteristic or incident, illustrating the close-knit community they formed. In one instance, a former barge hauler was nicknamed Besheny, meaning frantic because at the end of the day’s route when everyone else was resting, he was still doing a lot of physical activities such as swimming across the Volga, or climbing a pine tree. Another burlak’s nickname was Ulan, because once he and his friends robbed three men on the road near Kazan. One of their prizes was a leather box which he expected to hold something of value. Instead, all that was inside was an uhlan helmet, hence his nickname. Stories such as these, grounded in the folklore of past generations, testified to a well-established subculture (Vinogradov 2015).

But the intersection of labor and the environment also prompted a rich vocabulary to describe the everyday tasks of the barge hauler. Within the subculture, on the days when the main job was “to pull the strap”—the work most associated with the barge haulers—they worked from dawn to dusk. The term implied hard labor and has survived in contemporary times as today “pulling the strap” means “It’s a constant grind” (Gilyarovskiy 2018). Portrayed in numerous mediums, the act of pulling the boat with straps around their chests, was best captured by Ilya Repin. In his famous work, “Barge Haulers on the Volga” (1873), Repin succeeded in depicting the barge haulers’ world on several levels. He conveyed the enormity of the task, and the amount of physical exertion and tedium required in moving the barges. but Repin also evoked the complexity of the barge haulers. With his careful portrayal, Repin depicted an impoverished but inscrutable, proud working class of men. While Repin’s representation was flattering, less flattering images of the burlaki co-existed in the Russian collective memory throughout the periods of Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union. Yet, Repin’s imagery of a demanding, harsh environment was supported by numerous travel accounts documenting the challenges the burlaki encountered. One Volga River

constant was the uneven stream flow and frequent shallow places. In the recollections of a late seventeenth century traveler, one day the shallow spots were so numerous, the barge only moved a half league. On this day, all he heard were orders to “Pull! Row! Back!” (Nikitin 1985: 301).

For larger ships, when pulling the barges, the burlaki walked on a path, known as the *bechevnik*, a coastal strip alongside navigable rivers which, according to law, should remain free for all shipping needs. In pulling the boats, not only was the work of actual pulling onerous but the paths were often described in the following way “The shoreline of the mountain side passes either along the slopes and peaks of mountains and ravines, or along coastal sand and clay. In the heat the sand burns and burns their feet, and in the rain the clay dissolves and become viscous and slippery” (Vinogradov 2015). Also, as the river’s high water receded with summer approaching and deadlines looming, there was always an urgency in moving the freight. In addition to low water, the threat of an early winter was ever-present. Similar to the diversity of jobs on the Mississippi River steamers, there were different types of work on the barges and, as hard as putting on the strap was, a worse job was moving the anchor. Here is one traveler’s observation of this work:

When the wind is not directly behind them, the Russians do not go under sail. Instead, they carry the anchors, one after another, a quarter of a league ahead in a small boat; then, using the bast [anchor] ropes, a hundred or more men, standing one behind another, pull the boat against the current. However, by this means they cannot go more than two leagues a day. The boats, which are flat on the bottom, can haul 400 to 500 last of freight. (Olearius 1967: 297)

Accompanying the drudgery and probably one of the best illustrations of burlaki culture and its linkages with the river were the songs they sung as they worked. Certain songs were sung for specific tasks, establishing a rhythm or step in carrying out their tasks such as dragging a ship off a shoal or struggling against the wind. Work songs were common among laboring classes and for enslaved black men and women, there were numerous songs that accompanied the work of loading freight, feeding the steamboat boilers, or rowing, to name a few. For the barge-haulers, the most

well-known song was “Dubinushka,” with lyrics acknowledging the river’s agency while implying an intimacy with Russia’s major waterway.⁷ Adding to songs were other works such as the poem written by a former barge hauler in which he lamented “Volga, you have shortened more than one life” (Ziolkowski 2020).

Further solidifying burlaki culture were the *artels*; loosely defined as labor collectives. In a recent dissertation on the burlaki, the author stated that labor collectives “lasted every year for several months, contributing to the formation of a distinctive burlak culture, with its own folklore, burlatsk proverbs and sayings and finally its own professional vocabulary” (Vinogradov 2015). The groups or *artels* for each ship numbered anywhere from ten to forty people pulling from nine-hundred and one-thousand *poods* of goods (a *pood-pyd* is equal to sixteen kilograms). And for riverboats on the Middle Volga and those smaller rivers that were part of the watershed, they averaged around sixty burlaki per boat. Their journey might be from Nizhnii Novgorod to Rybinsk, for example (Jones 2015: 155). but not all burlaki were free members belonging to an *artel*. Before 1861, some were serf barge haulers (Ziolkowski 2020). Those belonging to an *artel*, however, with its sense of community, ensured the persistence of a subculture, rooted in the collective memory of song and folklore.

Another aspect of barge hauler daily life was that barge haulers often did not know how much weight they were pulling. but if they realized the weight, more bargaining regarding pay would begin as the ship owner knew it would be harder to find additional burlaki, particularly as the ship neared the upper reaches of the Volga. Given the amount of weight they had to pull, the burlaki were expected to be strong, and according to one young man who became a barge hauler in the late nineteenth century, when they questioned his ability to pull the strap, he had to demonstrate his strength by bending a coin. According to his account, “he just folded it as a ‘patty’ and as a result he was accepted as equal to them.” (Gilyarovsky 2018). Burlaki folklore also

7. In the nineteenth century, the Russian Imperial government commissioned the Chernetsov Brothers to travel down the Volga and document Russian folklore and song for posterity, testimony to the Volga’s role in the emergent national culture.

included a story about Nikituska Lomov, who was memorialized for his ability to do the work of four men as well as stories of his protecting the less fortunate. Of course, part of his ability stemmed from his size which in subsequent stories became almost larger than life. Still another story that testified to their stamina and endurance in the face of cold is called, "The Barge Hauler's Contest with the Frost." In this famous tale, the barge hauler was compared to the nobleman who has to wear a fur coat to protect him from the elements while the burlaki wears only a short peasant's coat and no hat or gloves (Zeisler-Vralsted 2015: 67).

There was even a pageantry for the hiring of the burlaki which began in early spring once the snow started melting, freeing the river for commerce. Ship owners hurried to the markets or squares known in Russia as the "burlatskie bazary" to begin hiring. Common practices were established as the burlak signaled prospective employers of his availability by displaying a wooden spoon jutting out of his hat band, part of the traditional tall, felt hats worn by the burlaki. If he was employed, the wooden spoon was placed inside his belt. (In addition to their tall felt hats, the burlaki were also recognized by the leg-warmers and bast shoes they wore as their traditional footwear.) Another indication they were looking for work would be the black crosses on the soles of their feet which would be plain to see as they slept on the embankments. All these rituals cultivated a subculture born from exacting lives on the river. Living and sleeping on the river embankments were another aspect of unconventional burlaki life and viewed by many as the absence of a conventional home that allowed for a freedom of movement not permissible for other members of their socio-economic class. but within the broader Russian collective memory, the burlaki occupied dual, competing roles—they were either portrayed as outsiders, vagabonds or through the lens of Repin where the workers were poised for social redemption (Rybinsk Burlak Museum).

Further entrenching the barge haulers' place in Russian history and adding to the imaginaries of burlaki lives was the poetry of N.A. Nekrasov. Growing up on the Volga River, Nekrasov revealed a kinship with the river, like that of poets and artists, while also seeing the ambivalence of a Russian subculture where the river

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oppressed yet sustained. In one of the most famous poems about the barge haulers, "The Barge Tower," Nekrasov described their work

With shoulders back and breast astrain,
And bathed in sweat which falls like rain,
Through midday heat with gasping song,
He drags the heavy barge along.
He falls and rises with a groan,
His song now becomes a moan [...]
But now the barge at anchor lies. (2011, lines 349–355)

But in a more nuanced understanding of the river's agency and the hardships endured by the burlaki, Nekrasov also wrote.

Go out to the bank of the Volga: whose moan
Is heard about the greatest Russian river?
This groan we call a "song"-
Barge-haulers go by tow-path!
Oh Volga, Volga! Even in full-watered spring
You water the field not as much as
Great national grief overfilled our land.
Where there's a nation—there is a groan. (1976: 81)

Despite their presence and association with the Volga, by the late nineteenth century, the burlaki were becoming a cultural construct in Russian society as steam was displacing the profession. Many barge haulers, foreseeing the end of their work on the river, opposed the arrival of steamships. but ultimately for many barge haulers, like other laborers forced to find seasonal or extra work, they eventually moved into the industrializing metropolitan areas. The transition of this labor force from a river-centric economy changed village dynamics. As one scholar observed, "Peasants in villages around the Upper Volga trading towns became impoverished as they lost their seasonal jobs as pilots, bargees, and dockers" (Economakis 1997:6). Thus the advent of steam ended a rich subculture where life on the river offered a level of mobility, albeit in exchange for a demanding, often brutal existence.

In contrast to the barge haulers, whose livelihoods were displaced with the arrival of steamships, free and enslaved black men and women realized new forms of work with the arrival of steam. but another distinction between the two laboring classes was slavery and race. Although conditions for the burlaki

were harsh and their mobility was limited through a passport system in Imperial Russia, they were not enslaved, although before 1861, serfs could be found working on the barges. Enslavement, however, framed other perceptions of the Mississippi River and its environs. For example, even before the arrival of steam, for the enslaved, the Mississippi River and its surrounding wilderness represented racialized spaces—areas where whites were absent. In the words of one scholar studying the Natchez district, “The fields and the great house were places of work and struggle. The wild places were good for worship and running away” (Kaye 2007:5). Outside the white hierarchy of domesticated landscapes, the marginalized swamps and wilderness were an arena where the enslaved had control, contributing to an autonomous slave culture. These associations persisted throughout the antebellum period, informing a cultural identity, independent of the slaveholders.⁸ but the river also represented a “second middle passage,” where an estimated one million enslaved blacks were transported in chains to auction blocks in river cities, including New Orleans, Louisiana and Natchez, Mississippi up to the outbreak of the Civil War. Once sold, many were sentenced to lives working on river-front plantations—cultivating cotton or sugar cane—and building levees along with a host of other jobs. With steam-powered ships, transportation on the river improved dramatically, shortening the length of time for delivering goods through improved navigation, all factors critical to a growing, prosperous Southern economy, derived primarily from cotton. For black men and women, the changing economy increased their exposure to the river, resulting in greater numbers of enslaved while at the same time offering greater freedom and new venues of communication through laboring on the steamboats. Both African Americans and barge

8. Scholarship considering the role of alternative landscapes in the world of the enslaved is a growing field. Two notable works include *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (1999) by Rhys Isaac and *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* (1993) by John Michael Vlach. In Vlach’s work, he documented how landscapes were “reconceptualized” by the enslaved. Adding to the literature is Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (2004). For a work that specifically examines different perspectives of swamp landscapes, see William Tynes Cowan, *The Slave in the Swamp: Disrupting the Plantation Narrative* (2005).

haulers shared the liberating aspects of river labor, associations that informed the subcultures of each.

Throughout the nineteenth century, African Americans—both free and enslaved—knew the river through work on steamboats as waiters, boilermen, and roustabouts, to name a few jobs associated with river travel. In addition to jobs connected to steam travel, was the never-ending work on the levees. Each plantation that bordered the river struggled to keep levees maintained and curtail the unpredictable Mississippi flooding. According to scholars—relying upon memoirs of former slaves and advertisements for runaways—for those where the river offered work, they experienced a greater degree of freedom than enslaved black Americans forced to labor on the land. When working on a steamboat, black men and women had the opportunity to communicate with others and the possibility for escape might be greater. Still, work on the ever-present steamboats was grueling. New tasks emerged such as getting wood, known as “wooding up,” to feed the boilers and were often assigned to free and enslaved blacks. In the words of one traveler aboard a first-class steamer in 1855, sixty men might be charged with gathering one hundred cords of wood from the shore. The work was well-orchestrated:

The laborers pursue their calling with the precision of clockwork. Upon the shoulders of each are piled up innumerable sticks of wood, which are thus carried from the land into the capacious bowels of the steamer. The “last loads” are shouldered—the last effort to carry the ‘largest pile’ is indulged in. (Thorpe, 1855:37)

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Once the “wooding-up” was completed, an equally demanding job was insuring the boilers stayed full in order to steam the ship. This work was physically challenging on two fronts—the strength required and the intense heat from the boiler. Songs were often invoked to capture the rhythms of the work, as one European traveler recalled:

The immense fire-engines are all on this deck, eight or nine apertures all in a row; they are like yawning fiery throats, and beside each throat stood a negro naked to his middle, who flung in fire-wood [...] The negro up aloft on the pile of fire-wood began immediately an improvised song in stanzas, and at the close of each the negroes down below joined in vigorous chorus. It was a fantastic and grand sight to see [...] while they

[the men working the boilers] , amid their equally fantastic song, keeping time most exquisitely, hurled one piece of fire-wood after another into the yawning fiery gulf. (Bremer 1853:174)

While feeding the boilers was probably one of the worst jobs on steamships, other demanding jobs included loading and unloading freight. The men who did this were known as roustabouts. One former riverboat pilot remembered roustabouts carrying kegs of nails weighing one-hundred-seven pounds apiece for a distance of two-hundred yards. Each roustabout was expected to haul seventy-five kegs. Initially many of the roustabouts were German and Irish immigrants but after the Civil War, African Americans comprised the majority and while there is scant first-hand written experience about their lives, their lifestyles became legendary, through song and folklore, similar to the marginalized lives of the burlaki (Merrick 2015: 98). When not loading or unloading the numerous steamships traveling up and down the river, roustabouts lived in dilapidated quarters, gaining reputations for frequenting taverns in the least desirable neighborhoods such as Natchez-Under-the-Hill. Songs such as the “Drunkard’s Song,” reveal the uncertainty of the roustabout’s life:

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I went down on the levee
Waitin’ for the Miss Jaie Ray.
I knowed if I don’t work fer the kind captain
I can’t bring my Baby no pay.
While roamin’ this wide world of sorrow
No cheerin’ no comfort have I
And I think uv my ole whiskey bottle,
I know I’ll drink till I die. (Mary Wheeler Collection)

Another sorrowful song, like the plaintive lyrics of the barge hauler’s, is the following, known by its first line, “Ohio River, She’s so Deep and Wide,”

Ohio River, She’s so Deep and Wide
Lord, I can’t see my poor gal
From the other side
I’m goin’ to river, take my seat and sit down,
If the blues overtake me, I’ll jump in the river and drown.
I’ve go the blues, I’ve got the blues,
Lord, I ain’t got the heart to cry. (Mary Wheeler Collection)

Songs such as these along with the work songs, such as the “Po’ Roustabout,” offer a glimpse into the drudgery and despair that attended the roustabouts’ world.⁹

Through song, another river-related job was recalled—the brutal work of the levee camps. Before the Civil War, individual slaveowners who owned land along the river were responsible for constructing and maintaining levees. Meticulous slaveowners kept records of the enslaved working on their bordering levees with entries in accounting ledgers. Both enslaved men and women worked countless hours on antebellum levees as the river always threatened profits from the lucrative cotton crops. After the war, levee camps were established and worked by African Americans in conditions that were little better than those experienced when enslaved. The levee camps were known for their brutality where violence insured productivity. Oftentimes, there might only be three armed white supervisors directing the work of one hundred black men and women (Mizelle 2013). In one first-hand account by Big Joe Williams, he recalled working on the levees at the age of twelve:

I left home run off to the levee camp. I was about twelve years old then. I went to a camp in Greenville, Mississippi [...] I went out there and was a willow driver. Yeah, popped lossa mules out there [...] mule driver. The life was hard. The men worked from sunrise to sunset. At night they slept in filthy tents on rotten mattresses with a couple of blankets to crawl under. The food just about kept a man alive [...] The pay was \$1 to \$1.50 a day and that went on Saturday-night drinking and women. (Crowley 1991: 156)

Supporting accounts such as these are the songs produced by well-known blues artists. Chronicling life on the levees was a frequent topic for blues artists with lyrics such as these from Lucille Bogan’s “Levee Blues” (1927):

Down on the levee, Camp Number Nine
Down the levee, Camp Number Nine

9. Roustabout songs covered all aspects of steamboat life as T. Buchanan cites one roustabout song, “Roustabout’s Refrain,” in which black workers sing about the harsh treatment they receive from the captain. See Thomas C. Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World* (2004: 34).

You can pass my house, honey you can hear me cry
 I never had no blues, until I come by here
 I never had no blues, until I come by here
 I'm going to leave this camp, you can't start in here
 My sister got the, brother got them too
 We all got the levee camp blues
 I ain't found no doctor, ain't no doctor in this whole round world
 I ain't found no doctor, ain't no doctor in this whole round world
 Just to cure the blues, the blues of a levee camp girl. (Bogan, Vol. 1)

Using songs such as these was one way to retrieve a collective memory regarding the river and how the river was perceived by African Americans. The songs illuminate a number of themes associated with the levee camps; working conditions, separation from family, violence and disorder. One of the more popular songs describing the work, "Levee Camp Blues" (1941), came from Washboard Sam:

says I worked in a levee camp just about a month ago
 Says I worked in a levee camp just about a month ago
 Says I wired so many wagons, it made my po' hands sore
 We slept just like dogs, eat beans both night and day
 We slept just like dogs, eat beans both night and day
 But I never did know just when we were due our pay

They had two shifts on day and the same two shifts at night
 They had two shifts on day and the same two shifts at night
 But if a man wired wagons, he can't feed his baby right
 Yeah boy, wind it now, wind it
 Electric lights going out, telephone is bogging down
 Electric lights going out, telephone is bogging down
 I'm going to keep on winding because I'm the best old winder in town.

Thus, Mississippi River levees became a constant in the collective memory of African Americans as the Corps of Engineers committed to an engineering strategy whereby levees continued to be built, corseting the river, in the belief the Mississippi River could be contained. Twentieth and twenty-first century floods, such as the Great Flood of 1927 and the after-effects of Hurricane Katrina, exposed this fallacy but not before many African Americans lost their lives and/or their livelihoods. In the 1927 flood, the unofficial death toll reached one-thousand. Of those one-thousand, at least one-hundred African American men drowned on the night National Guard troops forced them to remain at the Mounds Bayou levee

in a last-ditch effort to save the levee. For Hurricane Katrina, the death toll reached almost 2000 with disproportionate losses in African American communities.¹⁰

Adding to the memories of levee work were the post-Civil War years of sharecropping in the Mississippi Valley. In a system akin to peonage, African Americans leased farmland from the planters with the rent repaid through the sale of their crops. For the sharecroppers, their debt load always outweighed potential profits. Often consigned to cultivate the valley bottomlands, African Americans saw their lands flooded first, forcing them deeper into debt. When the Great Flood of 1927 occurred, many did not see any hope of recovery, prompting a major migration to the North. Although provoked by economic losses, the migration North was also liberating for those African Americans who left the Jim Crow South. Subsequently, for African Americans, when faced with catastrophic disasters such as the Mississippi floods and storm surges, the narrative that emerges is laced with displacement, economic ruin and resilience. Twentieth-century blues music continued to be the repository in which these themes and emotions were remembered as the genre expanded with songs lamenting the 1927 flood.¹¹ In her work on female blues artists, Angela Davis remarked how their “work addressed urgent social issues and helped to shape collective modes of black consciousness” (Davis 1998: xiv).

10. The literature on Katrina and the 1927 Mississippi Flood is rich—a few notable works on Katrina include Douglas Brinkley, *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (2006); Michael D. Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (2007); and *Katrina's Imprint: Race and Vulnerability in America* (2010), edited by Keith Wailoo, et al. For the 1927 Flood, a number of histories have been consulted including John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (1997); Pete Daniel, *Deep'n As It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood* (1977); Patrick O'Daniel, *When the Levee Breaks: Memphis and the Mississippi Valley Flood of 1927* (2013); David Cohn, *Where I Was Born and Raised* (1935). Environmental historian Christopher Morris contends that “The 1927 flood was, and by some measures remains, the nation's greatest natural disaster remembered in photos, songs and film” (2012: 165).

11. Many works on the blues have been consulted including the classic by Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (1993); David Evans, *Big Road Blues: Tradition and Creativity in the Folk Blues* (1982); and *Nobody Knows Where the Blues Come From: Lyrics and History* (2006), edited by Robert Springer.

Returning to this article's beginnings—popular images and histories of the Mississippi and Volga Rivers as seen through the working experiences of African Americans and barge haulers—no one narrative prevails. Instead a multi-dimensional representation surfaces. For the burlaki and African Americans working on what were becoming national rivers, their connections possessed an immediacy lacking in the passive traveler's account or the abstract logistics of the engineer. Instead, the river was met through one's labor and often the same system that subdued and degraded the river sought to subdue and degrade labor. The rivers assumed new meanings derived from these touchpoints of labor. The intersection of labor and the environment produced experiences that influenced new narratives describing these national rivers. Through the recollections of the burlaki and African Americans, another history of the Volga and Mississippi Rivers emerges. Seen through the prism of labor, the rivers represent a different facet in people's lives. While the rivers might still play an ornamental role—appreciated for their power and beauty—the more common reaction is their exacting nature. For the burlaki, Volga shallows might result in only covering one-half league a day. For African Americans, a Mississippi levee breaks, taking the year's crops.

In comparing the burlaki on the Volga with enslaved and free African Americans on the Mississippi, similarities between the two groups existed. Their connections to the river were immediate, intimate, exacting, often tedious and brutal concomitant with marginalized lives consigned to society's fringe. Yet, there were also marked differences. For enslaved African Americans the river represented not only the journey into the Deep South and slavery but also the possibility of freedom while the surrounding wetlands and swamps offered a free, racialized space. To the barge haulers, life on the riverbanks lining the Volga allowed for an existence outside the conventional. For both groups, however, the same rivers also imprisoned. but while movement was restricted in Imperial Russia, the barge haulers did not endure the same deprivations as the enslaved. Yet for both, the harsh, everyday existence—whether pulling a barge or fueling a steamboat boiler—resulted

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in the same ills, a shortened impoverished life.¹² Still, the lives shaped by laboring on the Volga and Mississippi Rivers, produced rich cultures revealing another river distinct from the dominant narratives. In both instances, the rivers possessed an agency, enshrining an ambiguity in humans' kinship to the environment. In concluding, perhaps no one captured this better than formerly enslaved, William Bibb, who in remembering the Ohio River, a major tributary of the Mississippi, invoked an aesthetic appreciation of the river, an awareness of the river's mobility and prowess, coupled with a freedom only reserved for some. In other words, all the beneficence of the river in tandem with the jarring image of slavery:

I have stood upon the lofty banks of the river Ohio, gazing upon the splendid steamboats, wafted with all their magnificence up and down the river, and I thought of the fishes of the water, the fowls of the air, the wild beasts of the forest, all appeared to be free, to go just where they please, and I am an unhappy slave. (Bibb 1849: 19)

12. High mortality rates were the norm for the burlaki and enslaved. For the burlaki, one estimate was an annual rate of seven-thousand and for those who survived, many were in broken health. See Jerome Blum, *Lord and Peasant in Russia: From the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century* (1970: 283). In the case of the enslaved, one indication that life spans were short is that in the Lower Mississippi Valley the mortality rate among slaves was so high the planters would not allow census workers to count the slaves on their plantations. See John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (1999: 10).

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