

**PHOTOGRAPHIC CURRENTS: THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY US RIVER
SERIES OF JOHN P. DOREMUS, CARLETON WATKINS, AND TIMOTHY
O’SULLIVAN**

KATHERINE D. MITCHELL

Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2024

Major Professor: Kim Sichel, Ph.D., Professor of History of Art and Architecture

ABSTRACT

My dissertation examines serial river photographs, multi-part works in which the images are given a prescribed viewing order, that were made in the United States in the nineteenth century. I argue that the photographs in these projects act as sites of interaction between river use and the discipline of photography, two individual but intertwined instruments of expansion and imperialism. Interpreting them as series highlights the inherent contradictions and instabilities of the US settler colonial project. Each of my three chapters focuses on a single series, album, or set of photographs of a river in the western United States: John P. Doremus’s stereoview set *Doremus’ Views of the Mississippi and Its Tributaries* (ca. 1870s), Carleton Watkins’s album *Photographs of the Columbia River and Oregon* (photographs 1867, published 1872), and the series of Colorado River photographs Timothy O’Sullivan took during the 1871 season of

the Wheeler Survey. The three photographic sets date to the years immediately around 1870, during the surge of landscape photography that followed the Civil War and accompanied increased exploration of the US west for industrial purposes, railroad construction, and settlement by Euro-Americans. Each set represents a different production context: Doremus was an entrepreneur engaged in a private commercial venture to transform the river into viewing spectacle, Watkins had corporate backing and self-published albums for industrial patrons, and O'Sullivan was a member of a government-sponsored military survey. By bringing these three projects together my dissertation demonstrates that the strategies employed by Doremus, who renders the Mississippi pleasant and accessible, and Watkins, who masterfully combines representations of both nature and industry, sometimes in a single image, break down when O'Sullivan attempts to redeploy them along the Colorado. Using approaches from material culture studies and social and environmental art history, I explore how these three sets of photographs actively celebrate and promote environmental alteration and exert narrative structure over waterways that repeatedly demonstrate their own agency.