

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

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A SECRET HISTORY OF AMERICAN RIVER PEOPLE

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

In

DIGITAL ART AND NEW MEDIA

By

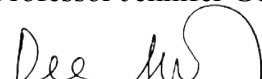
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June 2015

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Abstract

A Secret History of American River People is a project to recreate a 1940s shantyboat for a series of epic river voyages in order to build a collection of personal stories of people who live and work on the river. The project is a touring participatory installation, an interactive web documentary, and a research archive—all near-term outcomes of the project.

Using research from fieldwork on the Upper Mississippi River and experiences from a variety of rivers in the Midwest and West Coast, my goal is to create a dialogic and participatory art piece, firmly rooted in a people's history tradition, that reexamine the issues currently and historically faced by people living or working on the river with particular attention to the invisible stories of native people, working people, people of color, and women, to create a multi-perspective and multi-path take on historical narrative, to explore the importance of a public commons, and to challenge dominant cultural assumptions about the role in society of people living at the fringe.

A variety of platforms allow the project to reach audiences inside and beyond museum spaces. A touring art installation to be sited at galleries, museums, and educational institutions is intended to reach an audience that includes artists, museumgoers, and academics. The shantyboat serves as the primary artistic focus of the project, serving not only as the expedition vessel but the project library and archive. An interactive web documentary will reach an online audience and provide an opportunity to experience *Secret History* outside of a gallery. The web version of *Secret History* strives to educate and inspire visitors about the history of and contemporary issues facing people who make the river their work and home.

Dedication



Figure 1. Woodcut by Harlan Hubbard.

Dedicated to Dorothy Clementine Lamborn Ansite, my grandma, for whom the shantyboat Dotty is named and to whom I'm indebted for my sense of art and adventure.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to my thesis committee chair UCSC Professor Jennifer Gonzales, who demanded more rigor, deeper readings, and greater breadth of research; to committee member UCSC Professor Dee Hibbert-Jones, whose insightful artistic intuition guided me to stronger, more conceptually-grounded work; to committee member UCSC Professor Irene Gustafson who urged me to look at things differently and to examine other perspectives; and to committee member UCSC Professor Chris Connery whose support over the years helped lead me here.

Thanks to friends and mentors Robin Chandler, UCSC Associate University Librarian and Nina Simon, executive director of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History for suggestions, connections, and inspiration. Thanks to UCSC regional oral history manager Irene Reti for teaching me about oral history and introducing me to the work of the Oral History Association.

Professors Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Michael Mateas in the UCSC Computational Media department offered patience, feedback, and insight for the two years I was in the Playable Media project group.

Thanks to UCSC undergraduates Monica Yap, Regina Ortanez, and Kyle Doria for collaborating with me on the project—editing, transcribing, storyboarding, and producing chapters of the web documentary for nearly an entire year—without whom the project would not have had nearly the scope it did. To undergraduate Jacob Simowitz for doing all of the above and creating beautiful shantyboat-inspired art for the project. To Lauren Kincaid-Filbey for producing the first great trailer for the project.

Thanks to the eleven talented artists in my cohort in the UCSC Digital Art and New Media program for inspiration and an incredible sense of camaraderie.

Thanks to all the many friends who helped with the project financially, conceptually, and physically over many weekends spent building the shantyboat. Thanks to Lawrence and Dorothy Manzo for offering to host the boat while it was being built and for extending that offer as the shantyboat project turned into the *Secret History* project.

Particular thanks to Kai Dalglish for not only crewing on the boat during summer fieldwork 2014, but for untold days and days of work on the shantyboat and for sharing my aesthetic vision. Your technical know-how was invaluable and the project could not have happened without you.

Thanks also to Jeremiah Daniels for crewing on the boat in 2014 and 2015, helping organize difficult tasks, and rescuing us during various cross-country breakdowns. Thanks to all the crew lined up for 2015 summer fieldwork.

Huge thank you to Jennifer Bushard and Jason Arredondo who were my raft companions on all of the punk rafting journeys from 2006 to 2010—not to mention kept our shared house together during the two intense years of the MFA program. Thank you to my family and friends, Sia Delacosta, Kiyana Modes, and Daniella Irish who were incredibly patient and understanding while I was gobbled up by grad school.

Thank you to Alex Stevens, Shanai Matteson, John Sullivan, and Sara Lubinski who served as “connectors” directly or indirectly to dozens of people in their areas as we moved down the river.

Finally, tremendous thanks for all the invaluable generosity of people who allowed me, a stranger, to come into their world and conduct in-depth interviews and commit their words and images to the *Secret History* archive.

Introduction

A rustic recreated 1940s shantyboat, a series of daring river voyages, and a meticulous archive of river stories are all part of a multi-year art and history project, *A Secret History of American River People*.

Secret History is the culmination of an artist's dream to build a replica of an early 20th century shantyboat from scratch and float down the great Mississippi River, listening to the stories of river people. It is an attempt to step into the river of history. Swimming through narrative, immersed in personal histories, the project travels through the conflicting and complementary stories of river people and the landscape in which they live.

In summer 2014, inspired by historical accounts of shantyboaters on the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, I set out on a journey to record the would-be lost histories of river communities. In the tradition of Howard Zinn's People's History projects, *A Secret History of American River People* uncovers these hidden stories and brings them to life.

John and Alan Lomax, famed 20th Century folklorists, ethnomusicologists, archivists, and song and story collectors, have also inspired me to collect stories for years. Alan Lomax and his father John collected over ten thousand field recordings for the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress and credited with fueling the folk revival of the 1940s through 1960s. Alan Lomax was also an early oral historian recording interviews with important folk, blues and jazz musicians, including Woody Guthrie, Jean Ritchie, Muddy Waters, Lead Belly, and Jelly Roll Morton.

Reading memoirs of people taking real-life river journeys, I encountered many references to the common sight of shantyboats lining the banks of most towns before the mid-1950s. I was inspired to research the history of these communities. The biographies of Harlan Hubbard, an

artist who lived with his wife Anna in a shantyboat on the banks of the Ohio River for many years, inspired me. Harlan and Anna Hubbard built their shantyboat of reclaimed materials and floated down the Ohio to the Mississippi and from there to New Orleans and eventually the bayous of Louisiana. He brought an artist's view of river life and a sensibility reminiscent of a 20th century Henry David Thoreau. It is hard not to read Harlan's lyrical writing and see his paintings and woodcuts and not want to experience life on the river.

The true shantyboater has a purer love for the river than had his drifting flatboat predecessors... To him the river is more than a means of livelihood. It is a way of life, the only one he knows which answers his inmate longing to be untrammelled and independent, to live on the fringe of society, almost beyond the law, beyond taxes and ownership of property. His drifting down stream is as natural to him as his growing old in the stream of time (Hubbard, 1977, p. 3).

For the most part, shantyboating is a thing of the past, displaced by changing economics and laws. Even in the early 1950s, Harlan Hubbard observed that he was an endangered breed.

It is to be regretted that the race of shantyboaters is dying out. Today you are likely to find even an active fisherman living in a house on land, or in a trailer. Those who still live on the water have motorboats to shove their fleet upstream – and down, too– So that the art of drifting is forgotten. The younger generation seem to have interest away from the river. They will never be able to tell the tales their granddads can (Hubbard, 1953, p. 3).

Now these riverside districts, bottomland slums, and long-gone shantyboat communities are either abandoned or displaced, all going or gone.

Other inspirational river memoirs include Clarence Jonk's *River Journey*, a college student's Mississippi River shantyboat voyage during the Great Depression, and Harold Speakman's *Mostly Mississippi*, a canoe and shantyboat journey from the headwaters of the Mississippi to New Orleans in the late 1920s. Kent and Margaret Lighty's *Shanty-Boat* describes their Mississippi River journey several generations earlier.



Figure 2. Clarence Jonk and friends building the Betsy-Nell.

Also influential was Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree*, a semi-autobiographical novel about a man who lives in a shantyboat on the banks of the Tennessee and French Broad Rivers in Knoxville, Tennessee in the early 1950s. He is a part-time fisherman and mussel shell collector living at the edge of society, befriending bootleggers, prostitutes, junk collectors, scavengers, and homeless people.

The history of poor people living on or adjacent to the river is not well documented, beyond river memoirs, fiction, and pulp novels. Though part of the American landscape for more than a century, there is very little written about the history of shantyboats and boathouse communities. Even broadening the search to include areas of poor and immigrant communities living adjacent to rivers, the research pickings are quite slim.

The work of Howard Zinn was my introduction to social history and remains an important influence on both my politics and my choice to examine the history of the river through the personal stories of people who live and work on it. Zinn (1991) argued that the process of selection and human subjectivity ensured that history could never be an objective chronicle of Truth. Zinn wrote in *Declarations of Independence*: "All written history is partial in

two senses. It is partial in that it is only a tiny part of what really happened. That is a limitation that can never be overcome. And it is partial in that it inevitably takes sides, by what it includes or omits, what it emphasizes or deemphasizes. It may do this openly or deceptively, consciously or subconsciously” (p. 43). If a historian necessarily takes sides in what he or she includes or excludes in historical narrative, Zinn stressed the importance of transparency about a historian’s point-of-view. He makes his point-of-view clear in the first chapter of *People’s History of the United States*:

My viewpoint, in telling the history of the United States, is different: that we must not accept the memory of states as our own. Nations are not communities and never have been. The history of any country, presented as the history of a family, conceals fierce conflicts of interest (sometimes exploding, most often repressed) between conquerors and conquered, masters and slaves, capitalists and workers, dominators and dominated in race and sex. And in such a world of conflict, a world of victims and executioners, it is the job of thinking people, as Albert Camus suggested, not to be on the side of the executioners (Zinn, 1980, p. 9).

In *People’s History*, Zinn offers a different viewpoint on the grand narrative presented in establishment history books. “Thus, in that inevitable taking of sides which comes from selection and emphasis in history, I prefer to try to tell the story of the discovery of America from the viewpoint of the Arawaks, of the Constitution from the standpoint of the slaves... And so on, to the limited extent that any one person, however he or she strains, can ‘see’ history from the standpoint of others” (Zinn, 1980, p. 10). The further I read about people’s history, what E.P. Thompson called “history from below” and what Keith Jenkins (1997) called *postmodern history*, the more I realize that *Secret History* is not just about stepping into history, but stepping into a debate about history, a open-ended conflict about the nature of the discipline of history—or History rather, depending on your side in the debate.

History, in the modernist tradition, is a story arc about great men, nation states, agreements and conflicts, and moments of upheaval, a steady march toward progress. This view was at times re-jiggered to grudgingly admit the stories of working class struggles, anti-racist or post-colonialist viewpoints. But as Jenkins (1997) points out, “Both bourgeois and proletarian ideologies therefore expressed their historical trajectories in versions of the past/history articulated in the upper case (as History with a capital H)” (p. 5). Or put another way, both camps may have struggled over the narrative, but both were guilty of “looking at the past in terms which assigned to contingent events and situations an objective significance by identifying their place and function within a general schema of historical development usually construed as appropriately progressive” (p. 5). Jenkins sounds the death knell for modernist history: “We have witnessed the attendant collapse of histories in the upper case; nobody believes in those particular fantasies any more” (p. 5). It is unclear who Jenkins considers “nobody.” For only if it were true. For the most part, every American history textbook still represents the modernist historical view.

Jean-Francois Lyotard points out that a discipline that seeks an objective truth “is obliged to legitimate the rules of its own game. It then produces a discourse of legitimation with respect to its own status,” and must appeal to some grand metanarrative. If, for example, a philosophy of history is used to legitimate historical knowledge, “questions are raised concerning the validity of the institutions governing the social bond: these must be legitimated as well.” Postmodernity is marked by an “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Jenkins, 1997, p. 36). A people's history project does not merely seek to widen the circle and bring more voices into establishment history, but to challenge the way history is told and what we consider relevant to a historical narrative. The everyday stories of people's lives are as important as History with a capital H, and

form a historical collage of overlapping, complimentary and contradictory stories. So I want to be clear about my point of view. I am primarily interested in the personal narrative of ordinary people, boatbuilders, bartenders, people who live along the river, artists, and adventurers. I am interested in the stories of those whose stories seldom get told.

E.P. Thompson laid the groundwork for a shift from the grand narrative to a people's history in his essay "History From Below" pointing out the historical significance of the lives of ordinary people in an example from the industrial revolution, which "entailed not only a change in the rate of economic growth; it also entailed far-reaching changes in the way of life of the people. Economic concepts such as 'time-preference' and the 'backward sloping labour supply curve' are (somewhat clumsy) attempts to describe wider sociological problems" (p. 487).

The late twentieth century history battles echo art battles around the same time, both of which intersect with the *Secret History* project. E.P. Thompson wrote "At a certain point one ceases to defend a certain view of history; one must defend history itself" (p. 487). Certainly there are historians who vocally attempt to disqualify bottom-up history as historical revisionism or the dabblings of would-be sociologists. Or as Thompson put it, they argue that "the very attempt to introduce sociological evidence must be inadmissible, since this evidence would challenge the authority of the court, or at least its claim to all-embracing jurisdiction" (p. 487). In the oral history tradition, I am committed to letting people's stories speak for themselves. Therefore, I am conscious about adding a curatorial and editorial layer to these river stories, and resolve to tread lightly where it is inevitable. There is a rich crossover in these areas of art and history. Participatory and conversational art practice often involves sharing of personal experience, and sometimes includes the explicit gathering of participant's oral histories.

Pare Lorentz' *The River* (1938) was an influential film about the Mississippi River, a

grand narrative of epic landscapes, devastating conflicts, tireless industry, and merciless floods. It argues for a progressive agenda (“We fought a war and kept the west bank of the river free of slavery forever”) while stumping on behalf of the federal government who sponsored the project for the locks, dams, and levees that many people told me destroyed the Mississippi River: “Flood control of the Mississippi means control in the great Delta that must carry all the water brought down from two-thirds the continent” (Lorentz, 1938).

If *The River* is the definitive modernist epic of the Mississippi River, *Secret History* is its antithesis, told from the bottom-up, full of contrasting and complimentary stories of river people told in their own voices.

Secret History was conceived as a kind of rural *dérive*, a Situationist technique that literally means “to drift,” appropriately enough.

Dérives involve playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll. In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there (Debord, 1956).

In a *dérive* one adopts simple constraints that frame the journey while allowing the environment and the unexpected to make their impressions. In *Secret History*, interviewees are selected partly by chance and connection, events and timetables are mutable and unpredictable, while the place and the people make an impression on the artist and on the project. Listening is critical part of the voyage and a way of giving something back. My intention was to discover communities of shantyboaters as I drifted, and failing that, stories of the river and how it has changed.

For me, it goes back to the river, these forgotten waterways that flow through most

towns, often culverted, hidden behind levees, shoved underground or behind the grubbiest neighborhood. The former arteries of America, the way goods and services and people got around. Rivers and bays and estuaries, formerly so important they get special attention in the constitution of many U.S. states and commonwealths.

One of the surprising epiphanies on the *Secret History* journeys is that we are all river people. As humans, we depend on, and indeed are made of, water. The rivers that run through our towns and cities are not merely incidental aspects of local geography. Our towns and cities are located to take advantage of the river's contribution to transportation, agriculture, and the availability of fresh water. Today, rivers are an actively contested landscape with the process of gentrification much in evidence. For cities attempting to reestablish a connection to their rivers, the impulse is to create a shiny, clean and sanitized parkland—a kind of mall with a river running through it—rather than a wild and natural waterway. Urban rivers are the site of concrete abutments, river walks, riverside parks, aggressive policing, and the removal of riparian shrubs and foliage to discourage unauthorized use, such as squatting. These restrictions are a continuation of historic *enclosures* of the public commons.

Silvia Federici (2004) talking about her experiences in Nigeria with Neo-Liberalism in the mid 1980's writes, "I realized that the struggle against structural adjustment is part of a long struggle against land privatization and the 'enclosure' not only of communal lands but also of social relations that stretches back to the origin of capitalism in 16th-century Europe and America." She relates this type of enclosure of public spaces, the commons, with a loss of our common history, an observation that has guided me toward a *Secret History* for the last ten years: "I confronted a different type of 'enclosure': the enclosure of knowledge, that is, the increasing loss, among the new generations, of the historical sense of our common past" (pp. 9-

10).

A shantyboat is a small crude houseboat (also called a flatboat, broadhorn, barge, scow, or ark). During the 19th century into the 1950s, people lived in shantyboats along the canals and rivers of industrial American towns, places for itinerant workers, miners, fishermen, displaced farmers, and factory workers. Historically, working-class and impoverished people were a critical part of the wealth and history of river valleys and waterways: the people who brought the fish, who built the ships, who picked the crops.

The riversides were often wild places at the fringe edges of society, commonly home to bootleggers, sex workers, thieves, and squatters (Katz 1975, p. 35). Minneapolis, Knoxville, Cincinnati, Louisville, Chicago, Portland, and numerous towns, on the Mississippi River, the Illinois, the Ohio, the Tennessee, the Willamette, rivers and lakes and waterways all over the continent. This report from the 1911 Pittsburgh Post-Gazette gives both a flavor of the riverside and public's impression of it: "A posse of Arkansas officials attempted to raid a floating saloon doing a large business in a dry town last year and met a full-fledged battle. The aquatic bootleggers won the lay and escaped in their gasoline saloon. It is said that the first shantyboat built on the Mississippi was made for the purpose of dispensing liquor contrary to law, and there are still shantyboats engaged in the same business." Now, not only the shantyboats are gone, but the wild river banks, the river-based industry, and even the towns and neighborhoods adjacent to the river.

I observed from my readings that people's river journeys were clustered around certain years, especially the late 19th century and between the world wars. Working-class people living and traveling on the water corresponds to economic conditions, the boom and bust cycles of capitalism: the recession in the 1890s, the recession of the 1920s, the Great Depression of the

1930s, the recession in the mid 1970s, and the Great Recession in the late 2000s. In the fallout from the U.S. economic collapse in 1893, thousands of families left their homes in the upper Mississippi Valley in home-built shantyboats to look for work along the more industrialized lower Mississippi River and Ohio River Valleys. In the 1930s, displaced and jobless people took to the waters, to live or to travel to look for work (Jonk, 1964; Rankin, 1991). Dozens of published chronicles of these family sojourns are still available.

During the 1960s and 70s, a water-based analogue of the Back To The Land movement blossomed in leftover houseboat communities. People looked to the relative freedom of rivers, lakes, and seas, especially in West Coast floating communities in Sausalito, California, Seattle, Washington, and Portland, Oregon (Friedlander, 2013). Largely class-based conflicts between these houseboat communities and land-based homeowners decimated these communities. The result being that the idiosyncratic shantyboats of the West Coast have slowly been replaced with expensive waterfront floating homes.

More recently, young middle-class men and women, principally from young, politically radical communities, have taken to the river in homemade houseboats to voyage on the Mississippi, the Ohio, the Missouri and other rivers. These journeys taken largely for the adventure of it, are variously documented in homemade ‘zines and a few small books such as Robert Earl Sutter’s combination DIY boat manual and adventure story *Unsinkable*.

If the history of poor people is not well known, the history of poor people of color, native people, and women who live on the river is completely invisible. I’m drawn to uncovering this invisible history, difficult as it is to dig up. No history of river people, in general, and the Upper Mississippi, in particular, could be complete without the voices of native people. On the Upper Mississippi River, this includes the Dakota and Ojibwe (Chippewe) people. Dakota people refer

to the area between Minneapolis and St. Paul as the *bdote*, a sacred site at the confluences of the *Haha Tanka* (river of the waterfall), *Wakpa Tanka* (big river), and the *Mnisota Wakpa* (Minnesota River). The pre-civil war Fort Snelling was strategically placed here to control the Dakota people in this area and served as a concentration camp during the “Indian Wars” of the mid 1800s.

While many of the native communities on the river are located closer to the headwaters of the Mississippi River north of Minneapolis, outside of the range of the *Secret History* fieldwork, the rights of native people are still very much a current issue in the Twin Cities area. Under an 1837 treaty the hunting and fishing rights of the Ojibwe Nations were guaranteed in perpetuity but were restricted by state law until a Supreme Court decision in 1999 reaffirmed the tribe’s treaty rights over state laws (Loew & Thannum, 2011). Annually, Ojibwe and people from other Indian nations reassert this right by taking game and fish days before the official season opens, sometimes drawing conflict with local fishing and hunting communities (AP, 2011).

The Prairie Island Indian Community (PIIC) is a Mdewakanton Dakota community located on the banks of the Mississippi River north of Red Wing squarely in my fieldwork area. Mdewakanton means “those who were born of the waters.” Controversy erupted in the 1970s and 80s when a nuclear power station with above ground nuclear waste storage facility was sited less than a mile of the PIIC community. Though I have reliable contacts, I attempted and failed to interview members of the community during 2014 winter fieldwork, a lack I plan to address during 2015 summer fieldwork.

Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* centers on the moral conflict of African-Americans enslaved in the Mississippi basin. However, in Hannibal, Missouri, Twain’s hometown, one can

tour the “Tom and Becky Museum” and “Injun Joe’s Cave,” but the tours fail to mention that Hannibal, Missouri hosted a major slave market. Even the new interpretive museum in Hannibal I visited in the early 2000’s failed to mention this. And like most of America, the tours and museums politely gloss over mention of the native people pushed aside by European guns and disease. The history of African American slavery is tied to the history of the entire Mississippi River and even includes accounts of slaves held in the upper Mississippi River Valley from the Revolutionary War until the end of the Civil War. There are also significant abolitionist efforts documented in the upper Mississippi River Valley.

There are many historic narratives of African Americans working on the Lower Mississippi, but fewer above St. Louis. For instance, African slaves played an early part in the formation of the modern Mississippi River. In the early 19th century African slaves built the first levies on the lower Mississippi. A 100 years later, a half century after slavery was abolished, African American plantation workers were forced to work in hazardous conditions to shore up levies in the Great Flood of 1927, and as the waters rose, were left stranded for days without provisions while white women and children were hauled to safety. In another example, African American’s working on or near the Mississippi helped connect otherwise isolated black communities. “Riverside African Americans joined with mobile workers to establish a variety of social networks that defied the isolation and commodification of the slave market” (Buchanan, 2004). And black steamboat workers held an important source of income to both slave and free African American communities.

While much has been written about the immigrant experience in rural America, women and their service remained invisible. For the most part, their stories remain in the shadow of their male companions. There are the inevitable firsts, women notable for doing things men had been

doing for some time, but few available stories of women forging their own paths or reflecting on their unique experiences in their occupations. Women served as wives, childcare workers, servants, sex workers, and likely in small numbers in every conceivable occupation, but these stories about women's contributions to river communities are well hidden. Even in Harlan Hubbard's celebrated *Shantyboat* and the subsequent books, his wife and boating partner Anna is overshadowed by Harlan. "In all these writings, however, Anna remains a shadowy figure... Anna did virtually no public writing and left no journal or diary. And so the questions that readers of Harlan's books have always asked about Anna have gone unanswered: What in Anna prepared her for housekeeping on and alongside the river, without electricity? How did she spend her days? What did she think and feel about the life that she had chosen? What was, or at least seemed to be, the nature of her relationship with Harlan? What lay behind her famed reserve?" (Cunningham, 2001). These echo unanswered questions we have for all of the women left out of historical accounts.

Historically, working class and impoverished people, including new immigrants often found the flats adjacent to the river the only space available to them. Bohemian Flats and the Westside Flats were settled first by Scandinavian and then Slovak, Swedish, Czech, Irish, Norwegian and German immigrants looking for work at the mills in Minneapolis. These were the areas that frequently flooded each spring requiring residents to move to their upper stories and use boats to get around (Writers Program, 1975). Southeast Asian and East African immigrants have moved into the Twin Cities region, since the early 1980s due to the humanitarian work of NGOs in the Cities. Hmong people from Laos and Vietnam make up a significant number of the non-commercial fishermen using the Mississippi River in the Twin Cities. I hope to conduct an

interview during summer 2015 fieldwork with the Vietnamese Hmong owner of one of the only bait shops in St. Paul.

Goals, Objectives, and Methods

The goal of the project is to create a powerful tool for learning about the river and people's relationship to it, to create a multi-perspective and multi-path take on historical narrative, and to challenge dominant societal assumptions about the role of people living at the fringe. Most of all, I want to inspire audiences to take river history and draw parallels in addressing challenges in their own time and place. The plan was to create a touring shantyboat installation, an interactive web documentary, and a research archive. Each are detailed below.

A touring art installation sited at galleries, museums, and educational institutions is intended to reach my non-profit audience that includes artists, museum-goers, and university people. The shantyboat serves as the primary artistic focus of the project, serving not only as the expedition vessel but the project library and archive.

The interactive web documentary, also available as part of the installation, reaches an online audience and provides an opportunity to experience *Secret History* outside of a museum or gallery. The web version of *Secret History* strives to educate and inspire visitors about the history of and contemporary issues facing people who make the river their work and home.

In order to meet the project objectives, I used the following methods: gather oral histories, establish a project team, design and create software, create an interactive documentary, and create and exhibit the installation. Additionally, I am committed to further fieldwork and producing a research archive of long form interviews.

Meeting people who work and live on the river, I collected digital video archives of people telling their own stories—the stories of river people, river communities, and the river

itself, including the personal chronicle of my adventure. In order to compile archives useful as primary documents for future scholars, I carefully studied and strove for consistency with Oral History Association methodologies and best practices for compiling oral history interviews (OHA, 2009; Sommer, 2002). I interviewed Upper Mississippi artists, boathouse residents, scientists, researchers, historians, business owners, and adventurers. The first collection of interviews was gathered during fieldwork on the Upper Mississippi in summer of 2014.

In December 2014, I returned to the Upper Mississippi to broaden the pool of interviewees—without the Shantyboat this time—for an additional series of interviews with people who could not be interviewed on the previous trip. In summer 2015, in conjunction with exhibitions in the region, the shantyboat will return to the Upper Mississippi for a summer-long research voyage starting near Winona, Wisconsin where the previous year's journey left off.

In order to accomplish this ambitious project, I formed a research team of undergraduate researchers, Monica Yap, Regina Ortanez, Kyle Doria, and Jake Simowitz, to take on the production of some of the elements of the project, including transcription, cataloging, and creating web content. Additionally, individuals within the team took on diverse independent projects such as researching archival systems, creating video trailers, and finding organizations representing people of color and setting up interviews for summer fieldwork. Students were encouraged to bring diverse interests and skills to the class, as each team member uniquely contributed to the final product, including video production experience, drawing, web development, new media development, historical research, library science, and project management. Members of the research team quickly distinguished themselves as talented producers and artists. This became a critical dialogic part of the project, with the lines blurred between teacher and learners. Team members worked closely with the interviews and later

shaped the stories that became the chapters of the web documentary. Half of the undergraduate researchers stayed with the project for two quarters, and the other half worked on the project the entire academic year. The production team proved so integral to the project that they were listed as contributing artists in the MFA show.

Originally when I set out to make a publically accessible interactive documentary for a *Secret History*, I fully intended to use off-the-shelf software to tell the stories. Having worked for years as the UCSC University Library's Systems Architect and Developer and as the architect for the Grateful Dead Archive Online, I am familiar with content management systems (CMS), from publishing platforms such as WordPress and Drupal to open source archivist platforms such as Omeka. For quite a while, I entertained the notion of customizing an existing CMS, perhaps writing a custom WordPress theme or plug-in.

The Hollow Documentary project served as an inspiration for the interactive documentary portion of *Secret History*. I contacted the developers whose suggestion was “roll your own” (Appendix A).

I originally sought an undergraduate researcher to work as a programmer on the project, but finding that talented person proved so elusive, the production team referred to this hypothetical team member as the “unicorn.” Though I was already managing production, building an installation, producing my own chapters of the doc—with my computer science undergraduate degree and decades of engineering experience—it became obvious that this task would fall to me. I picked up this additional programming responsibility, designing and coding the production backend and the presentation frontend for the project, consisting of 10,000 lines of original code and innumerable libraries totaling half a million lines of code. The interactive

documentary was ready in time for the MFA show and will be publically released pending a number of improvements and additions.

Designing, programming, editing, and producing the interactive web documentary was the most ambitious aspect of the project’s winter/spring objectives. Making this our primary goal in winter and spring quarter, the project team assembled interviews, footage, and stills gathered during fieldwork into stories. These stories were realized on the custom backend chapter editor interface created for the project. The goal was to give a simple interface for researchers to describe the story they wanted to tell and have it rendered in a beautifully interactive web application.

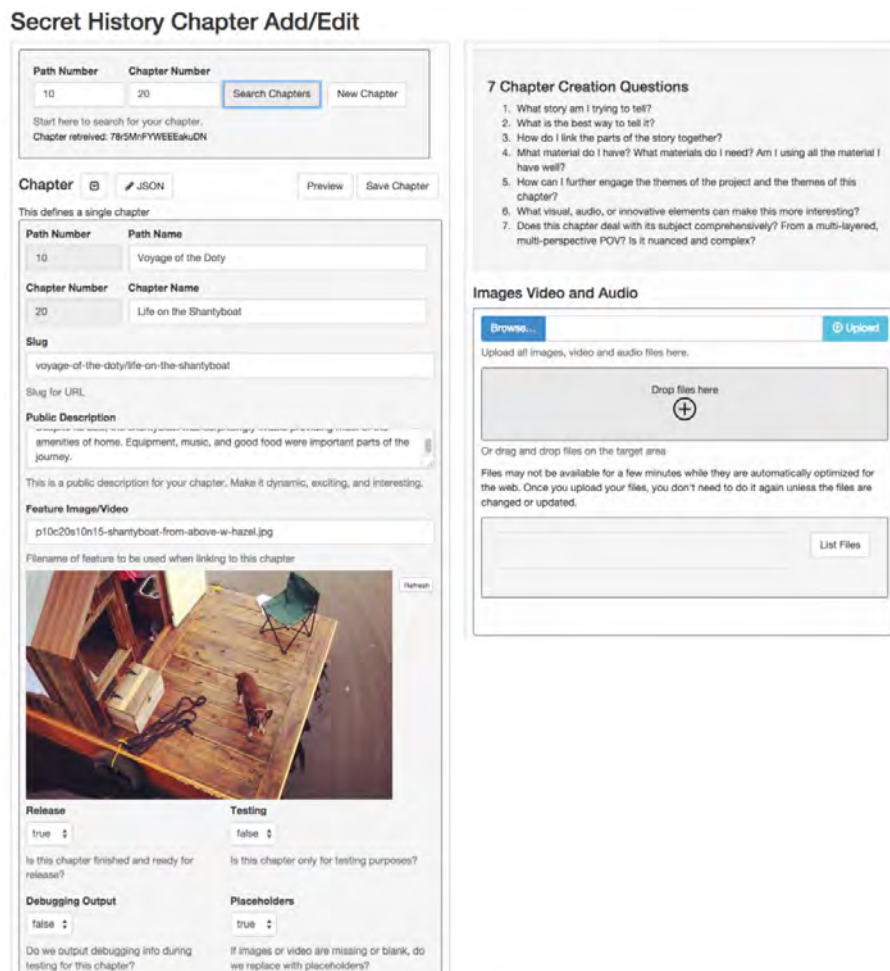


Figure 3. Secret History backend chapter editor.

The full *Secret History* installation debuted at the UCSC MFA exhibition. Before that, an exhibit featuring only the shantyboat has exhibited several times since the 2014 summer fieldwork. The exhibit is scheduled to show at several museums and events in the Upper Midwest during 2015 summer fieldwork, including the Minnesota Historical Society the Mississippi River Fund’s River City Revue, and the National Mississippi River Museum in Dubuque, IA.

Secret History is an archive of stories delivered on a variety of platforms. It is an installation piece in the form of a recreated shantyboat that can be temporarily sited in galleries, museums, and other cultural centers alongside the digital and paper archive. It is an interactive web-based new media work, connecting viewers to the river and its people. In time, it will be a publicly-accessible research archive that will be hosted in a public and permanent online home, indexed and accessible via public library catalogs.

The project outcomes corresponding to the project objectives are described in the following table.

Table 1. Outcomes and timetable.

<i>Art Installation</i>	
Two Bay Area regional exhibitions	October to December 2014
At least one regional exhibitions	January to March 2015
MFA exhibition	April 2015
At least two exhibition along the Upper Mississippi River	June to August 2015
<i>Interactive Documentary</i>	
Back end creation tools created	March 2015
Chapter Production	Jan to April 2015
Soft Launch	April 2015
Public Launch	June 2015

<i>Research archive</i>	
First wave of transcriptions complete	November 2014
Prototype chapter ready for indexing	May 2015
Prototype chapter indexed in finding-aid	June 2015
Archive edited and ready for hosting	October 2015
Archive hosted at permanent host	October 2015
Records in online public access catalog	November 2015
Finding aids created	December 2015
Public launch of <i>Secret History</i> research archive	January 2015

Dialog and Participation

Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) described a participatory tendency in late 20th Century art that he termed relational aesthetics, “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space” (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 113). In other words, it describes the emergence of art that focuses on relationships rather than objects. Claire Bishop (2004), while critical of Bourriaud’s promoting of open-ended and theoretically-ungrounded art to the benefit of art curators, refers to this tendency as participatory art (p. 52). She remains skeptical of the “democratic” and “egalitarian” nature of participatory art without a strong theoretical foundation, noting that businesses and commerce also encourage participation, but in a particularly non-democratic context (Bishop, 2006, p. 12). Though participatory art has its roots in the *avant-garde* going back as far as the nineteenth century, the movement is more firmly rooted in Allan Kaprow’s “happenings” in the U.S. from the late 1950s and Augusto Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed in Brazil in the 1960s. Performance art, installation art, and Conceptualism followed in the 1960s and ‘70s. So-called activist art emerged alongside feminist art in the 1970s and

blossomed in the 1990s. All of these broad categories have adherents, and detractors, and lots of crossover. Bishop, interested in offering a theoretical foundation, points out that Walter Benjamin articulated requirements for participatory art in 1934: “Benjamin maintained that the work of art should actively intervene in and provide a model for allowing viewers to be involved in the processes of production: ‘this apparatus is better, the more consumers it is able to turn into producers – that is, the more readers or spectators into collaborators’” (Bishop, 2006, p. 11).

Grant Kester (2004) in *Conversation Pieces* writes specifically of art that focus on conversational interactions, that is, dialog as art, and cites examples of this tendency in art work from the 1990s and 2000s. He notes it is called littoral arts by Suzanne Lacy, relational art by Bourriaud, conversational art by Homi K. Bhabha, and dialogue-based public art by Tom Finkelpearl. Kester himself, inspired by Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, refers to it as dialogical art (Kester, 2004, p. 10). Kester acknowledges that some critics have justly questioned the status of “art” that is indistinguishable from political or social activism, a question examined a decade earlier in Nina Felshin’s (1995) edited volume *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*. While some critics have grudgingly accepted its status as art, they have retreated to either a wholly subjective evaluation or a simple calculation of its political efficacy, a measure of whether the artist achieves a work’s stated goals (Felshin, 1995, p. 12) —a measure that Kester is justly critical of, given that much activist art has extremely lofty goals. *Secret History* is a dialogic piece that has strong similarities to several pieces described by Kester, for example, the Littoral Arts project *ROUTES*. Filmmakers, writers and photographers worked with Irish bus drivers and shop stewards to create a series of works, including films, public art, performance, and an oral history archive. “At the center of the project was an extended process of listening and documentation in which the drivers were encouraged to recount their experiences over the past

thirty years, specifically in relationships with sectarian violence. The bus workers possess a unique perspective on this history” (Kester, 2004, p. 7). The project focused on the stories of bus drivers and the unique perspective they offered crossing daily through Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods during periods of civil conflict in Northern Ireland. Buses and local geography were contested spaces with Irish bus drivers in the middle of the conflict. This focus on collecting oral histories, people sharing their experiences in their own words, is echoed in several pieces discussed by Kester, including ROUTES, Suzanne Lacy’s pieces, and WochenKlausur’s work (pp. 7, 98, 116). Similarly, in *Secret History*, oral histories were the centerpiece of the work.

Secret History focuses on a dialogic relationship with river people, institutions that support the work, and audiences of the work. It could be said to be a community-based project in that, during fieldwork, I enter communities, get to know the people and their relationships, and listen to their stories. My goal is to give those personal narratives an engaged life that makes visible otherwise invisible conflicts, struggles, and stories. This is fine, as far as it goes, but the challenge, of course, is facilitating two-way communication. Do audiences get to continue the dialogue with subjects of the project, or are they merely consumers of the product that I manufacture from the raw material of people’s stories? Do subjects get to weigh in on the use of their own images and words, to publically add or disavow parts of their stories? Regardless of the interactivity and dialogic nature of the exhibition of the project, my hope is always that the personal narrative of interviewees will form a multi-layered complementary and contradictory collage of stories about the river and river communities. That is, I hope that whether or not the subjects of the project are in direct dialogue with the audience or with other subjects, that their words will be in dialogue with each other.

Secret History relies on the dialogic participation of collaborators in river communities to share their stories in conversation with the artist. Similarly, in *The Roof is on Fire*, the 2004 Oakland, California piece by Suzanne Lacy, Annice Jacoby, and Chris Johnson, Latino and African-American teens took part in a series of dialogues about issues facing their communities. The Austrian collective WochenKlausur's 1997 *Intervention in Community Development* simply gathered residents of a small Austrian town for a series of conversations about their visions of the future of their community. These pieces rely on facilitating conversation and, most importantly, listening to what is said.

In my conversations, repeated story threads emerged in my discussions with people who lived and worked on the Mississippi River. For instance, a wide variety of interviewees expressed concern about the legacy of river engineering. Humans have modified the Mississippi River since the 19th Century to improve navigation, starting with removing snags and other obstructions, channel straightening, and erecting revetments for flood control and "reclaiming" land for agriculture. Later dykes placed in the river perpendicular to the current to narrow the navigable channel and reduce sedimentation modified the river further. Still later, throughout the 20th century, dams and locks were created that turned the wild river into a series of pools and increased the navigable channel to a minimum 9 foot depth. The decrease in flow has dramatically reduced the sediment discharge of the river causing silting not only in the backwaters but in the main channel as well, requiring constant dredging. Complaints about the damage to the river caused by hydro-engineering was a consistent thread in my interviews with river scientists, fish biologists, ecologists, river residents, and people who sport fish and hunt. It is complicated for those whose mandate is to protect the river as well as maintain a navigable

channel. This questioning of a hundred and fifty years of river engineering will be reflected in soon to be released chapters of the documentary.

Closely related to dialogic art is community-based art that borders on activism, particularly environmental art that emerged from the 1960s and 70s. Environmental artists such as Helen and Newton Harrison have used art and story to tackle large systemic issues, arguing “that the artist’s habits of metaphor, cross-reference, inclusiveness, and holistic thinking may help unclog a discourse that often finds itself mired in the narrow channels of technological and bureaucratic thinking” (Heartney, 1995, p. 143). The Harrisons are credited with shifting environmental art from the subtractive (and destructive) tendencies of early environmental artists such as Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer to something more in dialogue with science and nature. “Combining text with photographs, drawings, and maps, the Harrisons employ the language of storytelling to present the results of their investigations into a particular problem or a specific ecosystems” (Heartney, 1995, p. 144). Over the years, much of their work has concerned rivers: the Sacramento, the San Joaquin, the Los Angeles, the Arroyo, and the Sava in Yugoslavia. They talk of multiple perspectives and possibilities, past and future alterations of a river’s course, and forging new histories. And throughout, their work take into account the realities of local populations, local ecosystems, and political forces in play. They presented their work in unconventional ways that challenged what was then considered environmental art. “Although it is true that the Harrisons’ work does not resemble art in any traditional sense, it employs a multilevel, metaphoric kind of thinking that differs from the more linear and instrumental approach of conventional science and technology” (Heartney, 1995, p. 160). Secret History owes a debt to the Harrisons’ pioneering work, and directly follows on their river work, their dialogic process, their multilayered approach, and the de-emphasis of the physical

manifestations of their work. In the case of *Secret History*, objections could be raised that the project more properly belongs within the realm of sociology or history, but the project similarly works at many levels, is deeply concerned with aesthetics, and has “activist” goals along with sociological and historical ones. With my concern for the cultural diversity of social ecosystems, my passion about the need for public commons and resistance to capitalist forces of privatization and enclosure, my emphasis on listening as an important process of social change, and my interest in nonhierarchical consensus-based organization, *Secret History* is inevitably a political project that has activist elements. A multi-layered, non-linear approach and deliberate intervention into the *status quo* differentiate *Secret History* from either a simple activist campaign or a history project. After years having unconsolidated careers as an artist and as an activist, with *Secret History* I sought to bring together my interests in art, public space and people’s use of it, and community engagement toward sociopolitical change. In Nina Felshin’s *But Is It Art?*, the author gives a number of examples from the 1960s to the mid 90s of artists whose work walks the line between art and activism, artists “characterized by the innovative use of public space to address issues of sociopolitical and cultural significance, and to encourage community or public participation as a means of effecting social change” (Felshin, 1995, p 9). Though very different in the types of issues they confront and the tactics they use, these artists share methodologies, formal strategies, and intentions.

I chose to start my fieldwork on the Mississippi River because of its significance in American history and literature, and I thought it would well represent my experience on other American rivers. As I observed on DIY boating trips on other rivers, I expected towns and communities to have turned their backs to the river. However, I discovered a surprising thing: people on the Mississippi loved their river. They knew about the return of the mayflies, gone for

a generation. They knew about shore erosion caused by large V-hulled boats. That knew that the river was healthier than it had been in 150 years. They knew about the danger posed by invasive species. They knew about the silting caused by dams and they knew how this threatened waterfowl and fish habitat. It was an eye-opening experience to have so many people willing to tell us so much about their river. This knowledge and love of the river is reflected in this first batch of stories from the *Secret History* archive. That said, there is still much lost. This recent love affair with the Mississippi River follows 150 years of neglect and abuse. For generations the river was literally used as a sewer and for generations more it was used to flush the biologically and chemically toxic waste of industry. For two hundred years the river has been shaped and engineered to a point that it has little relation to the wild river that once flowed 2,320 miles from near the Canadian border to the Gulf of Mexico.

Although gentrification has erased much of the cultural diversity of river communities, *Secret History* is an attempt to preserve, mark and remember what's left of river culture, a critical and endangered part of the mental and geographic landscape. This is similar in intent to the landscape walks of the land artists. John K. Grande (2004) stresses the importance and relates this to Earth-based art in *Art Nature Dialogues*: "Cultural diversity can better maintain bioregional variation and resources when not assimilated and homogenized. The survival of minority culture, like the survival of rare and endangered species, is essential if we are to understand where we have come from, what we really need to ensure our survival" (Grande, 2004, p xvii).

Nowhere is this erasure of cultural diversity more evident than in those communities formerly and currently sited on the river. Residents and officials differentiate between houseboats—crafts that are principally boats that you can live on short-term—and boathouses—

crafts that are principally houses that happen to float. A houseboat generally has its own propulsion, an inboard or outboard motor. A boathouse, if it ever moves at all, must be towed. Boathouses are subject to a maze of regulation restricting the number of boathouses, where they can moor, and how they can be maintained. Houseboats, on the other hand, have far fewer restrictions and are often moored and lived-aboard full-time in private marinas in many areas. As a consequence, boathouse communities are endangered, both from river officials and from gentrification (Phillips, 2009). Most boathouses and shantyboats were moved off of the nation's rivers in the 1950s. In fact, a few shantyboats can still be found high and dry, used as homes up on shore.



Figure 4. Boathouses in Brownsville, MN.

Inexplicably, in a few places, boathouse communities still survive. Usually this is in places where the on-shore community has rallied in support of threatened boathouse communities. But even as the official longevity of their place on the river is secured, money threatens to undo these communities. Most are part-time vacation homes, but in at least one area in the Midwest and several on the West Coast, boathouse residents live year-round. Residents

repeatedly told me that as boathouses are both restricted in number and recognized as sought-after waterfront property, the price of each successive sale rises dramatically. As money moves into the traditionally hardscrabble boathouse communities, conflicts arise and the sense of community is strained.

This gentrification on the river, and the earlier forces that displaced poor and working class people and people of color, are, as Dolores Hayden (1995) points out, sites of contested terrain. “Today, debates about the built environment, history, and culture take place in much more contested terrain of race, gender, and class, set against long-term economic and environmental problems” (Hayden, 1995, p. 6). Though she principally discusses urban areas in *The Power of Place*, her observations are transferrable to the river environment, which since the mid 19th Century is essentially a built environment. As always, I have an interest in the contested histories that could inform our present. Yet I’m afraid there is little reflected in the current archive that is contested. I missed opportunities to ask hard questions. Of the people I interviewed, Pat Nunnally of UMN’s River Life Program seemed to have the clearest picture of the economic forces at work on the river and expressed the need to make the river accessible to everyone, especially in the Minneapolis Northwest where the majority of African-Americans live cut off from the river by a freeway. Hayden talks about making history visible, especially the invisible histories of women and people of color. In future fieldwork, I intend to frame my questions around more contested history, resistance, battles fought and won or lost, histories that didn’t make the establishment narrative, stories about women, people of color, and non-dominant cultures.

Voyage as Art

Secret History references a number of artists who use watercraft or metaphorical and actual journeys as a part of their practice, including a few who use boats, ships, and rafts in the context of actual waterways.

A common theme is the journey as metaphor, a way to explore identity and belonging especially across borders. An exhibition titled *Unfinished Journeys* at the National Museum of Norway terms this “travel in the figurative sense – the ongoing quest for one’s own identity and place in the world – but also tackle the issue of migration” (National Museum, 2012). Wangechi Mutu, the Kenyan-born Brooklyn-based collage artist said “Artists use Journeys to tell stories of their lives and the places from which they come” (Okayafrica, 2014). In contrast, since the 1960s and 70s there have been a multitude of artists incorporating movement through the landscape for its own sake as part of their practice. These artists largely come out of the land art tradition, following in the footsteps of artists such as Richard Long and Hamish Fulton. Some of these artists have used boats in their journeys. Mriganka Madhukaillya and Sonal Jain of Desire Machine Collective from Guwahati, India presented *Bhotbhoti Tales* (2009), a project not unlike *Secret History* in both spirit and practice. “Desire Machine Collective, who have taken up studio residence on a ferry in the Brahmaputra River, speak with local boatmen about the river. What emerges is a multifaceted, contradictory view of the river’s geography and its lore; as the boatmen’s stories provide a depth and an anecdotal history that contemporary mapping technologies like Google Streetview or Earth cannot render” (New Museum, 2013). *Bhotbhoti Tales* is both dialogic and a journey as art, a focus on the interactive process of listening to the stories of people who work on the river. Ellie Ga, also part of the same *Walking Dragging Drifting* exhibition at New Museum, documented “her time aboard a ship that drifted through the

glacial darkness of the Arctic for five months on a scientific expedition. The only artist on the boat, Ga counters the scientific measurements made by her co-travelers with more subjective ones: sketching the drift of the boat, measuring her possible walking distance at given stops; taking photographs of dawn and sunset” (New Museum, 2013). Ga’s work is focused on the process of the voyage, and as with the “walking artists” that precede her, a deliberate release of artistic control, an opening to possibility and chance. While *Secret History* does not emerge (consciously) from the environmental art tradition, it shares an affinity with these art practices. From the beginning, the project sought to hear the stories of river people and *the story as told by the river itself*. This is the aspect of listening to stories from the deck of a shantyboat on the river. The rhythms of the art-making experience take a cue from the slower rhythms of life on the river, something I noted from my earliest DIY rafting trips. It is an aspect that people experiencing the project notice as a critical difference between *Secret History* and many similar oral history projects.

We are familiar with the artist use of boats as metaphor, concept, and art object. In any context, a boat is an evocative subject suggesting variously travel, migration, freedom, escape, or more metaphorically a journey suggesting endurance or transformation. Simon Starling’s lyrical *Shedboatshed* took a shed originally sited on the banks of the Rhine, disassembled it, made part of it into a boat, and then used the boat to float the remaining parts downriver to a museum in Basle where it was reassembled into a shed (Higgins, 2005). What makes *Shedboatshed* unique is that while an artifact of the work is present in the museum, the work is primarily conceptual. The most important aspect of the piece, the laborious disassembly, reconfiguration, and reassembly process, is not present. While a boat played a critical part in the work, no trace of a boat is in evidence. Only the shed remains. Starling himself calls his work a “physical

manifestation of a thought process.” Another noteworthy boat project by Starling is *Autoxylopyrocycloboros* (2006), a piece he called a “self-defeating journey.” The artist carefully restored a salvaged wooden boat and outfitted it with a wood-fired marine engine. He sailed it across Loch Long in Scotland feeding parts of the boat into the ship’s boiler plank by plank until it sunk midway across. As with Starling’s work, the artifacts exhibited in *Secret History*, in this case the boat itself, belie the artistic process only barely present at the exhibition. While the boats in Starling’s work and *Secret History* serve both a sculptural and traditional role, Starling’s boat voyages are much more allegorical. *Secret History*’s shantyboat directly echoes the history of traditional shantyboats whose history is being explored.

In Subodh Gupta’s 2013 work, *What does the vessel contain, that the river does not*, he relocated a seventy foot long wooden Indian fishing vessel fully-loaded with what appear to be the possessions of an entire village—TVs, kettles, chairs, beds, a bicycle—to London and suspended it in a bright florescent-lit gallery space. The Independent said of it, “The sculpture evokes the conflicting feelings of belonging and displacement, movement and stability, and explores the liminal space between these states of being” (Pilger, 2013), which could also serve as a description of the emotions evoked by a river. In Gupta’s work, the artifact is the thing, though it evokes a process of dislocation and displacement.

Rob Fischer is an artist from the area in which I did my fieldwork, the Upper Mississippi River, and his work evokes his native landscape, ice houses, cabins, and fishing boats. The pieces in his boat series look like greenhouses coming out as boats, sometimes upright, sometimes turned on end (Walker Art Center, 1997). He works with reclaimed materials and industrial scrap, rusted metals, old windows, and peeling paint evoking a feeling of loneliness and longing, an Upper Midwest version of wabi-sabi. Though Fischer’s work is object-based, his

aesthetics are also similar to that of the *Secret History* installation, relying on rusted and weathered materials to evoke the past, the history contained within.

The Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang, well-known for his gunpowder “paintings” and epic sculptures with life-like cast animals, also often works with boats. In his 2014 piece *The Ninth Wave* he takes on species extinction and global climate change, and to a lesser degree, Chinese environmental degradation, head-on in an installation of a full-sized rustic barnacle-encrusted fishing boat “ark” containing a hundred sick (stuffed) animals from across the world. In *Reflection-A Gift from Iwaki* (2004), a sunken boat out of which pour thousands of white ceramic figures, Cai Guo-Qiang examines beauty, death, cross-cultural collaboration, and modernization. The image of Guo-Qiang’s old fishing boat sitting in a gallery had a significant influence on the feeling of the *Secret History* installation.

Whether Gupta’s fishing boat or Fischer’s sculptural boats, even out of the water, a boat is still a boat and immediately recognizable. It carries its own context, a suggestion of journeys and transformation. In *Secret History*, I bring the feeling of the river to the gallery. To evoke the process of the journey, I bring the shantyboat to and, sometimes, inside the museum along with a small pier and the johnboat—a rope mooring everything together.

Moving from the general to the specific, contemporary artists working physically with boats, ships, and rafts in the context of actual waterways make up a short list including Marie Lorenz, the Mare Liberum Collective, Swoon, and Constance Hockaday.

Marie Lorenz is a New York artist who pioneered the *Tide and Current Taxi*, a “rowboat water taxi in the New York Harbor” that extensively explores the waterways around Manhattan using tides, currents, and paddles for propulsion (Lorenz, 2014). She documents her dozens of annual voyages since 2005 by mapping, storytelling, photographing, interviewing, and writing.

The ongoing work is presented on an extensive blog and at exhibitions and talks throughout the year. Lorenz' work is suffused with a fierce curiosity, quiet contemplation, and a desire to listen to the landscape, the unnoticed civic features, and the life of the river. Nearly all of Lorenz works over the last 25 years deal with small human-powered boats and waterways. Each of her installations are often coupled with a boat journey on a local waterway and reference a specific urban maritime landscape, the underside of piers, sewers and drains, detritus and flotsam. Reading her work, you get an impression of an artist with intention who carefully leaves room for synchronous events and happenstance, a congenial willingness to drift off plan like a boat on the tide. Previous projects include beachcombing, boatbuilding, prints using beach-found objects, and rowboat explorations from Italy to San Antonio to San Francisco. With the artist's insistence on self-imposed constraints and willingness to listen and let the story emerge from the journey, with her project's multi-year and multi-river accumulation of documentation that quietly blurs the lines between art and advocacy, I can't help but feel a project affinity. No doubt, Lorenz striking installations influenced the pier and piling installation of *Secret History*. In terms of methodology, the artist's work continues to inspire new ways that *Secret History* might approach the stories that each river may tell.

Mare Liberum is a New York City art and boat-building collective based in Gowanus. The collective finds its roots "in centuries-old stories of urban water squatters and haphazard water craft builders, Mare Liberum is a collaborative exploration of what it takes to make viable aquatic craft as an alternative to life on land" (Mare Liberum, 2014). They draw inspiration from improvised boats built by refugees in Senegal and Cuba and ocean-going rafts such as those created by William David Pearlman, also known as Poppa Neutrino. Mare Liberum's most recent and ongoing work includes *SeaChange: We All Live Downstream* (2014), a "collaborative

art & activism project, navigating the Hudson River, climate change, and water as commons” (Mare Liberum, 2014). The project is intended to “explore story-based forms of community activism, drawing a narrative through-line on the map between disparate actors in the ongoing resistance to extreme energy, while creating a deeply transformative experience for all involved” (Mare Liberum, 2014). Another recent work includes *Shipwrecked, Shanghai’d and Marooned: A Plywood Fleet for New York City* (2011), a series of small paper boatbuilding workshops in conjunction with the New York City *Sea Worthy* exhibition. Past projects include boat-making workshops, printed broadsheets on DIY boatbuilding, and gallery installations incorporating their work. *Sea Worthy* was a series of exhibitions spanning the summer of 2011 and focused on water access, public space, and engaged maritime themes in contemporary art practice. It was a joint project of New York’s Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts Project Space, Flux Factory, and The Gowanus Studio Space. “*Sea Worthy* presents work by artists who employ the boat as a platform for collective action, private reflection, and liberatory possibility. The sea excursion suggests both an opening and a crisis – the expanse is daunting, uncontrollable, and full of dream potential. To explore this terrain, the artists take to the high and low seas, metaphorically, virtually, and in reality” (Flux Factory, 2011). *Secret History* shares this politically conscious anarchistic approach to art, history, and participatory art making. While the stories that may emerge from the project are less well documented, the heart of the project is clearly rooted in similar political analysis.

Caledonia Curry, who goes by her street name Swoon, is originally a street artist known for her life-size wheatpaste prints pasted in abandoned areas, usually of human figures rendered in a style reminiscent of woodcuts. Since 2006 her work has also included unusual DIY art boats. In 2006 and 2007 she collaborated with fellow artists to create the *Miss Rockaway Armada*, a

project to build a fleet of boats from trash and float down the Mississippi River. It was an experiment in collaboration and collective work and living. The crew consisted of “approximately 30 performers and artists from all over the country including members of the Toyshop Collective, Visual Resistance, The Amateurs, The Floating Neutrinos, The Infernal Noise Brigade, The Madagascar Institute, Cyclecide, and the Rude Mechanical Orchestra” (Curry, 2007), nearly all non-institutional art and music collectives. The expedition supported themselves by playing music, performing, and leading workshops throughout the trip. It is worth noting that on my journey down the Mississippi, a great many people recalled the *Miss Rockaway* fleet nearly ten years after it has made its river voyage. The intention of *Miss Rockaway* was less consciously aesthetic than Swoon’s later projects, but as Claire Bishop paraphrased Walter Benjamin who “argued that when judging a work’s politics, we should not look at the artist’s declared sympathies, but at the position that the work occupies in the production relations of its time” (p. 11). *Miss Rockaway* challenged assumptions about what is art, how it is created, and how it is presented. More recent projects included the evocatively named *Swimming Cities of Switchback Sea* (2008) and *Swimming Cities of Serenissima* (2009) which navigated the Hudson River and the Adriatic Sea, respectively (Bloom, 2008). The later crashed the Venice Biennial barnstorming the Grand Canal and camping in the Venice Lagoon (Curry, 2008). These voyages were more consciously art projects, music and performances, floating on a small fleet of intricately unlikely craft, towering above the water like delicate confections. Swoon’s most recent work, *Submerged Motherlands*, is a monumental installation in the Brooklyn Museum that included a sculptural tree rising to the top of the 72-foot dome, a constructed environment of figurative prints and cut paper foliage, and the rafts used in the *Swimming Cities* projects. Appropriately, the headline in the Times was “Swoon Blurs the Line

Between Art and Activism” (Ryzik, 2014a), precisely the aspect of participatory art that has confused critics for decades. Swoon has very successfully transitioned from outsider artist/adventure to gallery darling, with a series of successful shows in New York. Her influence on the *Secret History* project is undeniable, as she was one of the artists/adventurers taking Mississippi River journeys around the time that I made my first DIY boat voyage on the Missouri River. But unlike, *Miss Rockaway* and *Swimming Cities* which created a platform to showcase the performance possibilities of the artists onboard as a starting point for interaction, *Secret History* is more focused on listening to the stories of those people with whom it interacts. According to those who remembered the earlier *Miss Rockaway* visit on the Mississippi, the communities through which they moved found them amusing, but a world unto themselves. I suspect the *Rockaway* crew made the most substantive connections during the journey with the local artist and punk communities of which they were already a part. *Secret History*, in contrast, is interested in bridging connections between a diverse breadth of communities.

Constance Hockaday also uses boats to engage traditionally activist issues such as lack of public space, gentrification, lack of art space, displacement, and the lost history of marginalized communities. In a recent work, *All These Darlings and Now Us*, she created a floating island of four sailboats in San Francisco Bay offering peepshows. The project was “specifically a response to the demise of two beloved clubs in the rapidly gentrifying San Francisco Bay Area: the Lusty Lady, the nation’s only worker-owned and unionized strip club and Esta Noche, an infamous Latino gay bar which both closed within 6 months of each other” (Ryzik, 2014b). Performers from both clubs danced inside the cabins of the sailboats. Even more than *Secret History* whose activism is one of highlighting issues, Hockaday directly confronts issues with which the communities she works with struggle. Hockaday’s earlier work, also part of the *Sea Worthy*

exhibition, *Boatel* was an interactive/performative installation in the form of a floating hotel and performance space in Far Rockaway Queens. The installation was a success. “It sold out for the entire 3-month season and utilized 6 boats and a floating platform stage hosting nightly lectures, movies, storytelling by nautical enthusiasts and,” echoing the 1994 civic intervention work of WochenKlausur, *Boatel* featured “a meeting with the city planners working on NY 2020 vision for the NYC waterfront” (Hockaday, 2014). Finally, Hockaday created the 2009 *The Incomplete History of Rafts*, a series of art books that chronicle the expeditions of *The Floating Neutrinos* and David Pearlman, Poppa Neutrino himself, whose most famous expedition crossed the “Atlantic Ocean on a boat made from scrap wood found on the Hudson [River] and in the streets of NYC” (Hockaday, 2014).

In 2012, I began building a homemade shantyboat—that is, a rustic houseboat—from scratch, recording every step in the build process with digital photography and narrative, presenting the chronicle in a Shantyboat build blog. The hull is a flat-bottom barge designed by Glen L. Witt who used modern materials to adapt plans that have been around for 200 years, not too dissimilar from the boat that Harlan and Anna Hubbard made along the banks of the Ohio river in the 50s.

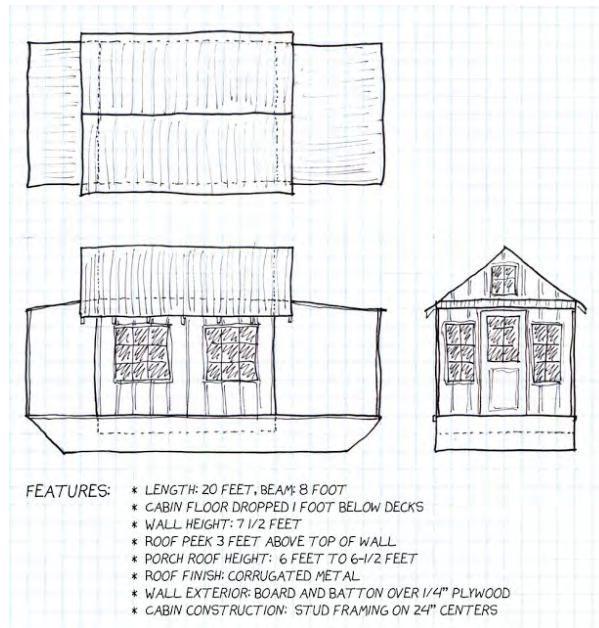


Figure 5. Planning the Secret History shantyboat.

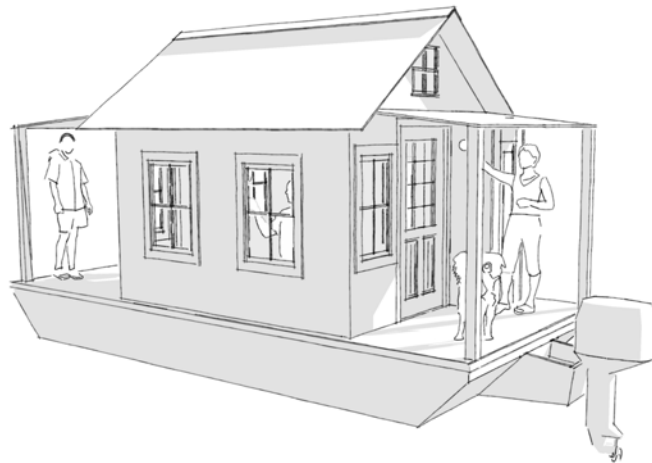


Figure 6. Early sketch of the shantyboat.

The shantyboat grew from a vague notion to a full-blown scheme. Schemes turned into plans, which turned into action. The frame was built with kiln-dried Douglas Fir. The hull was fiberglass over plywood. A whole community of friends helped flip the boat over after the hull was completed. Every weekend for a couple of years, I was out in a friend's barnyard in the cold or in the heat working on the shantyboat. After the laborious hull, the cabin came together much faster and used more traditional framing. More than just a boat, I wanted the shantyboat to be a

floating home and workshop for an artist's journey. The cabin is a gabled corrugated tin roof shanty with a small galley, a worktable, a woodstove, a library, and a sleeping loft.

To evoke the historical inspiration of the shantyboat, an important part of the project was the use of recycled and reclaimed materials. As with Fischer's work, the weathered materials evoke their own history. While the hull was new lumber, the framing and the siding for the cabin was all reclaimed lumber from the county dump or from clearing old sheds and chicken coops. People were happy to have these dilapidated structures removed. Windows were reclaimed from a window installer who daily pulled out old single-paned windows and generously donated them to the project.



Figure 7. Shantyboat cabin framing.

In early June 2014, in the month leading up to the first summer fieldwork expedition, I prepared for the journey—setting up meetings with river people, borrowing video and audio equipment, and launching a successful Kickstarter campaign to help fund the project. That month I flew to Minneapolis and St. Paul for a week of trip reconnaissance. I met with some remarkable people, including the National Park Service chief historian for the Mississippi River area, the top

riverboat pilot on the river, a labor history professor from Macalester College, an artist who coordinates other artists and experts for amazing river events, and lots of people who grew up on the river and know decades of personal and local history. Many of these people were later interviewed during either summer or winter fieldwork. I scouted out all the boat launches within a short distance of Minneapolis and enjoyed lots of great food and good coffee. Minneapolis was doing its best to convince me that it should be my next hometown.

I wanted to connect a geographically dispersed audience to the stories, the individuals, and communities along the river using social and digital media. During every part of the journey including the run-up to our departure, I provided blog and Twitter updates in real-time along the journey, including short video and audio excerpts of interviews, photographs of places and interviewees, updates about the trip's progress, and links to historical, social, and ecological resources. The journey was followed on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook by several thousand followers, an impressive percentage of whom engaged regularly with the project through comments, suggestions, and sharing with friends. Some of our followers connected us with people who later added stories to the *Secret History* archive.

In July 2014, I set off with my trip companion Kai Dalglish, ship's mate, from California to Minnesota, 18 hundred miles across two major mountain ranges towing a seven thousand pound shantyboat. Naturally, it took longer than expected with long stops for repairs and problem-solving. We went through two trucks, a cooling system, a water pump, a transmission, two batteries, and several parts that fell off the shantyboat. We also encountered remarkable generosity in all the people we met, tow-truck drivers, mechanics, merchants, strangers, and all the business-owners who let us camp in their parking lots until the latest repairs on our truck were complete. Unlike the misery of an interminable breakdown in a car, being stranded with the

shantyboat was a very different experience. We slept in relative comfort and had a full galley to make food. So while we may have been stranded alongside a highway in Nevada or a parking lot in Utah, like a turtle, we carried our home with us. After leaving our old truck in Salt Lake City for transmission repairs, we rented a brand new truck and made good time through the Rocky Mountains and the plains states arriving better late than never in Minneapolis ready to launch.

The shantyboat was small but livable. We had all the amenities: a small but full kitchen, a work table, lots of light and breeze, and a well-stocked project library of art theory books, history books, river memoirs, references books, and trashy reading. The shantyboat was a tiny spec on a big river that was wide and beautiful with spectacular high bluffs above wooded banks. The people were generous, gregarious and helpful. One couple read about us in the local press and then adopted us and became our trip angels, meeting us at towns downriver, bringing us help when we needed it and beer whether we needed it or not. Our pace was leisurely, a snails pace. Towns were 5 to 15 miles apart and we stopped at most of them to meet people. It usually took a few days to schedule and do interviews, so we weren't breaking any records going downriver. It brought to mind Clarence Jonk who set out in his shantyboat, the Betsy-Nell, from Minneapolis on his epic depression-era journey and only got as far as Red Bluff before he was locked in by the frozen river. Where I expected the trip to be a relaxing jaunt, I was busy the entire time. I spent a disproportionate amount of the trip hunched over my laptop. Blogging and tweeting to followers, processing interviews, and making arrangements.

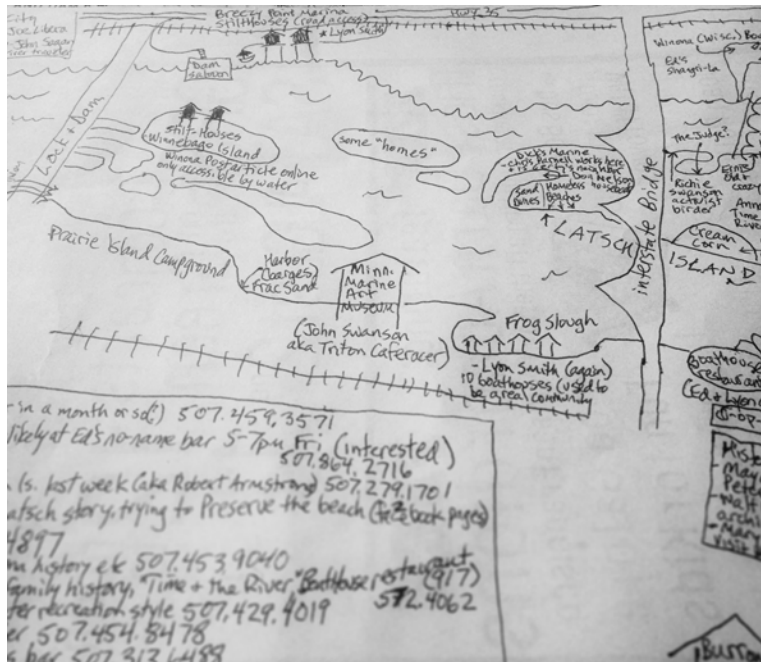


Figure 8. Alex Stevens' map of Winona, MN.

In the style of a *dérive*, chance and connections determined who I interviewed. I focused on interviewing as wide a variety of river people as I could find, sometimes with people scheduled far ahead of time, sometimes with people I met randomly. Laurel Donovan rowed up in a Walmart inflatable while we were moored at the public docks in Hatings, MN. We took full advantage of networking with friends who had friends in the area. In finding connections to river people, I discovered an interesting thing: People's connections to others are unevenly distributed, clearly revealing "connectors," people who are the nodes of social connectedness. Twin Cities artists Shanai Matteson connected us with dozens of river people in her area, and Alex Stevens, the housemate of a friend, hand drew us a map of everyone and everything there was to see near Winona, MN. Alex's map is now part of the *Secret History* archive. I interviewed people who lived and worked on the river: artists, historians, scientists, boathouse residents, locals, bartenders, and adventures. Later when I returned to the area for fieldwork in winter 2014, I put extra effort into connecting with people from the African-American, Hmong, and Dakota communities in the area to bring in a broader perspective to the archive. These in-depth

interviews in the oral history tradition capture a variety of river people's thoughts about their feelings about the river, their work, their lives, their childhoods on the water, issues faced by river communities and stories about the river itself.

Artwork

The full Secret History installation debuted at the UCSC Digital Art and New Media MFA exhibition in April 2015. The installation consists of the trailered shantyboat sited outside the institution and a connected installation inside. In the installation, visitors step onto the recreated shantyboat, pick up the banjo or a book from the library, talk with the artist, or sit awhile. Or they can explore the nearby installation and overhear the stories of shantyboaters, scientists, historians, and locals who live and work on the river.

The shantyboat is an imposing structure, on or off the trailer. 13 foot high, 22 foot long and 8 foot wide, trailered. It has the appearance of a gabled tin roof shanty on a wooden-hulled flat-bottomed barge, with a deck at approximately chest-level. Windows dominate each wall of the shanty through which dark wood shelves lined with books can be seen within. Visitors board the boat via a steep, wooden-slatted gangplank. At a longer exhibition in which there is indoor space, the shantyboat will come off the trailer into the gallery. Still an imposing 10-foot high, the deck is at knee level and one can easily glance into the windows of the boat.



Figure 9. Secret History shantyboat at MFA exhibition.

The deck onto which visitors step is like much of the boat, weathered wood showing the marks of many years of use. The walls of the cabin itself are constructed from a reclaimed hundred-year old chicken coop. The windows are single paned windows recovered from a window installer. Some broken panes are replaced with leaded glass, others with stout cardboard signs. “This is the most homey place I’ve ever been,” wrote one visitor in the ship’s log. This reflects many people’s impressions upon entering the shantyboat. “I could live here!” wrote another visitor (Secret History, 2015). Visitors see a comfortable couch, a small kitchen, a worktable with two chairs and flowers next to an old radio, a typewriter, and frequently other visitors typing up their river stories for the archive. Looking further, they find a bed loft above the kitchen and another full deck at the back of the boat with a door leading to the ship’s head.



Figure 10. Secret History installation.

Following a long rope from the shantyboat, visitors find another part of the installation on the second floor of the building. A small weathered pier moors the shantyboat to the rest of the installation, which includes a 10-foot johnboat also roped to the pier. The rope ends are coiled neatly and shipshape as is standard for naval docks. Inside the johnboat are items associated with a small boat: a gas can for an outboard motor, a few life jackets, and two oars. Additionally, there is a pile of books in the boats prow, books dealing with the complicated multi-layered subject of a *Secret History*. The books cover subjects ranging from art theory (dialogic practice, social practice, environmental art), art history, social history, race, and river memoirs. These are some of the books normally on the shelves of the shantyboat. Atop the pier is a small tin-roofed hutch, which serves as a display kiosk for an interactive documentary. In the front is a touchscreen monitor upon which the documentary is exhibited.

The interactive documentary combines personal narrative, portraits of interviewees, footage shot from the river, still photos, and ambient audio in an evocative and interactive experience offering multiple branching thematic paths and perspectives. A welcome screen greets visitors and offers them tips on using the interface or allows them to jump right into the story. To advance the story, visitors drag the screen right to left, “turning pages” as one would a book. The documentary is divided up into a series of chapters, each of which represent a short narrative, typically two to five minutes long. At the end of each chapter, one to four related chapters are offered. A navigation screen allowed visitors to select any one of the available chapters. At the MFA exhibition, visitors could navigate between eight chapters dealing with subjects exploring aspects of the voyage of the shantyboat, living on the river, historical context, journeys on the river, and stories from the river’s point of view.

Aesthetically, the installation and the shantyboat are of a piece, reclaimed and recycled materials, carefully chosen to reflect life on the river. Reclaimed redwood one-inch board, rusted corrugated sheet steel, and recycled windows were materials included in the shantyboat. Reused redwood planking, old tarred pier pilings, treated lumber, used hempen rope, an aluminum johnboat, well-used life vests, a rusty outboard fuel can, and wooden oars made up the installation. The thick rope moored both the johnboat and the shantyboat to the pier. The rope ran to the floor, and “through” the second floor window, on the way to the shantyboat outside. Visitors’ interactions with the shantyboat at the MFA show were consistent with previous shows. People toured the shantyboat, carefully examining the interior, making themselves comfortable in a chair or the couch and staying for up to an hour. If one of the artists were there, visitors asked questions about the boat, about the journey, about the river, and about the people I met on the trip. Kids particularly enjoyed the boat, boarding via the gangplank and jumping or climbing

off the other end, and then coming around for a repeat visit. Elder people or less able-bodied people needed more coaxing and sometimes literal handholding going up the rather perilous gangplank. At busy times during exhibitions, we stationed docents to help people into and out of the shantyboat. Unfortunately, the boat is not easily handicap accessible. Several visitors every hour clearly wanted to stay longer and did. They sat on the couch, read books from the library, enjoyed other people's reactions or found the forms requesting their river stories. Dozens of people typed or handwrote their own river stories for the archive. Most people were happy to sign the ship's log. One visitor played the banjo for well over an hour.

The installation on the second floor saw fewer visitors, though it was steadily visited during the exhibition. Of those, perhaps two to five people could enjoy the documentary at a time, though only one person could operate the touchscreen. Unlike the boat, interacting with the documentary required up-to-date technical literacy. The swipe-to-advance interface was not always obvious to visitors. One of the members of the project team or a docent was on hand to help people with the experience and to answer questions.

While excitement about the piece is certainly welcome, visitors to the piece are often more interested in the river journey than in the resulting interviews. As an artist who wants to privilege the voices of those river people I talk to, it is tempting to want to redirect people's excitement away from the journey to the destination. However, as with the Harrisons' work, the process is perhaps more important than the product. "Although the physical result of [the Harrisons'] process is often simply an arrangement of text, photographs, and maps that appear in their gallery installations and catalogs, the public aspect of their work has more to do with the way in which they have been able to insert their ideas into policy discussions" (Heartney, 1995, p163). That I built a boat to engage the river and river communities directly, that I came to listen

and to experience the lives of those I meet, that I strive to help tell their story—that is the inspiring aspect for visitors of the piece. Though I have not had an impact on policy, it is not wholly out of the question for the future. In the upcoming exhibit in St. Paul, for instance, *Secret History* is featured in an exhibition whose ongoing purpose is to change people’s ideas about the river.

An unexpected and significant part of the project was the project group formed to do production on the archive. What started as a bevy of helpers turned into a year-long collaboration with talented producers and contributing artists. The undergraduate research group took form as a three quarter seminar-style class that along with individual and group responsibilities, discussed subjects ranging from bottom-up social history to web storytelling to copyright and public domain.



Figure 11. Secret History production team
(L to R) Monica Yap, Kyle Doria, Wes Modes, Regina Ortanez (not pictured Jacob Simowitz)

We were trying collectively to do something that none of us had done—create a web documentary, a research archive, and a full art installation. The can-do attitude of my initial

group of undergraduate made the project possible. A fourth student joined us in the second quarter and expressed concern that he was clueless when everyone else seemed to know what they were doing. One of my students said, “None of us know—we are making it up as we go along,” which well summed-up our efforts and characterized the bias-to-action of the team.

Future Considerations

I have identified several places where the piece could be improved, from an artistic, historical, and sociological standpoint. Generally, these criticisms focus on methodology, installation, and sustainability of the project.

Looking at the fieldwork I’ve done so far, an area of concern is a lack of diversity in the pool of interviewees. In summer 2014 fieldwork, extensive interviews were conducted with 14 people. Though they represent a range of socioeconomic levels, all of them appear to be white European ancestry with only four of them female. While I have attempted to confront this directly by including interviews with women and African-American people in my winter 2014 fieldwork, I continue to reach out to communities of color in the Upper Mississippi River Valley and expect to dedicate significant time and resources to diversifying the project interview pool. This absence of people of color is also an opportunity to develop the theme of gentrification, one of the themes that have emerged during fieldwork on the river. While I have slowly begun to understand the significance of the shifting perspective of the value of the river on poor people and people of color, I have not yet explicitly developed work that explored this theme. The Minnesota Historical Society in Minneapolis has impressive resources and frequent public programs focused both on African Americans and women in the Upper Mississippi River region. Perhaps a fruitful collaboration would be possible.

The project needs more transparency in how interviewees are selected, either a formal selection plan or an explicit admission that selection is guided by chance and connection. Ideally, oral history interviewees represent people from diverse ethnic, racial, religious, socioeconomic groups, and cross-generational experiences. Well-meaning researchers without a formal interviewee selection plan, tend to engage those within their social sphere. *Secret History* still lacks a formal interviewee selection plan. This would be a good opportunity to seek help from specialists in the sociology and anthropology fields.

The work could use better integration of the exhibit and the histories and methods that the work explores. The shantyboat is a comfortable place, but work is needed to foreground the racial, economic, and ecological conflicts of river communities in the exhibition. A more explicitly performative piece places the artist at the center of the work, sharing stories, asking questions, and further pushes the work into the dialogic. The shantyboat library already features more books representing the depth of thought and theory of the piece, writings dealing with areas of conflict such as economic displacement, race and gender, politics of geography, art theory, and the contested areas around public space. I intend to create physical spaces within the boat to hold artifacts and evidence of these deeper conflictual stories, perhaps written by exhibit visitors, for instance, drawers for “places lost,” “experiences with race,” “stories about gender,” “people who moved away,” “being poor,” and “the future river.” For upcoming exhibitions, I will be inviting interviewees to talk to audiences about their experiences living and working on the river, a shift that makes the work more participatory, blurring the lines between subject and participant. As mentioned above, earlier fieldwork missed the opportunity to dig with my questions into contested space, hard questions that explore conflict, resistance, victories and losses, an opportunity I will not pass up again in further fieldwork.

Does the work read as an art piece, or just as an interesting hands-on history project—or worse, only as an artifact of a thrilling adventure. To be sure, it is all of those things, but I want to approach the project from the point-of-view of an artist, view it in the context of art theory and history, and attract the attention and support of art institutions. I am interested in ways I can further contextualize and develop this as an art piece. This will be the ongoing challenge of continuing my education in art theory.

I see a whole host of possible improvements with every aspect of the installation. The most pressing ones have to do with the interactive documentary, finished days before the exhibition. As with any computer user interface, small changes and minor design choices can have a large impact on people's experience. Easier and smoother ways to advance the story are some of the most important planned UI improvements. "Flick-scrolling" (also called inertial scrolling) should replace the laborious "sticky" screen scrolling currently used. An auto scroll option would give people the option to sit back and watch as the story unfolded. The story system was designed so narration, interview audio, and ambient audio could span multiple shots within a scene. However, it was unclear to viewers how far the soundtrack spans and whether they should advance and risk cutting off the voice or wait for the narrator to finish. I have currently designed a simple system to indicate to the user whether they should advance or wait, but it remains unimplemented so far. The chapters cover topics in broad categories whose organization remains invisible to the user (See Appendix B). So viewers stumble from chapter to chapter with no clear idea of an overall organization of the documentary. The navigation system uses a literal map as a metaphorical device, but unfortunately does little to orient viewers. A better system for guiding users and offering chapter choices is needed; along with a system to keep track of which chapters a user has visited. Since *Secret History* is an incremental archive

with new chapters being regularly added, a clear way to indicate which chapters are newly added would encourage repeat viewing. Additionally, there are still aspects of the shantyboat I want to improve. Replacement of what docents were referring to as the “Gangplank of Death” with a simple set of stairs would go a long way toward making elder and less able-bodied people more comfortable visiting the shantyboat.

While I am justifiably proud of the production team, the group was organized within the institution of the university and built upon the power imbalance endemic to the rest of academia. The project group was organized as a class in which I was ostensibly the teacher. The students received a grade based on the quality of their work and participation. While membership was consensual on the part of everyone, all of the members were not on equal terms. This organizational structure stands in stark contrast with my experience as an anarchist community organizer in which consensus-based decision-making in which everyone has an equal voice were the norm. This was a prefigurative tactic: If we want to live in a world in which people share power, our organizing to create that world should reflect that. In the late 20th Century, as lines were blurred between art and activism, the collective organizing of art-making collectives and activist movements evolved in parallel. Consensus-based decision-making adapted from Quaker models emerged from the women’s movements and anti-nuclear movement of the 1970s and 80s. Groups such as Brooklyn’s Flux Factory (est. 1994), the Justseeds Artists’ Cooperative (est. 1998), and the Beehive Design Collective in Machias, Maine (est. late 1990s) still rely on consensus-based models. In the Secret History project group, despite a syllabus that read like ground rules for an anarchist collective, it is worth noting that in a true consensus-based collaboration, one person does not set all the ground rules.

Participate - You were selected to work on the project because of your skills, experience, and interests. Your views are important and we want to hear them, and your work contributes an important piece to the project.

Collaborate - We do it together. A good day is one in which we all succeed. We will work together in our larger group as well as in smaller groups and pairs.

Communicate - Be honest and clear about where you are at, what you know and need to know, and what you've accomplished (or not). Ask for what you need to succeed. Bring up issues before they become problems, and allow us all to work together as a team to solve them.

Support - We each bring different strengths and weaknesses. Working collaboratively, we support and teach each other in areas where we are not as strong.

Respect - Treat each other with respect as we work together. Make room for other people to talk, for their opinions, and for disagreements. How we work together and how that feels is as important as what we produce.

Future organization of the *Secret History* project will have to challenge power imbalance and come together as collaborating artists on equal terms.

I've been mulling over the sustainability of the exhibit as currently configured. Does it make sense to have an installation that must be towed to each exhibition? An exhibition in Miami means a road trip from California to Florida. There is no possibility of packing the shantyboat in a box and sending it via UPS. Without even considering the madness of towing a 7000 pound boat across country in an era of peak oil, it may be financially and temporally unsustainable as an artist as well. Institutions can seldom afford to pay artists at all, meaning that each exhibition involves fundraising for towing costs, time off work for the trip, and associated trip costs. One possibility includes developing a tiered approach where a minimal exhibit involves small shippable items such as river portraits, ephemera, and the documentary on

equipment provided by the institution. Scaled up exhibitions could include the installation and the shantyboat.

An important not-yet-launched component of the project is the research archive, featuring long form interviews with people encountered during the *Secret History* expeditions. While the web documentary allows visitors to experience the journey and get to know its subjects through interview excerpts. The research archive makes these stories in their entirety available to future generations of scholars. The archive seeks to address the dearth of material on the subject of the lives of river people making the material available to future audiences indirectly through scholarly articles and books that may use *Secret History* as a primary source. All of the interviews were conducted according to Oral History Association guidelines, including pre-interviews, consent forms, and carefully worded open questions (OHA, 2009; Sommer, 2002; Perks, 1998). This will make it easier to create a research archive. Before we can fully create indexing and finding aids for the archive, we must completely transcribe all of the *Secret History* interviews. With nearly 30 hours of interview footage, full transcription of these interviews is no small affair. Nevertheless, thanks to the tireless work of the production crew, the first batch of interviews from the 2014 summer fieldwork is 90% completed. Significant effort must be put in to transcribe the remaining summer and winter fieldwork interviews. On top of that, three months of fieldwork on the river in summer 2015 will result in a possible doubling of the archive material. Cataloging and proper indexing are the keys to the archive being useful to future scholars. If potential scholars cannot find the archive, cannot easily find out what topics it covers, or cannot easily access it, they will not use it. An institutional host for the archive would take on the responsibility of cataloging the contents based on our metadata in an online public access catalog such as OCLC WorldCat. This is made more complicated in that *Secret History* is

a “live” archive, with additions coming in regularly. The project team is currently enlisting the aid of university archivists in the Midwest and West Coast to find permanent hosting for the archive. I am currently in discussion with the University of Minnesota’s River Life program director Pat Nunnally about the possibility of UofMN serving as the archive host. Indexing of multimedia content involves creating finding aids that allow a scholar access to topic metadata, transcripts, and media preferably simultaneously. As suggested by Irene Reti, the director of UCSC’s Regional Oral History Project (Reti, 2013), we are working with the University of Kentucky’s Doug Boyd and his Oral History Metadata Synchronizer (OHMS) to create finding and indexing aids for the archive. We are using our summer 2014 interview with Lauren Donovan to prototype the use of OHMS.

A Secret History of American River People is the basis of my MFA thesis work, but the project continues beyond graduation. The full installation exhibited at my MFA show in April 2015, and less than two months later, I leave for the Midwest for another fieldwork expedition down the Upper Mississippi. I expect this fieldwork and the subsequent processing of the resulting archive to be funded by a combination of grants and crowdsourcing. One of the goals of the project is to tell the story of river people on American rivers to inform our present time and place. While I chose to start with the Mississippi River, a waterway that looms large in the American consciousness, *Secret History* is not merely a regional project. Other rivers have different but complementary histories, critical pieces in the collage of people’s river history. Plans to gather oral histories from river people on the Ohio, Missouri, and Tennessee Rivers are gestating. Partnerships with river-connected institutions may provide additional resources. I am currently in contact with the University of Minnesota River Life, Works Project in Minneapolis, Mississippi River Fund, Minnesota Historical Society, the National Mississippi River Museum,

and the Minnesota Marine Art Museum. Art residencies located in cities and towns located on navigable and historically important rivers are a possibility for the project. The residency period spent on the shantyboat in the area of the residency could culminate in an exhibition of regionally significant stories. This work would contribute to the *Secret History* archive and solidify the project as a “multi-river” project.

By design, each of the components of the project are built as a platform upon which future content can be contained comfortably. New thematic paths and protagonists can be added to the web documentary. The research archive can be expanded. The history aboard the shantyboat exhibit grows richer and deeper each year.

One of the most rewarding aspects of the project has been collaboration with other artists and curators. For instance, one of the exhibitions planned for summer 2015 is a joint project of the National Park Service, the Mississippi River Fund, and a Twin Cities art collective Works Progress. The *River City Revue* brings “artists, scientists, cultural historians and Mississippi River enthusiasts together to create an experience that would reintroduce the Mississippi River to a new audience, creatively engaging them with a myriad of cultural and environmental resources” (Works Progress, 2013). I was invited to co-curate the event and bring Secret History to an afternoon and evening at the St. Paul Yacht Club for an event titled “People of the River.” Another possible collaboration is with the University of Minnesota’s River Life project, “a broadly inclusive program of the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota, uses social media, a digital atlas, and case studies to define the discussions and practices that will create inclusive, sustainable rivers” (River Life, 2015). I am working with the director Pat Nunnally to partner with the University of Minnesota to serve as the digital host for the Secret History research archive. I am currently in discussion with possible sponsors for a journey on

Georgia's Ocmulgee River in summer 2016. Marie Lorenz, Dylan Gauthier of the Mare Liberum Collective, and Constance Hockaday are contemporary artists who use boat journeys as a regular part of their practice with whom I've been in contact about possible future collaborations.

Conclusions

I set out at the beginning of the MFA program with a prefigurative goal of practicing within the program what I hoped to be doing when I emerged at the end of it. Some of my subsidiary goals were to work on ambitious pieces, be fearless, travel to faraway places, be an expert in my field, have an impact, publish results, and teach what I know. I wanted to create a framework within which I could build a meaningful, sustaining practice. *Secret History* gives me a foundation within which I can do all of these things and more. *Secret History* is an ambitious project that provides ample room for me to grow as an artist, as an activist, and as a person. It requires me to hone many of my existing skills and stretches me to learn many more. It opens doors to collaborations and community organizing. With time I expect *A Secret History of American River People* to reflect the extraordinary depth and breadth of the people who call the river their life and work, and to create a place within American art and history for the stories of these river people.

Appendix A - Technologies Used for Web Documentary

Hollow was an inspiration for the Secret History Web Documentary. Hollow is “The future of rural America seen through the eyes and voices of people living in McDowell County, West Virginia.” As reported by the creators of the Hollow documentary, Hollow was written in JavaScript and relied on SocketStream, Jade, Stylus, MongoDB, and Data Viz.

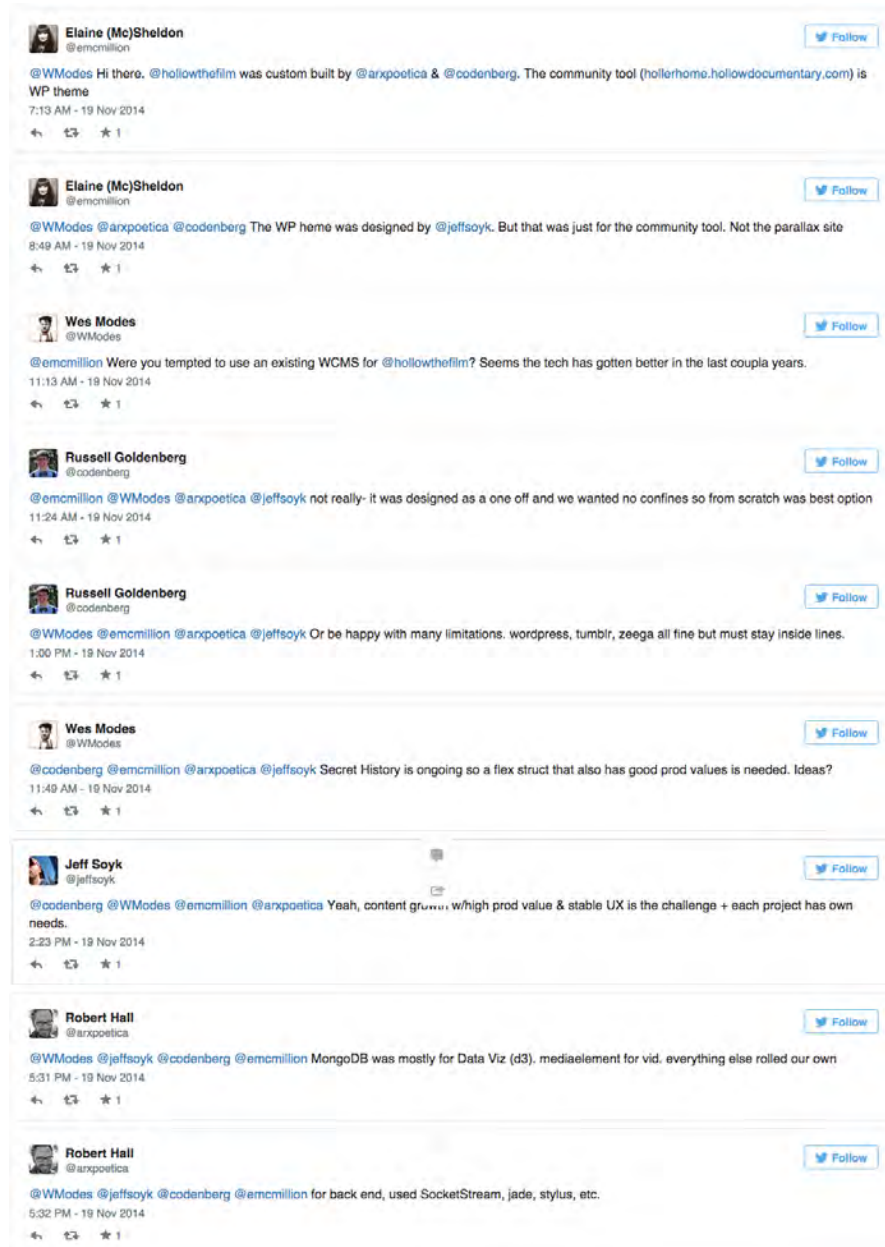


Figure 12. Advice from Hollow Documentary producers.

The following technologies were used in the creation of the Secret History Web

Documentary:

jQuery JavaScript Library v1.11.2 - all around awesome indispensable Swiss army knife for JavaScript + Web
(c) 2005, 2014 jQuery Foundation, Inc. and other contributors
MIT License (<http://jquery.org/license>)

Meteor v1.0.3.1 - a fullstack NodeJS framework. We used demeteorizer to allow it to run outside of its meteor context and deploy to vanilla PAAS server
(c) 2015 Meteor Group (<http://meteor.com>) MIT License

Scrollmagic.js v2.0.0 - this is the latest scrollmagic packaged for meteor.
(c) 2015 Jan Paepke MIT License

GreenSock Animation Platform v0.10.5 - used for animation and tweening
(c) 2008-2014, GreenSock. All rights reserved.
License at http://www.greensock.com/terms_of_use.html

BigVideo.js - for background video. Loaded as client/libjs file, modified to handle multiple instances. ScrollMagic is used to trigger video on and off as it gets within range of the viewport
(c) 2012 John Polacek (<https://github.com/dfcb/BigVideo.js>) MIT License

Video.js v4.10.2 - Video player used by BigVideo
(c) 2014 Brightcove, Inc. Apache License, Version 2.0
(<https://github.com/videojs/video.js/blob/master/LICENSE>)

Howler.js 2.0.0 - for background audio player. Loaded as client/libjs file. The player is in a javascript only library so it is not visible. ScrollMagic is used to trigger audio according to design of chapter.
(c) 2010-2014, John Dyer (<http://j.hn>) MIT License

FitText.js 1.2 - expands text to fit container used for titles.
(c) 2011, Dave Rupert (<http://daverupert.com>)
License: WTFPL <http://sam.zoy.org/wtfpl/>

Bootstrap.js v3.1.0 - HTML, CSS, and JavaScript framework for developing responsive, mobile web projects
(c) 2011-2014 Twitter, Inc. MIT License
(<https://github.com/twbs/bootstrap/blob/master/LICENSE>)

Bootbox.js v4.3.0 - for interactive simple modals
(c) 2011-2015 by Nick Payne <nick@kurai.co.uk> MIT License
MIT License

JSON Editor v0.5.12 - JSON Schema -> HTML Editor
(c) 2014 Jeremy Dorn (<https://github.com/jdorn/json-editor/>) MIT License

Mousewheel.js v3.0.6 - to allow trapping vertical mouse wheel movements
(c) 2011 Brandon Aaron (<http://brandonaaron.net>) MIT License

ffmpeg v2.5.4 - (masquerading on Ubuntu as libav-tools in the repo) a complete, cross-platform solution to record, convert and stream audio and video.
Installed with options `--with-libvorbis --with-libvpx --with-theora --with-tools`. We use this to compress video.
(c) ffmpeg.org GNU Lesser General Public License version 2.1

HandBrakeCLI - HandBrakeCLI is command-line driven interface to a collection of built-in libraries which enables the decoding, encoding and conversion of audio and video streams to MP4 (M4V) and MKV container formats with an

emphasis on H.264/MPEG-4 AVC encoding through x264
 GNU General Public v2 License with L)GPL or BSD licensed libraries
 ffmpegthumbnailer v2.0.9 - A lightweight video thumbnailer. Uses ffmpeg to generate
 thumbnails from video easily
 (c) dirk.vdb@gmail.com GNU GPL v2 License
 ImageMagick vi6.9.0-9 - a software suite to create, edit, compose, or convert bitmap
 images. We use this to compress and resize and compress our images
 (c) 1999-2015 ImageMagick Studio LLC (<http://imagemagick.org>) Apache 2.0 License

Appendix B - Chapter Content of Secret History Documentary

Visitors to the installation could explore the *Secret History* documentary, navigating between eight available chapters in grouped in five broad volumes. These chapters drew short excerpts from interviews, stills video and ambient audio from my river voyage, and photos from river historical collections.

Table 2. Secret History chapters as of April 2015.

Title	Producer	Description
Introduction / Point of View	Wes	Secret History seeks to step into the past to bring something forward to inform our present, our thoughts about the fringe edges of society and our own forgotten histories. What do we mean by history? What do we mean by secret?
Introduction / We Turn Toward the River	Wes	What happened to those quiet moments of possibility when we woke up as children with nothing to do and nowhere to go and the entire world before us? We turn toward the river...
Voyage of the Dotty / Provisioning	Wes	After months of preparation, finishing the boat, planning the journey, and fundraising, we were finally ready to say goodbye to all the friends who'd helped make it happen.
Voyage of the Dotty / Life on the Shantyboat	Wes	Despite its size, the shantyboat was surprisingly livable providing most of the amenities of home. Equipment, music, and good food were important parts of the journey.
Living on the River / Boathouses	Monica / Wes	What is the difference between a houseboat and a boathouse? This is a basic introduction to living on the river.

Looking Back / Moving on the River	Kyle / Wes	Looking back at the Mississippi River as the lifeblood of a continent, from canoes to steamboats to commercial barges. From the earliest people in the region, it is a story of movement and trade on the river.
River Journeys / Reasons People Journey	Jake / Wes	For adventure, for work, out of economic necessity, or for escape, people take to the river. They set out in shantyboats, in small crafts, and even swimming the length of the river.
The River's Story / Water Quality	Regina / Wes	As both a natural resource and wonder, the watershed of the Mississippi covers most of the continent west of the Rocky mountains, 31 states and 2 Canadian provinces. This chapter explores the river's story within the context of it's ever-changing ecology.

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