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The cover image is of St. Anthony Falls Lock, closed in June 2015. Image courtesy River Life, University of Minnesota.

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University of Minnesota

Contact Us

Open Rivers
Institute for Advanced Study
University of Minnesota
Northrop
84 Church Street SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Telephone: (612) 626-5054
Fax: (612) 625-8583
E-mail: openrvrs@umn.edu
Web Site: <http://openrivers.umn.edu>

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PRIMARY SOURCES

MINNEAPOLIS' UPPER HARBOR TERMINAL: A GEOSTORY OF COLLABORATIVE CREATION

By Laurie Moberg

Embedded in landscapes are the social histories of how a space has been shaped and reshaped by human and nonhuman forces over time. Each reinvigoration of a geography to suit human interests, desires, even human understandings of nonhuman capacities leaves traces, sometimes obscuring, eroding, or even erasing the previous human intentions. Yet how do our iterative landscape reconfigurations demonstrate our understanding of the material earth and its dynamic capacities? In the era of the Anthropocene, as arguments articulate how human projects and practices have irreparably altered and continue to transform the planet geologically, ecologically, and atmospherically, I pose this question neither as a theoretical enterprise of intellectual abstraction nor as a call for scrutiny of ecological changes or archaeological evidence. Instead, I ask this question in this way because the era of the Anthropocene is both daunting and full of potential: daunting because we teeter near the precipice of an irreversible tipping point beyond which humanity's existence is drawn into question; full of potential because in the face of an uncertain future, we have the capacity to reevaluate our histories and reimagine our relationships with the planet in more collaborative terms.

So what happens when we reposition humanity not as the central figure in shaping the world but as one of many co-creating agents, from rivers to fiber optic cables to insects? Social theorist Bruno Latour suggests that recognizing that we share agency with the earth and create the world together is a step toward beginning to tell what he calls "our common geostory" (2014:3). Using the following three images, I'd like to begin to tell a kind of abbreviated historic geostory grounded in a particular place: a stretch of the Mississippi River abutted by what is currently known as the Upper Harbor Terminal (UHT) in north Minneapolis. Perhaps not particularly photogenic or scenic according to typical aesthetic standards, this stretch of riverfront between the Lowry Avenue and Camden bridges on the west bank of the Mississippi River has been repeatedly reconfigured to suit the needs and visions of a particular period. The images here show three configurations of the UHT landscape across a century. Together, these images demonstrate the temporal layering of a physical and social landscape, highlighting changes over time; my analysis aims to illuminate how these changes emerge at the intersection of humans and nonhumans, and point us toward an alternative perception and ethic of co-creating the world.

The Logging Trunk Line

At the turn of the twentieth century, much of Minneapolis' riverfront area was dominated by mills. As the St. Anthony Falls area became the primary home for flour mills, lumber mills eventually moved upstream to more spacious sites that could accommodate the need for growing lumber and train yards. From the 1890s through the first decade of the 1900s, the UHT in north Minneapolis was a key lumbering hub for the Upper Midwest, and the Mississippi River became a prosperous trunk line, carrying

felled trees downstream from across northern Minnesota.

The Bovey-DeLaittre sawmill and lumber yard pictured here was one of the myriad successful lumbering enterprises in Minneapolis. Opening its doors in 1869, the Bovey-DeLaittre sawmill found security by providing for lumber yards in smaller, rapidly developing agricultural prairie towns across the Upper Midwest (Larson [1949] 2007). After fire took their first sawmill operation



*Bovey-DeLaittre sawmill and lumberyard, circa 1905, photographed by Elgin R. Shepard.
Image used with permission of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

on the east side of St. Anthony Falls, the Bovey-DeLaittre Company rebuilt upstream on what was previously farmland (Hotchkiss 1898) and what would later become the UHT. They remained at that site until closing their doors permanently in 1915 (Larson [1949] 2007).

In this image, human effort, industrial prowess, and development drive are evident. This era of American growth transformed forests into economic resources and rivers like the Mississippi into conduits for expanding the logging enterprise. In this portion of the geostory, the material presence of the river is a critical contributor to the shape of the UHT. The image shows the way log booms were erected in the water, the way the waters carried the logs and directed them to their destination. What it cannot show, however,

is that the logging industry depended on early spring flows of meltwater to make the rivers run high enough and forcefully enough to carry their timbers downstream. By reevaluating the mighty force of the river waters in this image, we can begin to appreciate the waters not as manipulated by human ingenuity but as a partner in shaping and reshaping the material and social worlds of the logging era. After 1905, logging companies would gradually begin to close their doors; fewer and fewer logs would flow on the Mississippi's mainstream to Minneapolis. The river that carved its course through the area long before the logging industry fleetingly marshalled its forces for particular ends, however, would continue to flow and to design the social and geological landscape into the future.

The River at the Center

In the 1940s, the lumber business in Minneapolis had disappeared as the northern pine and fir sources diminished and the UHT site was in the process of a reformulation. After years of negotiations with the Army Corps of Engineers and federal legislators and offices, Minneapolis received congressional support and funding to build the Upper and Lower St. Anthony locks and dams (City of Minneapolis and Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board 2016). The aerial image here from the United States Geological Survey (USGS) was taken in 1947 as the Army Corps of Engineers made plans for the locks and dams that would allow for an industrial port upstream from downtown Minneapolis.

Complementary to the preliminary planning process for the UHT, this aerial image is somewhat indiscriminate in what it depicts: residential streets, industrial spaces, railroad tracks, bridges, and, of course, the Mississippi River as the centerpiece. Here, the river runs like a dark, narrow band dotted with islands, its subtle curves disrupting the linear grid of city streets. The area

that would become the UHT is featured along the lower west bank of the Mississippi River, distinguishable because it lacks the tree canopy and gridded repetition of neighboring urban residential landscapes. This riverfront area, previously occupied by lumber yards and later a shipping terminal, creates a border territory between the river and the residential spaces of north Minneapolis.

In the context of planning for the UHT, this image suggests a particular set of human relations with and understandings of the river: specifically, that rivers can be manipulated for human designs. For example, look at the islands protruding from the river in this aerial photo. While the logs floating downstream in a previous era could be maneuvered to avoid these obstacles during the high waters of spring, a shipping terminal would require a more consistent channel and flow that the islands might obstruct. In the context of 1947 imaginings, this photo indexes a set of human aspirations to restructure the waterway to better serve shipping interests. By the 1930s, the Army

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Corps of Engineers was invested in the nine-foot channel navigation project, which promised deep and consistent shipping avenues (US Army Corps of Engineers 2016). The St. Anthony locks and dams would eventually comply with these standards as well, thus necessarily changing the contours of this stretch of the Upper Mississippi. This image captures a critical moment before this future was enacted, a moment when other futures could have been imagined, but which have since been foreclosed, a moment when a particular

understanding of what the river should do for people was organized into the landscape.

Yet even as these plans formed the social and physical landscape, they were informed and ultimately reformed in part due to the untamable capacities of the river itself. The geostory is never complete.



*Aerial photo of north Minneapolis and the UHT area, 1947 (north is the top of the image).
USGS Open Access.*

The Upper Harbor Terminal and Its Futures

The final temporal layer is a photo of the Upper Harbor Terminal in action. Taken in the early years of the twenty-first century, the image shows the terminal as an industrial shipping center with mounds of coal, gravel, and road salt on the bank and barges aligning the water's edge. The UHT opened in the 1960s after the completion of both the Lower and Upper St. Anthony locks and dams made it accessible to barges and boats. Eventually the UHT replaced the municipal

port at Bohemian Flats, a downstream area beneath the Washington Avenue Bridge. With the skyline of the Minneapolis skyscrapers in the background, the UHT is positioned as feeding the economic development and growth of the metropolitan area. Once a productive port, The UHT remained an active barge terminal even as the site grew to be financially insolvent. As trains and trucking routes via Interstate-94 (visible on the right/west in this image) increasingly became



The UHT as an active port terminal, circa 2005, looking south toward Minneapolis. Image from the Metropolitan Design Center Image Bank. Copyright Regents of the University of Minnesota, used with permission.

the more economical choices for the transport of goods, the barge terminal became unsustainable. Minneapolis opted to close the terminal in 2014, opening its many acres for more fiscally responsible and possibly more community-engaged enterprises. The closure of the Upper St. Anthony lock followed the next year. As a result, the UHT is being redeveloped once again as a federal “Promise Zone” with both private and public interests guiding its revitalization.

The UHT as an active port terminal, circa 2005, looking south toward Minneapolis. Image from the Metropolitan Design Center Image Bank. Copyright Regents of the University of Minnesota, used with permission.

The UHT as an active port terminal, circa 2005, looking south toward Minneapolis. Image from the Metropolitan Design Center Image Bank. Copyright Regents of the University of Minnesota, used with permission.

This photo taken before the harbor closed reflects one set of human relations with the river – economic, industrial, and detached – that aligns with the development trajectory of the UHT’s geostory. The river’s capacities to carry have been molded to be useful to the changing forms of human needs; over time the river became a resource to be used and engineered, a means for economic development in the eyes of many. This stretch of river is grounded in and has enabled these relations for over a century, but the geostory – like the materials that form it – is ever-evolving, constantly in a state of becoming something different. As the future of this place is being reshaped once again, we have reached a critical moment when human relations with the river can be reconfigured to reflect an alternative ethos, possibly an ethos of collaboration and co-creation.

How might our understanding of the Mississippi River change if we considered it a collaborator in our projects, endowed with the agencies to participate in or disrupt our human designs? How

might our practices change if we considered the river as kin like many indigenous people do, from the Dakota of the Midwestern U.S. to the Karen of Southeast Asia? How might our geostory change if we consider rivers like the Mississippi to be storytellers themselves (McLean 2009)? Perhaps in reimagining the social and physical landscape of a place, we can begin a practice not only of seeing rivers as collaborating with us, but also of seeing humans as collaborating with rivers. After all, as anthropologist Hugh Raffles explains, nonhumans are “not just deeply present in the world but deeply there, creating it, too” (2010:3).

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About the Author

Laurie Moberg is a PhD candidate in anthropology at the University of Minnesota. Her work investigates recurrent episodes of flooding on rivers in Thailand and queries how the ecological, social, and cosmological entanglements between humans and nonhumans, people and the material world, are reimagined and reconfigured in an era of global climate change. She is the 2016-2017 Graduate Research Assistant for Open Rivers at the Institute for Advanced Study.