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RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

INNOVATIONS

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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image is of tending water and listening at Water Bar in Greensboro, North Carolina, courtesy Shanai Matteson, Works Progress, and Water Bar & Public Studio.

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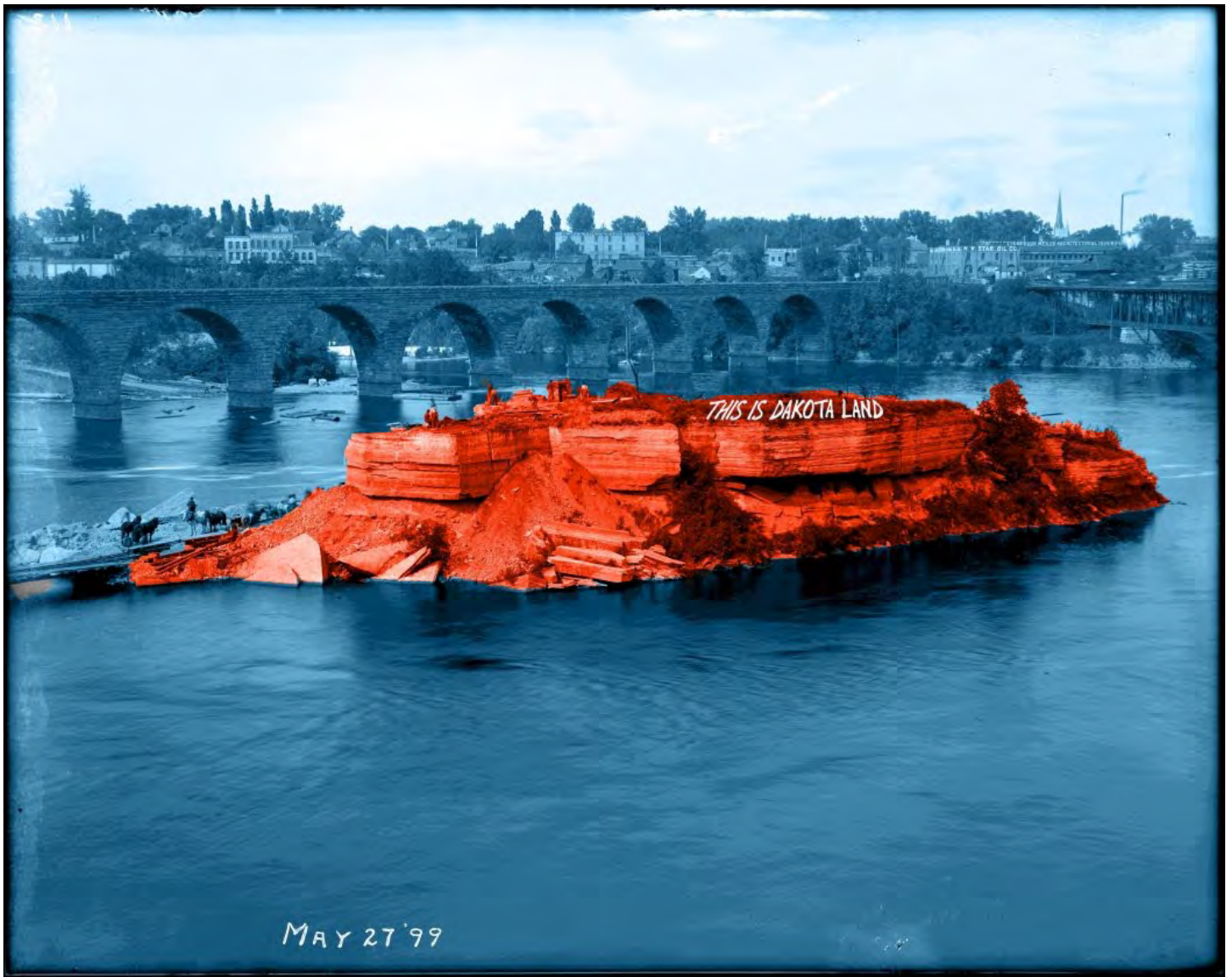
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FEATURE

ON THE UNCOMPROMISING HAND: REMEMBERING SPIRIT ISLAND

By Andrea Carlson



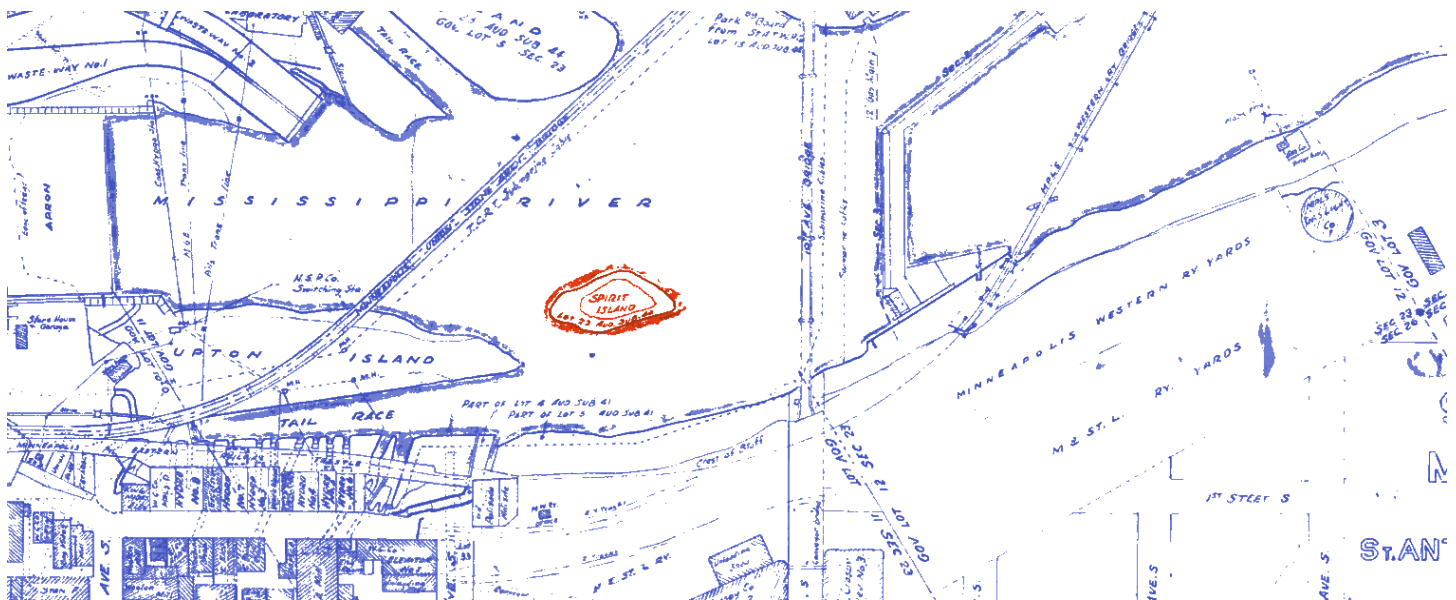
*Still image from the video 'The Uncompromising Hand' (2017) by Andrea Carlson.
Image courtesy of the artist.*

Drawing as Imagining Absence

Sometime prior to 1963 a person sat down at a table to draw a map. This person could effectively communicate with lines across a page, possessing the technical skills of rendering exact scale ratios of a three-dimensional space on a sheet of paper. The task of this artist was to draw a blueprint that would be used to harness a river for industrial use. It is likely that this person had a formal drawing education that included life drawing courses traditionally taught by drawing the nude bodies of women. This is an unintended analogy: a river is not a woman, nor are our bodies entirely foreign to rivers. This imaginary artist of the past is drawing a map of a future river. They may have employed techniques other than those acquired by drawing human bodies; they may have beaded lines against a straight-edge, or traced another artist's renderings, but we can assume with near certainty that the muscle memory within the drawer's hand produced the first gestures that irreparably transformed a waterway. One thing this artist did not draw was a little limestone island called Spirit Island. This was not a mistake of the artist. The island wasn't

drawn, because leaving it out was the first step in imagining its absence.

Our assumed artist was drawing a blueprint for the Upper St. Anthony Lock and Dam built across the Mississippi River in Minneapolis. The lock was designed to assist boats navigating St. Anthony Falls. These plans also called for an easy passage for boats accessing the lock, but Spirit Island sat in this path. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers removed the island in 1960 and dredged the site to create a deep trough for load-bearing boats. The completion of the project in 1963 was heralded by some as a great success, an engineering achievement, and their voices were published and amplified. Fast forward to the year 2015, when the Upper St Anthony Lock closes for operation after a mere 52 years of service. Fifty-two years on a human scale isn't long at all, equal to roughly two generations. According to the 2010 U.S. census, 17.5 percent of people living in the city of Minneapolis are 55-years-old and older. There are still eyes in the city that remember seeing Spirit Island. Those who have



Still image from the video *'The Uncompromising Hand'* (2017) by Andrea Carlson.
Image courtesy of the artist.

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witnessed the island must look at that area of the river now and imagine the island there.

Long before the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dismantled Spirit Island, it was subjected to decades of quarrying by settlers in the late nineteenth century. With a valuable cap of Platteville limestone, a much sought-after building material, the island was dissected and hauled away in horse-drawn carts on tracks. Unfortunately, the settlers didn't keep extensive records of where Spirit Island's limestone went. Today, we can imagine that the limestone quarried from Spirit Island is now fixed into nearby buildings in Minneapolis, perhaps in the Nicollet Island Inn. Maybe pieces of it are in the Stone Arch Bridge, which runs just upriver from where the island once was. Pieces of it may lie on the river's shore,

and perhaps some of it was sold to far-away places. The stone jetty that runs along the channel of the lock is most likely remnant pieces of the island. Spirit Island's stone may now make up the walls of adjacent mills, such as Pillsbury A Mill. The stone blasted off of Spirit Island may have been used in the construction of the Washburn A Mill, only to explode again in the 1874 flour dust explosion that leveled the building. One can suspect that the material of Spirit Island now physically exists in many places, but the island is lost in uncertainty and only found again in an imaginary space.

Spirit Island was so thoroughly dissected in the late nineteenth century that it was lamented long before its final disappearance in 1960. *Minneapolis Tribune* writer Frank O'Brien



*Installation images of the video 'The Uncompromising Hand' (2017) by Andrea Carlson.
Photo: Rik Sferra.*

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declared its demise in 1899 stating that Spirit Island represented, “That beauty spot of nature which has so recently disappeared by the uncompromising hand of man, to make room for the (paddle) wheels of progress.”[1] O’Brien cites the disappearance of Spirit Island while applauding the triumphant determination of industry. The sacrifice is insincere, a pithy, obligatory nod to the appreciation of natural earth formations folded into a love letter to industrial destruction. My bias against O’Brien’s phrasing, against the phrase “(paddle) wheels of progress,” was taught to me in the words of a poem by Mark Turcotte. Published in 2002 in his book, *Exploding Chippewas*, Turcotte’s poem, “Woman Calls Water,” attributes the following words to a Dakota grandmother:

*There were no ruts
before they brought the wheel, she says.
Only the cut of a hoof, the scratch
of the point of a stick
drawing circles within human circles,
hoops spinning, untangling to the sun.
There were no ruts
before they brought the wheel, she says.
The riverbank and shoulder
were strong before they brought
the wagons, before
the teams of oxen carried away
the humming, hissing skins
of all our brother buffalo.*



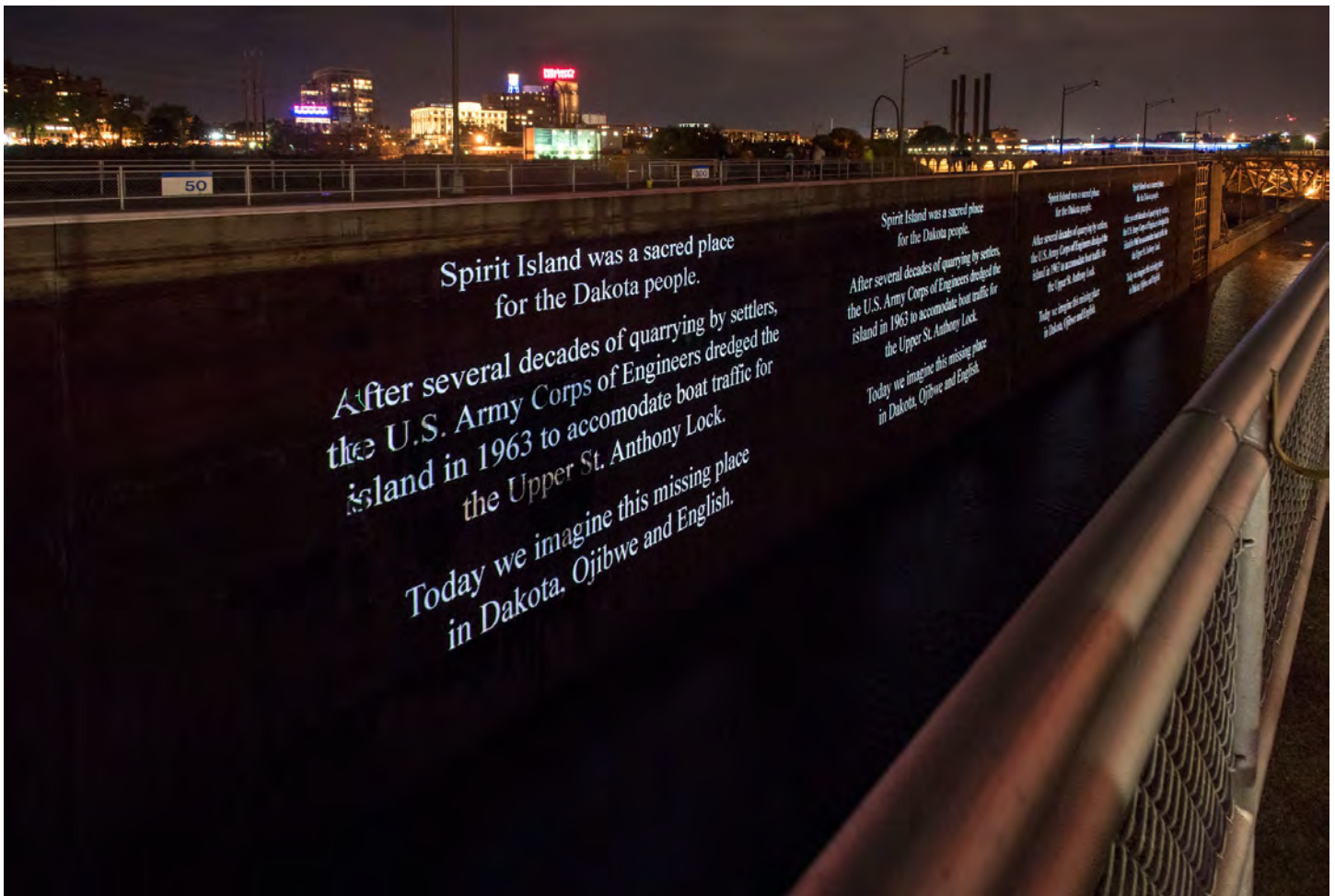
*Installation images of the video “The Uncompromising Hand” (2017) by Andrea Carlson.
Photo: Rik Sferra.*

Later in the poem, Turcotte continues the grandmother's words:

*The wheel is my enemy, she says.
The train is my enemy, the wagon, and the
highway.
The map is my enemy, she says.
The wheel.[2]*

Turcotte's poem plays a conceptual foil to O'Brien's article. To settlers, *the wheel* is a harbinger of progress, bringing only good things. To Native people, wheels drew lines across the continent and left a wake of destruction. The Dakota grandmother of Turcotte's poem is most

likely Susan Power (senior), a Native activist based in Chicago and to whom the poem is dedicated. Her words—which Turcotte confided in me came to him in a dream—declare the map as her enemy within the context of the settlers' tools for conquest. Drawings can be used to make a map or used in propaganda, but they are morally neutral outside of applied contexts. Because I'm a visual artist, I draw every day, and I often think about the histories around my craft. I started my research for a proposed public art project titled, "The Uncompromising Hand: Remembering Spirit Island," by thinking about the artist or architect who sat at a table and imagined the Mississippi River without Spirit Island. Drawing



*Installation images of the video 'The Uncompromising Hand' (2017) by Andrea Carlson.
Photo: Rik Sferra.*

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can reduce large concepts into hand-sized abstractions. Settlements first took the form of drawings, hand-drawn maps with hand-drawn lines that would eventually correspond with rows of corn, hand-signed treaties, certificates of ownership, deeds and wills that would graft new names and legal fictions onto corresponding maps. Our hands abstractly plot out power on

paper long before that power alters the landscape. Drawings are fast skeletons of potential ideas. Drawings are powerful tools. To viscerally bring back the island, I turned to drawing; the same tool that imagined the island's destruction could be used to bring it back.



*Installation images of the video 'The Uncompromising Hand' (2017) by Andrea Carlson.
Photo: Rik Sferra.*

Dominion Nomenclature

It is tempting to say that Spirit Island once was defined by the Mississippi River because it was in the river, it was carved out and eroded by the river. But the island couldn't belong to a river by that name. The name *Mississippi* is an Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe) word that translates as "giant river" and sections of the river intersect with Anishinaabe territories. But it is important to remember that Spirit Island was a Dakota place and the terms we use around Dakota sacred places should be Dakota words. Some Dakota words that describe this sacred area include: *Owámniomni* (turbulent waters, aka St. Anthony Falls), *Dakhóta Makhóche* (Dakota Land), *Wakpá Thánka* (Great River, aka Mississippi River), and *Ĥaháwakpa* (River of the Waterfalls, aka Mississippi River). Back when the names of places were being written on settler maps in Minnesota, those who were taking down names were in communication with Ojibwe people. We were seen as "friendly" or friendlier, and had established relationships with settlers and missionaries during the fur trade era. This isn't to say that Dakota place names are entirely missing, or that Ojibwe place names are over-represented, but that the power to name a place has histories of both diplomacy and erasure.

The physical removal of Spirit Island is documented in photographs in the archive of the Minnesota Historical Society. These images show settlers quarrying the Island and are dated 1870, 1890, 1895, 1896, and 1899. It is important to remember that following the Dakota War of 1862, many Dakota people were exiled from Minnesota, and were living in the Dakota Territory.[3] They weren't able to defend their island; they were refugees for defending all that was theirs. The Ojibwe people warred with and displaced Dakota people in what are now the territorial lines that distinguish Minnesota. One of the many differences between how the U.S. government and

Ojibwe people negotiated with the Dakota can be seen in the treaties and agreements reached between the two tribes. Our agreements, the agreements between Dakota and Ojibwe people, were often remembered in the form of ceremony. As long as the ceremonies were in practice, the treaties were honored.[4] Ojibwe people learned about Dakota sacred places from Dakota people and carried on traditions of feasting, protecting, and caring for those sites. The island was sacred to the Dakota and to others who respect sacred places; therefore, Ojibwe people should have interceded in the 1800s on behalf of displaced Dakota people. I cannot say if my own Ojibwe ancestors had tried, and I'm saddened and ashamed of our complicity.

To be clear, destroying a sacred island is disrespectful, a willful act of erasure, ignorance, or malice. Renaming Indigenous places is another act of erasure, often the easiest form of erasure: an act of the pen, a cartographer's conquest, seen clearly in the name *America*, the feminine form of Amerigo (Vespucci). Place names with the word *New*, such as, New York, New World, New Ulm, are assuredly meant to reassure the settlers that they have arrived in their new, old home. But when settlers renamed Indigenous sacred places, they added a particular insult to this injury. Devils Tower, The Witch Tree, Devil's Kettle, Devil's Lake, all bear the fear-inclined mark of settler/colonial nomenclature. It is notable that this satanic panic and disrespect towards Native spirituality wasn't applied to Spirit Island. But that isn't a charitable gesture. The Dakota names for their places should have been retained. We are now witnessing Dakota people in Minnesota leading grassroot efforts to return place names to their original owners' tongue. The people of Minneapolis can now proudly say "*Bde Maka Ska*" instead of "Lake Calhoun"[5] If names reinforce presence, we can stop honoring the name

of John C. Calhoun, and all that his name stands for as a pro-slavery statesman of the nineteenth century, and we can stop exiling the Dakota.

Although restoring place names is within our capacity, we cannot rebuild islands. My project, “The Uncompromising Hand: Remembering Spirit Island,” was an attempt to reimagine the island. It took the form of a large-scale video made up of maps, photographs, and drawings of Spirit Island. Dakota, Ojibwe, and English words for the St. Anthony Falls areas scrolled across images of the island in the direction of the river’s waterflow, as though these elements were drifting downriver upon the wall within the lock. Visitors were invited to walk around the walls of the lock and look into a chasm 56 feet wide by 400 feet long and well over 50 feet deep. Animated elements of the video included the island in its more intact state fading into reduced images of the island until the island dissolves into a black screen. Projecting “*Dakhóta Makhóčhe*” and “This is Dakota Land” onto the lock, a project of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, is a good reminder for the very people who have been so accommodating to pipeline construction across Dakota land. A formalized reminder of whose land one lives on in the colonized world is called a “Land Acknowledgement” statement. “The Uncompromising Hand” can be understood as a visible statement which recognized Indigenous relationships to this missing place. Although “The Uncompromising Hand” happened to embody the very spirit of Land Acknowledgement statements,

these statements should also be implemented in the introductions of non-native public speeches, artist’s talks, formal presentations and addresses as an act of diplomacy and respect. The Laurier Students’ Public Interest Research Group (LSPIRG) answers questions about Land Acknowledgements thusly:

What is a Land Acknowledgement?

A Land Acknowledgement is a formal statement that recognizes and respects Indigenous Peoples as traditional stewards of this land and the enduring relationship that exists between Indigenous Peoples and their traditional territories.

Why do we recognize the land?

To recognize the land is an expression of gratitude and appreciation to those whose territory you reside on, and a way of honoring the Indigenous people who have been living and working on the land from time immemorial. It is important to understand the long standing history that has brought you to reside on the land, and to seek to understand your place within that history. Land acknowledgements do not exist in a past tense, or historical context: colonialism is a current ongoing process, and we need to build our mindfulness of our present participation. It is also worth noting that acknowledging the land is Indigenous protocol.[6]

The Sacred Roadside Attraction

What is the significance of an island and why was Spirit Island a sacred place? Why did the Dakota revere the island? I don’t know why, but I imagine that places remembered for joy, commitment, tragedy, and loss can become sacred. In *Lost Minnesota: Stories of Vanished Places*, Jack

El-Hai writes of an account of the origin of Spirit Island:

Fredrika Bremer, a Swedish novelist who visited Minnesota in 1850, recorded the oft-told Dakota saga that may well have given the island its name: Ampota Sampa was

happy with her Dakota family of husband and two children. One day, however, the husband introduced a second wife into the family. Stricken with grief, Ampota Sampa placed the children into a canoe and piloted it over the edge of St. Anthony Falls. 'Their bodies were never seen again,' Bremer wrote, 'but tradition says that on misty mornings the spirit of the Indian wife with the children folded to her bosom, is seen gliding in the canoe through the rising spray about the Spirit Island, and that the sound of her death-song is heard moaning in the wind and in the roar of the falls of St. Anthony.' [7]

In facts alone, this story is tragic. If this story is why Spirit Island became sacred, then the sacredness belongs to those who loved, remember, and survived Ampota Sampa. [8] To those of us who have suffered the loss of loved ones to rivers, Bremer's romantic retelling of the story is remote, distant, and kitschy; all suffering is contained within Ampota Sampa as an object or an allegory. I hesitate in sharing the story in this form. The tragedy of a woman vanishing into the mist may have seemed familiar to Bremer's Scandinavian readers, reminiscent of Hans Christian Andersen's tale of *The Little Mermaid* (1837) whose scorned-by-a-man protagonist turns into seafoam. While I'm cautious about doubt-casting this story, the narrative seems incomplete, or all too happily serving Victorian aesthetics. Who told Bremer this story while she traveled in Minnesota: a settler, or had she actually met with Dakota people? I'm not Dakota, but when Dakota people share their knowledge with me, I take special care of that knowledge; I was entrusted with it, and I don't give it away. This story is retold without special care, further illustrating the settler bias that reduces Indigenous sacred places to cute roadside attractions or charming tragic tales of a bygone age.

When the narratives around sacred places are told for the amusement of tourists, the desires of the tourists are prioritized. I didn't want to retell

the story of a river suicide in relation to my project. At the presentation of "The Uncompromising Hand," a young person asked me why Spirit Island was sacred. I quickly considered my options. Relating the story of Ampota Sampa would make me the keeper of the story, potentially the revealer of Dakota things. I chose cultural relativism instead, asking the kid if they had seen the beautiful Catholic basilica a few miles from where we spoke. They had. I asked how congregants would feel if another group of people quarried it; I painted a mental image of people cutting away the basilica's stone filigree. The young person said that they understood my point, and to my surprise, they added that they would rather have the island than the church. The kid understood the specialness of a place without the aid of a story of a woman dying there, nor did they need a church to convey specialness or sacredness.

To reiterate, I don't know why Spirit Island was sacred. What makes a sacred place sacred might be the energy around the place, the spirit in the place, the history and memories associated with it. I would never want to quarry the marble from the basilica to build another church, yet I have seen Spanish colonial churches in Yucatán, Mexico that were built with stone stolen from Mayan temples at Mayapan. [9] If the idea of quarrying stone from Indigenous temples and the destruction of Indigenous sacred places seems like a narrative from another time, it is assuredly not. We are now witness to the active disregard and destruction of Indigenous sacred places for pipelines, reducing Bears Ears National Monument, or encasing sacred mounds in the parking lots of Walmart stores. [10] The destruction of Indigenous sacred places for archeological digs and building developments upon "ancient Indian burial grounds" in North America is so common it has become a horror film cliché. Linking the sacred to worldviews on spirituality or national obligations is an assured way to achieve a full spectrum of differing opinions. There are those among us who feel that human dominion over the earth is a sacred

right and could argue for the destruction of Spirit Island on the grounds of sacredness. If the idea of sacredness is linked to a plea to refrain from

destroying something described with this word, the very idea of the sacred is somewhat tragic and vulnerable.[11]

A Phantom Island

On the evenings of September 29th and 30th, 2017, a slow-paced video depicting scrolling images of Spirit Island was projected across the Upper St. Anthony Lock. The piece “The Uncompromising Hand: Remembering Spirit Island” was a work that I had envisioned and proposed responding to the goals in a request for proposal selectively issued by *Northern Lights.mn*, Mississippi Park Connection, and the National Park Service at the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area. The request stated that “The goal of these projects is to bring to life in a spectacular and visceral manner important aspects of the [St Anthony Falls] Heritage zone, focusing especially on the lock and dam.”[12] The desire “to bring to life” the Heritage zone may have sprung from the 2015 indefinite “Mandatory Closure” of the Upper St. Anthony Lock as signed into law: Section 2010 of H.R.3080—Water Resources Reform and Development Act of 2014. [13] If an emotional connection to the lock had inspired the development of the site as a place for public art, I matched the emotion with a proposal about virtually resurrecting Spirit Island. As the project’s goals had aimed to enliven the place, projecting this phantom island onto a lock, a lock that has the appearance of an open tomb, might solemnly fail. Acknowledging this problem, and the problem of linking Native Americans to a romantic past, I wrote the following in the proposal:

It is important that this film not be understood as lamenting the past. Often Native Americans, our cultures and very existence is seen as something endangered, extinct or not thriving. But we are not a tragedy and should not be spoken of like O’Brien spoke

of the island. Although the lasting effects of colonization are still being resisted through Indigenous language revitalization efforts and environmentalism, the last segment of the animation will reveal that *the hand*, referenced in the title, can be the hands of those interested in a better future—learning from our past to protect the environment for future generations to enjoy.

Invoking *the hand* as representative of our future actions as liberation from perpetuating settler mentality in our current actions is how drawing can show us endless proposals for the future. Drawings are gestures of power relating to the hand. A raised fist, the American Indian Movement’s logo, and many other resistance logos feature the hand as action. Hands are symbols of power, symbols of action. It isn’t my intention to dissect the human body into symbolic organs, but an analogy between hands and power already lives in the idioms of American English. Changing hands, out of one’s hands, the hand that feeds, time on one’s hands, folding one’s hands, to wash one’s hands of, giving one’s hand in marriage, take something off of one’s hands, all convey possessive access, control, and power. One offers a hand for a shake in diplomatic gestures, an act of trust that may have its origins in the kindly sport of revealing a lack of weaponry. American Sign Language is a Native American invention, a language of unity and diplomacy that traversed several hundred linguistic groups. Because the hands pick up where the spoken voice fails us, because the island was initially quarried by hand in an elaborate ceremony of erasure, it will need to be up to future hands to resist, to refuse, and to draw in what has been erased.

See a time-compressed video segment of 'The Uncompromising Hand' (2017) by Andrea Carlson. Documentation: Rik Sferra.

On a final note, one element observed on the night of the project's tests was the fact that the island was actually being projected to scale. Some photographs contained images of settlers on top of the island. Horses hitched up to carts on tracks to excavate the stone were in the images, too. While viewers stood on the lock's wall above the projection, they appeared to be the same

size as the people in the photos standing on the island. The viewers appeared to be hovering just above the people in the photos. A park ranger explained that the limestone cap on Spirit Island was nearly the height of the lock, coming in at a few feet shy of the lock height. The projection of Spirit Island placed the top of Spirit Island a few feet shy of the top of the lock. We were seeing the island presented to scale. Those who, like me, have imagined the island hundreds of times while crossing Stone Arch Bridge had a visceral chance to see the island in a brief apparition.

Footnotes

[1] O'Brien, Frank G. "Famed Falls of St. Anthony as They Looked at an Early Day." *The Minneapolis Tribune*, 7 Jan. 1899, p. 3, <http://www.mnhs.org/newspapers/lccn/sn83016771/1900-01-07/ed-1/seq-27>. Retrieved December 12, 2017.

[2] Turcotte, Mark. "Woman Calls Water." *Exploding Chippewas*, TriQuarterly Books, 2002, pp. 55-56.

[3] Hyman, Colette A., "Survival at Crow Creek," *Minnesota History*, 61 (2008), 148-60.

[4] See the origin of the Big Drum. White, Bruce. "Honoring Wiyaka Sinte Win/ Tail Feather Woman and Her Vision." *MinnesotaHistory.net*, 23 Mar. 2009, <http://www.minnesotahistory.net/wptest/?p=1000>. Retrieved December 12, 2017.

[5] John C. Calhoun was a racist, slavery-advocating politician, whose portrait was printed aside Andrew Jackson's on Confederate first issue banknotes. See also: Nelson, Emma. "Hennepin County Board panel advances lake name change from Lake Calhoun to Bde Maka Ska." *Star Tribune*, 21 Nov. 2017, <http://www.startribune.com/hennepin-commissioners-ok-lake-name-change-from-calhoun-to-maka-ska/459149993/>. See also a proposed Minnesota bill pertaining to place names: <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/bills/text.php?number=Hf2503&version=0&session=ls85>

[6] Laurier Students' Public Interest Research Group (LSPIRG). "Land Acknowledgement." *2017 ACPA Convention*, 2017, <http://convention.myacpa.org/columbus2017/land-acknowledgement/>. Retrieved December 14, 2017

[7] El-Hai, Jack. *Lost Minnesota: Stories of Vanished Places*, University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p. 52.

[8] Although nested in the context of a Dakota story, the reiteration of the family as being a "Dakota family" and the wife is an "Indian wife" reminds the non-Native reader that familiar kinship terms that might engender empathy are offset by continual reminders of *otherness*.

[9] See "Experience Mayan Culture at the Ruins of Chichen Itza and Mayapan." *All Mexico* 365, 25

May 2016, <http://www.allmexico365.com/blog/experience-mayan-culture-at-the-ruins-of-chichen-itza-and-mayapan>. Retrieved December 13, 2017

[10] Sturgis, Sue. “Wal-Mart’s History of Destroying Sacred Sites.” *Facing South*, 8 June 2016, <http://www.facingsouth.org/2009/09/wal-marts-history-of-destroying-sacred-sites.html>. Retrieved December 13, 2017.

[11] The phrase “Women are Sacred” is emerging in communities that have seen trauma and abuse directed towards women. This phrase further perpetuates an association of physical restraint towards the sacred out of respect for sanctity.

[12] Request for Proposal for “Illuminate the Lock” via email correspondence April 12, 2017.

[13] “H.R.3080—Water Resources Reform and Development Act of 2014”. *congress.gov*. Retrieved December 12, 2017.

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About the Author

Andrea Carlson (b. 1979) is an artist of Ojibwe descent from Minnesota currently living in Chicago, Illinois. Her work has been acquired by institutions such as the British Museum, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, and the National Gallery of Canada. Carlson was awarded a 2008 McKnight Fellowship and is a 2017 Joan Mitchell Foundation fellow. Carlson’s “The Uncompromising Hand” was commissioned in 2017 by Northern Lights.mn and Mississippi Park Connection as part of “Illuminate the Lock” (<http://northern.lights.mn/projects/andrea-carlson-the-uncompromising-hand/>).