

Iowa Artists 2018: Jen Bervin
October 19, 2018 – January 27, 2019
The Des Moines Art Center
I. M. Pei Gallery

- 1 Over the course of twelve years, the artist Jen Bervin sewed a 230-curvilinear-feet-long sculpture by hand, including each of the thousands of reflective, silver sequins that densely cover the surface. Her piece, *River*, maps the Mississippi from the headwaters in Lake Itasca, Minnesota to its delta south of New Orleans where it meets the Gulf of Mexico. She calculates that it took the same amount of time to sew each section of the river that it would take to walk the real one; the scale of the map is one inch to one mile. *River* is also a reversal – presented on the ceiling of the I. M. Pei gallery from a geocentric perspective as if viewers were inside the earth’s interior looking up at the riverbed.

Years to complete: 12

Materials: Silver sequins, mulberry paper,
mull, tyvek, thread, and mirrored composite

Dimensions: 230 curvilinear feet / 70 m

Scale: 1 inch to 1 mile

Perspective: Geocentric

- 2 The ‘Perfect Memory’ of Water by Kendra Paitz
- 3 Five Approaches to Jen Bervin’s *River* by Matthew Goulish
- 4 Electron Microscope Scans of a Sequin at 200um, 1mm and 4mm
- 5 Annotated Maps of the Mississippi River in Iowa for *River*

You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. 'Floods' is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory — what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our 'flooding.'
—Toni Morrison¹

When one thinks of the Mississippi River, she may first call to mind steamboats, catfish, industrial transportation, and agriculture. Or perhaps historical events like the New Madrid earthquakes, the “Trail of Tears,” and the floods of 1927 and 1993. Or maybe the wide array of creative responses this one massive and ever-changing body of water has inspired—from novelist Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), to singer Bessie Smith’s “Muddy Water (A Mississippi Moan)” (1927), to photographer Alec Soth’s *Sleeping by the Mississippi* (2004). As it flows south from Minnesota’s Lake Itasca toward the Gulf of Mexico, it cuts through Grant Wood’s rolling green hills in Iowa, passes by Eero Saarinen’s soaring silver arch in St. Louis, and amplifies rousing tributes to B.B. King’s Blues in Memphis. It both divides and connects ten of the country’s fifty states as it transports lingering residue from contemporary pesticides and miniscule particles of ancient rocks. For poet and artist Jen Bervin, who was born in Dubuque, Iowa — a small river city along the state’s Illinois and Wisconsin borders — the Mississippi River carries all these and more in its eddies and currents. It is inextricably linked to her “original place.”

For *River* (2006–2018), Bervin has imagined the famously muddy waterway in silver sequins that catch the light and send micro-shimmers of magic into the surrounding environment.

Over the course of 230 curvilinear feet, she presents a one-inch to one-mile scale map of the Mississippi River from the geocentric point of view, as though looking up at the riverbed from the center of the Earth. It is a reversal of the river and it is installed overhead so we can fully appreciate a perspective we could never actually embody. (And it’s certainly not a view we typically consider while wading into, boating across, or flying over the Mississippi.) Bervin refers to *River*’s sequins as “old-fashioned pixels,”² and three sizes of flat, circular, striated ones overlap and brush against each other as they delineate the river’s meandering path and branching delta. The archipelagos of the delta are mirrored to, in Bervin’s words, “hold the space in its reflection, including the natural light and the color of anyone passing by.”³ As with our memories, everything is acknowledged through fragments and glimpses. This monumental yet delicate piece epitomizes Bervin’s practice of long-term research and deep engagement, an approach consisting of equal parts criticality and wonderment.

River is a hybrid: a sparkling textile, a sculptural object, and an elegant line drawing in the air. Installed in its entirety for the first time on the concrete ceiling of the Des Moines Art Center’s I. M. Pei-designed addition, there’s a strong link between the work’s content and the site. To begin with, the architect included Wisconsin limestone as aggregate for the concrete, which acknowledges the abundance of limestone surrounding the Upper Mississippi (and offers continuity with Eliel Saarinen’s original building).⁴ It is particularly meaningful to premiere *River* in Iowa, a state that was not only Bervin’s childhood home but also one that is part of the Mississippi Watershed. The Des Moines River, which flows through downtown Des Moines, is one of the Mississippi’s tributaries. Importantly, *River* is still and quiet; there is no sound component and there are no rushing waters. Instead, Bervin’s sequins take advantage of silver’s reflectivity⁵ and the abundance of natural light in the Pei addition, conjuring trails of glittering stars and reinforcing profound connections between the earth, water, and celestial bodies. As she points out, the work “addresses deep time, deep space.”⁶

Bervin began *River* in 2006 and continued into 2018. There's a distinct sense of temporality embedded within a project that unfolds over such a span, as evidenced, in part, by the artist's stitches as markers of time. Bervin is not alone; many artists, writers, and filmmakers set up timelines driven by the concept of the work. Richard Linklater's *Boyhood* (2014), filmed over the course of twelve years with the same aging cast, and Katie Paterson's *Future Library* (2014–2114), a newly planted Norwegian forest that will grow for 100 years before providing paper for a 2114 anthology featuring 100 commissioned texts held in trust until that time, come to mind in terms of process, duration, accumulation, and the registration of transitions. These pieces, and *River*, offer composites of moments: memories, time periods, and locations. Also notable is Bervin's use of silver, a material associated both with the past (antique teapots, heirloom jewelry, ancient currency, photographic processes) and the future (high-tech equipment, industrial advances, water purification on the International Space Station). In terms of contemporary art, silver calls to mind Andy Warhol's floating Mylar balloons in *Silver Clouds* (1966), Cornelia Parker's hovering and flattened tableware for *Thirty Pieces of Silver (Exhaled)* (2003), or Oliver Herring's knitted mylar sculpture series *A Flower for Ethyl Eichelberger* (1991–2001), among others. Herring's affectively moving and marvelously constructed series provides a compelling analogue to *River* in its unexpected use of materials, underlying personal narrative, and ten-year engagement with both subject matter and sewing-based process.

As with her other works influenced, in part, by artist and writer Anni Albers' (1899–1994) textile designs, Bervin immerses herself in the histories of sewing, textiles, craft, and feminism. *River* is primarily comprised of hand-sewn silver foil-stamped cloth sequins, but also includes metallic thread, silver mulberry paper, mull, and Tyvek. (Although sequins are typically thought of as decorative embellishments — tiny shiny discs added to craft projects and dance recital costumes — many contemporary artists have conceived of ways to incorporate their materiality and connotations into enticing yet socially engaged works of art, from Ebony G. Patterson's mixed-media photo-based tapestries that witness against violence, to Nick

Cave's wearable *Soundsuits* that “obscure race, gender, and class.”⁷) Bervin's time and physical labor are manifest in ways that are very, and ways that are not so very, evident to the viewer in: separating and sorting the snakes of sequins into usable and damaged piles, stitching them with metallic thread, measuring and cutting the backing materials, checking contours and scale against a variety of pencil-annotated printed maps of the river system, and matching newly created sections to those she previously made. In keeping with the communal aspects of sewing and knitting circles — traditionally viewed as spaces for women to gather, converse, and even protest—she sometimes worked on *River* with studio assistants Mariette Lamson (delta) and Rachel van Dyke (headwaters). And her mother helped with some of the final sections while visiting Northwestern University during Bervin's 2018 fellowship. (She taught Bervin at a young age how to sew by hand and machine, which gave her the “early impression that one could be good at everything.”⁸) More often though, she worked alone in the studio or while traveling. She sewed alone from Minneapolis to the Gulf, enjoying the solitude and space to listen to audio books and readings. Fascinatingly, she says that it took “the same amount of time to sew each section of *River* that it would take to walk the real one.”⁹

River is just one project among many in which Bervin finds impossibly poetic ways to imagine the unimaginable, including writing a poem from the perspective of a silkworm, composed in a six-character chain that corresponds to the DNA structure of silk as she did for her “Silk Poems” (2017). The poem was nano-printed on a silk biosensor in gold spatter, formed the basis of her *Silk Poems* book, and was the subject of a short documentary by Charlotte Lagarde. Likewise, Bervin's research of American poet Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) did not yield a straightforward analysis of the influential writer's works. Instead, recognizing the radical brilliance of the poet's original variants, line breaks, and compositions, she both created a series of large-scale embroideries, *The Dickinson Composites* (2004–2008) — 6 × 8 feet stitched cotton and muslin wall-hung works that evidence Dickinson's composite markings in her “fascicles” — and published a book with scholar Marta Werner on the poet's envelope writings, *Emily Dickinson: The Gorgeous Nothings* (2013).

Bervin's current collaboration with Lagarde (2016–2020) on 4th-century Chinese poet Su Hui and her "Xuanji Tu," an embroidered poem written in a 29×29 character grid that can be read in any direction to yield almost 8,000 possible readings, will culminate in a five-channel video installation that functions as a self-described "feminist listening room."¹⁰ And just as she inverted our view of the Mississippi River, Bervin is likewise transposing how we listen by making recordings of the radio astronomers who listen to outer space, awaiting signals. She has been working with artist Fayen d'Evie – and multiple other partners, including SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) – to "explor[e] questions around the sonification of space and listening"¹¹

Even as Bervin embroidered magnifications of Dickinson's unpublished variants, learned about silk's compatibility with the human body, studied Su Hui's references to the armillary sphere, and traveled to telescope arrays in California and Tasmania, she continued to work on *River*. As the memories of the actual river have always been with her, so has her under-construction shimmering silver stream since its beginning in her Brooklyn studio in 2006.¹² It was with her as she published *Silk Poems*; *Emily Dickinson: The Gorgeous Nothings*; *The Desert*; and *The Silver Book*. And as she exhibited at The Power Plant, MASS MoCA, Walker Art Center, Morgan Library and Museum, and Ian Potter Museum of Art. And as she met Charlotte Lagarde, who is now her wife and collaborator. She has taken sections with her on extensive international travels for research, residencies, fellowships, lectures, and teaching (and has made a studio kit that fits perfectly on airplane tray tables). Perhaps the adventure of being in new places with new people and possibilities sustained such a long-term project. Perhaps it was her absence from the river itself.

River wasn't something she had been researching or brainstorming; instead she just "saw it" while listening to music in Brooklyn one day.¹³ Surprisingly, she doesn't remember the song that prompted this, but knowing Bervin, it was unlikely to have been one that specifically references the Mississippi like Johnny Cash's upbeat *Big River* (1958) or even one that incorporates the idea of a river in general into its lyrics, like Patti Smith's

searing *Pissing in a River* (1976). Instead, it was probably one that set off an intricately linked chain of unexpected associations akin to those she so surprisingly slips into and out of in her *Silk Poems*. And that brings us back to Morrison's "perfect memory" of water and the "rush of imagination" she cited as a writer's "flooding."¹⁴ The piece is also connected to Bervin's father, whose ashes were scattered in an area "overlooking the river in 1980, and to an experience nearly thirty years later: the inverse of mourning – a sudden joy."¹⁵ As she moved from Brooklyn, to Berkeley, and then to Guilford, Connecticut, with stretches in France, Italy, and China, she worked on this piece that has such strong connections to her own place of origin, and to our collective geological, cultural, environmental, commercial, and political histories. The Mississippi River's vastness precludes us from ever fully knowing what those gallons contain as they meander and connect communities and climates, pasts and futures. Yet Bervin's *River* allows us to "remember where we were"¹⁶ and imagine where we can go.

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Kendra Paitz is the Director and Chief Curator at University Galleries of Illinois State University.

Singing Geography
Unmeasured
Goddess of the scales
Submersive
Intuition

1. Singing Geography

Some time around 1849, Sunday School teacher John Heyl Vincent, who would go on to become an American bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church and pedagogical theorist and co-founder of the Chautauqua Assembly, captured attention and established himself as an educational reformer when he transformed the relatively obscure activity of memorizing sacred place names by introducing music and standardizing the practice into a system he called "Singing Geography." In his first major innovation, Vincent toured small towns in Pennsylvania, teaching and conducting choruses.

Now largely forgotten, "Singing Geography" experienced a notable resurgent boomlet from 1993 to 1998, thanks to Stephen Spielberg's *Animaniacs*, a cartoon series for children televised during the US animation renaissance that began in the late 1980s. The central characters, Yakko, Wakko, and Dot Warner, all cartoon stars from the 1930s, have finally escaped the Warner Bros. water tower in which they have been locked for 60 years. Voiced by Jess Harnell, Wakko, wearing a backwards red baseball cap and a blue turtleneck sweater, speaks English with a Liverpool accent. He offers one of many performances-within-a-performance on a game show resembling Jeopardy, when he wagers all his winnings on a "Daily Double" question – "The Names of All Fifty States and Their Capitols." Leaping from behind his podium, Wakko produces an old style classroom chalkboard on wheels featuring an outline of the United States. He sings his answer to the tune of *Turkey in the Straw*, accompanying himself with a fiddle, and miraculously filling in the map state by state at the touch of his bow.

*Baton Rouge Louisiana Indianapolis Indiana
And Columbus is the capitol of Ohio
There's Montgomery Alabama*

*South of Helena Montana
Then there's Denver Colorado
and then Boise Idaho*

*Texas has Austin
Then we go north
To Massachusetts Boston
And Albany New York
Tallahassee Florida and Washington D.C.
Santa Fe New Mexico and Nashville Tennessee*

This virtuosic recital features an easily overlooked grace-note at the start. Before taking up his violin and commencing his song, Wakko inscribes a jagged chalk line running south to north, just to the right of the map's middle, from the Gulf of Mexico to a point to the left of Lake Superior. The necessary line remains unnamed and uncommented on, a spine and precondition.

2. Unmeasured

In late 1965, filmmaker Conrad Rooks hired the 28-year-old composer Philip Glass as music director for his LSD epic *Chappaqua*. Rooks had engaged French musicians to record a score composed by Indian sitar-player Ravi Shankar, and the task of transcription fell to Glass who, by his own admission, knew "virtually nothing" about non-Western music. He spent several months on the task, alongside Shankar and the tabla-playing percussionist Alla Rakha. Twenty years later, Glass described his moment of revelation.

I would describe the difference between the use of rhythm in Western and Indian music in the following way: in Western music we divide time – as if you were to take a length of time and slice it the way you slice a loaf of bread. In Indian music (and all the non-Western music with which I'm familiar), you take small units, or "beats," and string them together to make up larger time values.

This was brought home to me quite powerfully while working with Ravi and Alla Rakha in the recording studio. There we were with

the musicians sitting around waiting for me to notate the music to be recorded ... [Ravi] would sing the music to me, and I would write it down, part by part ... The problem came when I placed bar lines in the music as we normally do in Western music. This created unwarranted accents. When the music was played back, Alla Rakha caught the error right away. No matter where I placed the bar line (thereby “dividing” the music in the regular Western style), he would catch me.

“All the notes are equal,” he kept piping at me ...

Finally in desperation, I dropped the bar lines altogether. And there, before my eyes, I could see what Alla Rakha had been trying to tell me. Instead of distinct groupings of eighth notes, a steady stream of rhythmic pulses stood revealed.

3. Goddess of the scales

The word sequin comes to English by way of the French version of the Italian word *zecca*, “mint,” which in turn traces back to the Arabic *sikka*, “a die for coining.” Emily Spivak, writing for the Smithsonian, describes how the gold disks sewn into Tutankhamun’s royal garments, dating from 1323 B.C. and discovered in 1922 when archeologists opened the Egyptian pharaoh’s tomb, engendered the Flapper sequin fashion craze of the 1920s. She documents sequin evolution from the *zecchino*, gold coins produced in 13th century Venice, to metal disks, to the lighter electroplate gelatin discs of the 1930s that rain could melt, to Herbert Lieberman’s innovative collaboration involving acetate with Eastman Kodak. As Lieberman told *Fanzine* magazine:

The light would penetrate through the color, hit the silver, and reflect back. Like you painted a mirror with nail polish. Acetate will crack like glass. The harder the plastic, the nicer the sequin’s going to be.

In 1952 DuPont invented Mylar, its trade name for BoPET (Biaxially-oriented polyethylene terephthalate), a polyester film made from a

stretched polymer with high tensile strength, chemical and dimensional stability, transparency, reflectivity, and gas barrier and insulating properties. The largest sequin producer, the Lieberman-owned company Algy Trimmings Co., by then based in Hallandale Beach, Florida, adopted Mylar to coat the plastic colored sequin and protect it in the washing machine. Eventually vinyl replaced the Mylar-acetate combination. Of sequin history, Spivak notes:

Sewing gold and other precious metals onto clothing was multifunctional, serving as a status symbol, a theft deterrent or a spiritual guide. Especially for those with more nomadic lifestyles, coins were kept close to the body and attached to clothes. In addition to safekeeping valuables, sequined clothing doubled as ostentatious displays of wealth in places like Egypt, India and Peru and, with their glaring sheen, they were meant to ward off evil spirits.

Of all the sequin-like epidermal scales of fish or reptiles, avian scales on the feet of birds, mammalian scales of the pangolin and armadillo, a special mystique surrounds the shedded skin of the snake after molting. The artifact lies discarded in a landscape, evidence of growth and mobility, like the coat of the departed pharaoh. The word *scale* finds its way to English from the Old Norse *skál* ‘bowl,’ of Germanic origin, related to the Dutch *schaal*, the echo of which one might hear when raising a toast (skoal), and in “shale,” the flat slab of sedimentary rock — a dish, or something shaped like it. Novelist Italo Calvino began his 1985 lecture *Exactitude* with this passage.

For the ancient Egyptians, exactitude was symbolized by a feather that served as a weight on scales used for the weighing of souls. This light feather was called Maat, goddess of the scales. The hieroglyph for Maat also stood for a unit of length — the 33 centimeters of the standard brick — and for the fundamental notes of the flute.

Is it a coincidence that Latin *Scala* “ladder” brings to the meaning of scale “to climb”? One scales the wall to escape a prison, as a musical scale climbs a keyboard. Might we call it a manner of climbing

when numbers reduce or enlarge while retaining proportion? In a scale model, two measures strike a harmonious balance in the weighing pans across the beam, represented by the colon.

1 inch : 1 mile

4. Submersive

If one could swim in the earth. If one could look up from a submersive attitude as in a vast and vaulted lake. Knowing how the expanse of water's surface looks to the diver: shimmering membrane between eye and sun, rippling skin shirt of mail. Below the headwaters at Lake Itasca, the crux at Cairo, the fanning Delta. Below the name, words from the region's first family of language. Below the stretch and weave of radical cartography, the survey map's arrested meander. A process that predates everything, unbroken flute measure after measure. Below every huckleberry friend and tributary. If one could bend one's thought to the geocentric mole in its vertiginous tunnel, "the position of the core sample," the superposition of stone and strata. What would one see, think, come to believe? Milky Way overhead skein unweaving.

*Caves and rivers imagine
having to bury yourself over
and over knock on wood*

5. Intuition

*"Out of the believer's heart shall flow
rivers of living water." John 7:38*

Philosopher Henri Bergson spoke of intuition as the effort *to bend thought backwards to its object*. In this formulation, one works to think as the object thinks itself, and thinks itself into existence. Thought, not reduced to an activity of the brain, now becomes a struggle and a complexity, a mode of self-definition and realization, a movement of life force. Can one think with one's hands, as manual labor acts as a conduit between consciousness and the world? Bergson's statement further proposes the object of intuition, a thing that thinks itself, as a set of processes — relations, modulations, becomings — making its decisive bid for freedom.

It is into those porous processes that one may think. One might further conclude from the infinitive phrase *to bend thought backwards* that thought commences from a facing-away position, both directional and reversible. The object appears behind one's back. The world, one could say, always hides. Second, thought, in this active intuition, has an elastic character. It can bend; the thinker can bend it. That bend has a retrograde motion, like turning a clock back, tracing a word to its origin, looking from an idea to a source. The moon in intuition "progresses" from west to east in the night sky. The river flows in place. Imagine the joyful struggle. What forms and materials, what scale and position? A thought experiment of this sort has been brought to resolution in an act of radical intuitive empathy, history and mourning, keeping close those people lost to the waters. Imagine the extended effort of a decade of durable labor, stitching each circle of light to its backing. If it were not before us, it would seem impossible. We might doubt its plausible existence. The perceptible blue grown denser, the eye so touched, so played upon by clouds. Such clear discovery, if one might describe its creation that way, has brought it forward and raised it up. Step in and step in again — its wake an invitation.

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Matthew Goulish is co-founder and dramaturg of the performance group Every house has a door and teaches in the writing program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

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Director of Curatorial Affairs / Senior Curator Alison Ferris.

Jen Bervin's multidisciplinary work results from poetic and conceptual investigations of material and language, intensive research, and collaboration with artists and specialists ranging from material scientists to literary scholars. Bervin was born in Dubuque, Iowa in 1972, and has published ten books. Her work has been exhibited internationally and is held in thirty international collections. Her honors include an Alice Kaplan Institute for the Humanities Residency at Northwestern University hosted by The Block Museum of Art (2018), The Rauschenberg Residency (2016), a Creative Capital grant (2013), and The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation Residency (2012). She is a Provost Fine Arts Fellow at Rhode Island School of Design.

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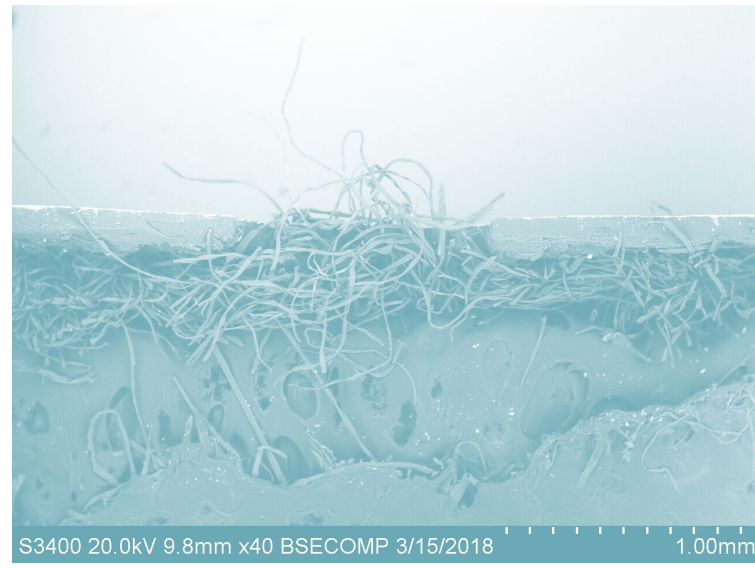
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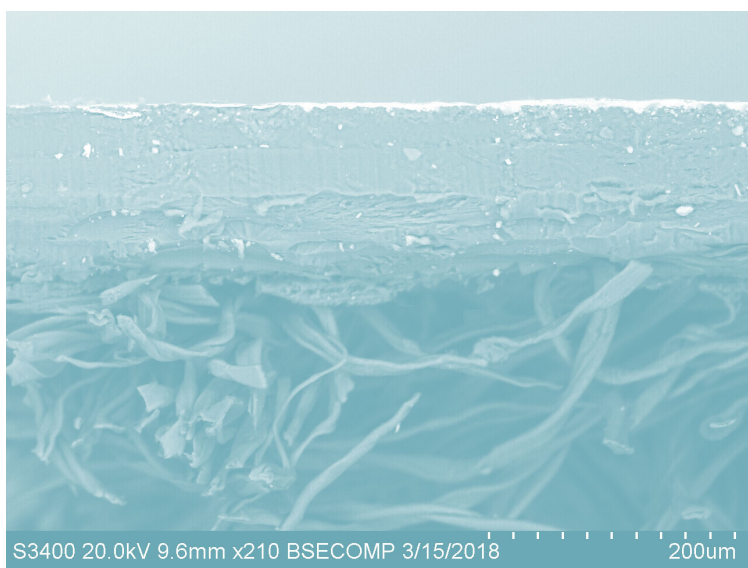
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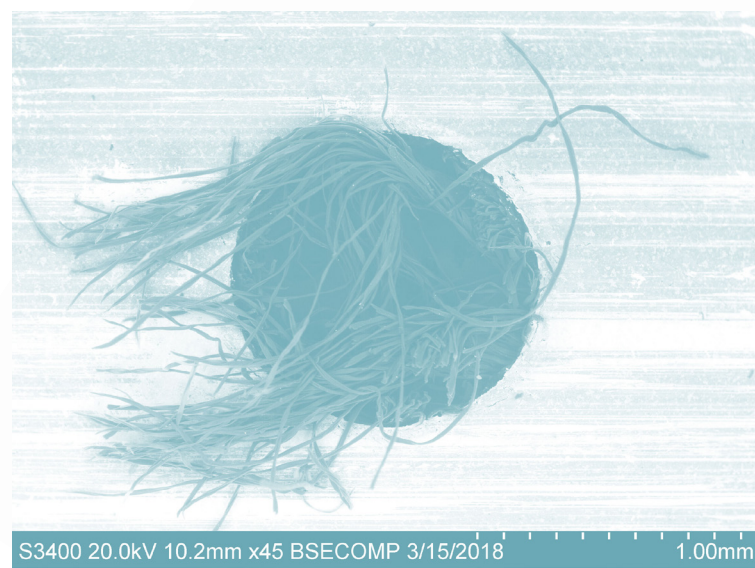
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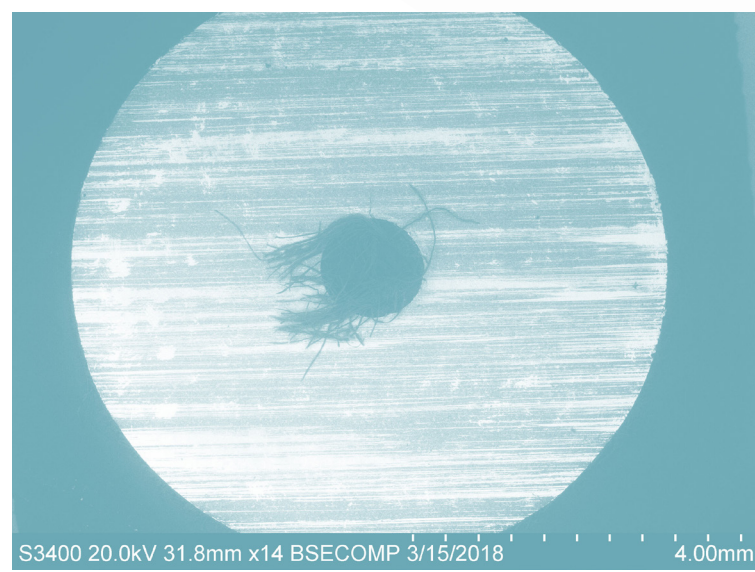
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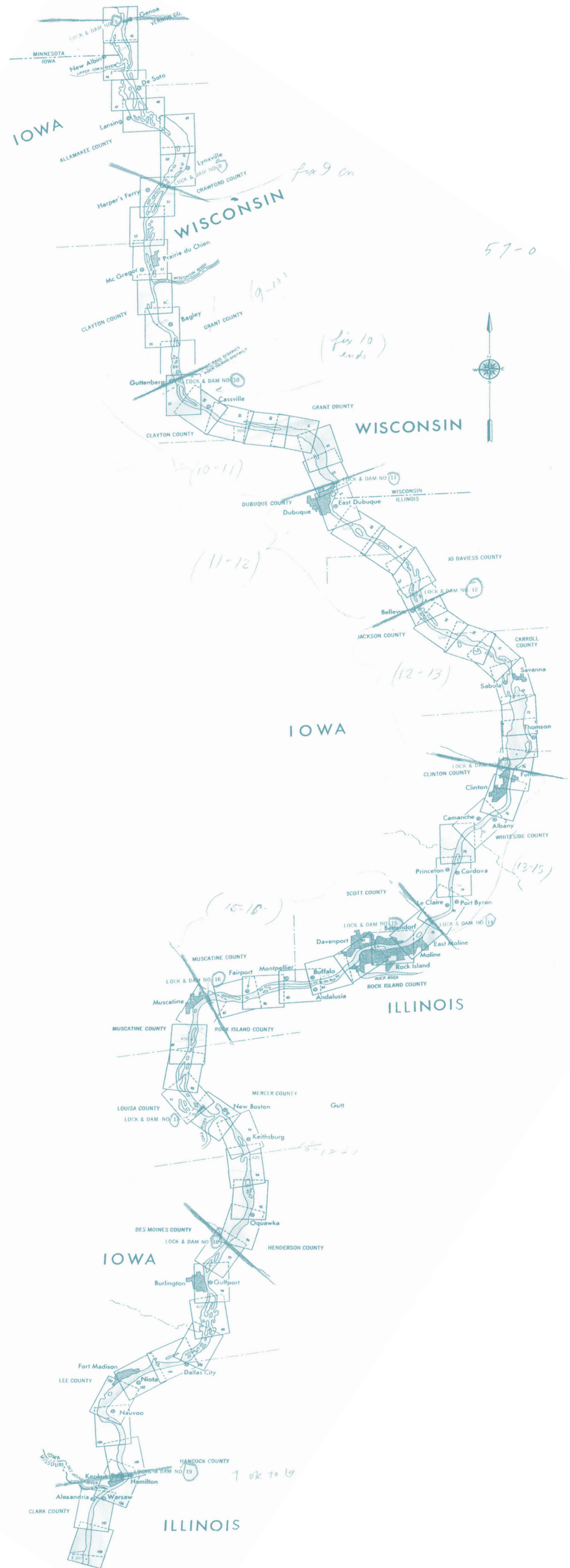
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