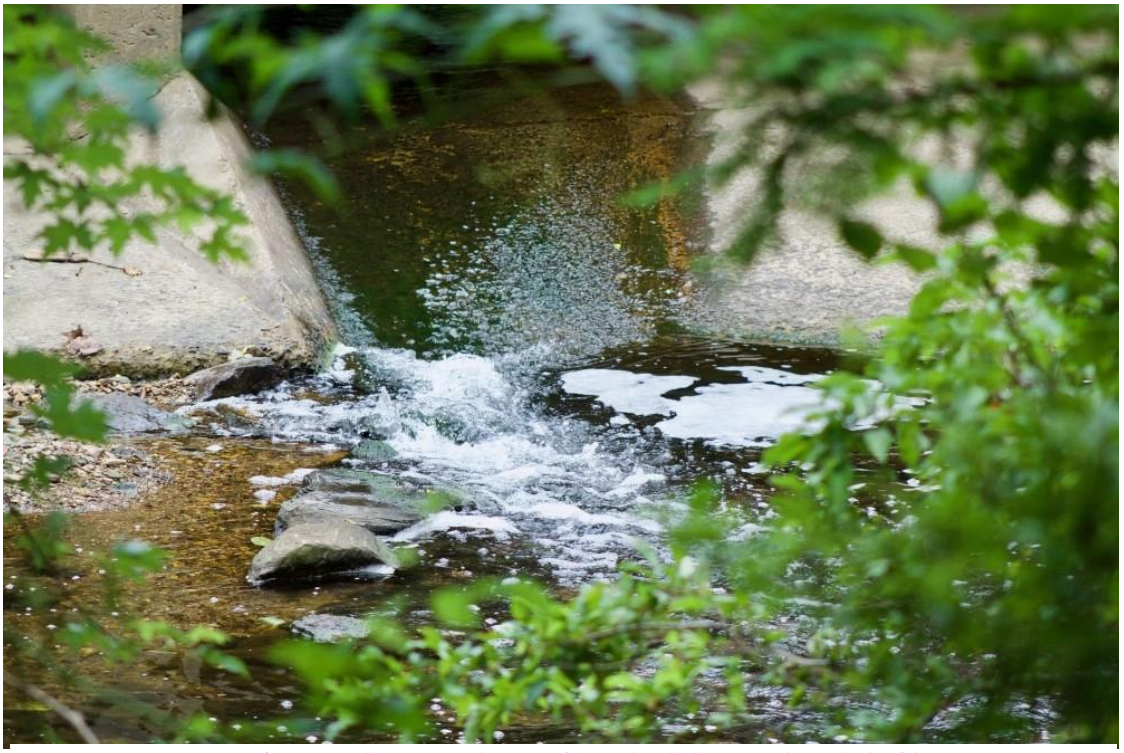
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Private: Amphibious Ambiguity

Posted by SAMUSA *on* JULY 23, 2018JULY 23, 2018



A view of Paper Mill Run, a tributary of the Schuylkill River, through the foliage

Participating in the Schuylkill River Research Corps' On-Water Intensive provided me an opportunity to step out of the classroom, out of the library, and out into Philadelphia's urban watershed. While out on the water, I experienced firsthand how our rivers–the Delaware, the Schuylkill, and their countless tributaries–are constantly in flux; at any given moment, the current, tide, weather, and curvature of the banks shape the water's flow. Conditions on and of the water are subject to change at a moment's notice. "Static" simply cannot be found in a river's vocabulary, and even the most carefully constructed plans can be dashed by the weather, misunderstandings, accidents, and countless other unforeseen events.



Built infrastructure submerged in Paper Mill Run

I contend, then, that rivers are both in and out of our control, or under and not under our influence. For example, humanity can only impede the movement of water with serious technological and mechanical intervention; one person won't stop the flow of the Delaware. Yet, the climate as a whole (of which the river is an integral part) experiences each day the influence exerted upon it by all of humanity, especially as our activities spur global warming and climate change. The state of being both can be described as a state of ambiguity. Amphibious research conditions, bringing academic and community research to and onto the water, breed these ambiguities, which help to simultaneously sharpen and problematize my understandings of my own research, scholarship, career, and life.



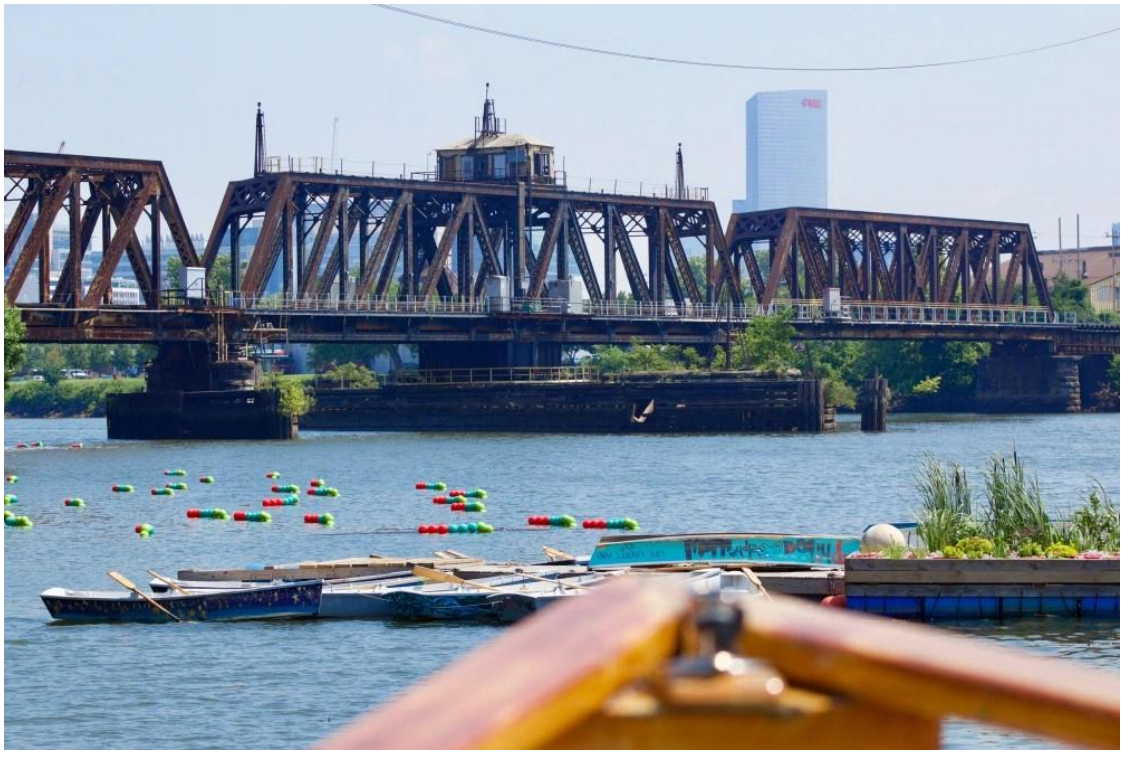
Presumably a storm-water drain, for the moments when the planned infrastructure fails to contain floodwaters as hoped for or planned

Moments on the water when things go wrong (or, rather, simply not as planned) remind us that these mechanisms, objects, and events are both in and out of our control. I can choose what to target and how to react to events, but I cannot always choose how those events unfold. For my research, embracing ambiguity means le ing go of prior plans and drafts when they no longer serve the project's core goals. This summer, my most important task consists of creating a framework for my project and at least one example instance, such as shaping a single stop of a larger tour, so that more work can be done by future stakeholders later on.



Life on the banks of the Schuylkill River

In my scholarship, career, and life, the key is flexibility: maintaining academic goals and making plans, but also allowing these to change as other parts of my work and life require. My speed may ebb and flow, and I am, as an individual, subject to forces that are simultaneously in and out of my control. I cannot change the fact that a series of physical ailments have left me ill, but I can choose to let myself rest so that I may return to full strength faster. I am more than willing to open up to heretofore unthought possibilities and try new paths, while ending others, as they reveal themselves. Our amphibiously ambiguous time on the water lends this new perspective to both my research and life.



A view of the Schuylkill intermingled with its built environment