

An aerial photograph showing a multi-lane bridge crossing a wide river. Below the bridge, a road interchange with curved ramps is visible. The surrounding landscape is green with some patches of red soil or construction areas. The text is overlaid on a dark semi-transparent band across the top of the image.

ISSUE SIXTEEN : WINTER 2020
OPEN RIVERS :
RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

ABUNDANCE & SCARCITY

<http://openrivers.umn.edu>

An interdisciplinary online journal rethinking the Mississippi
from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

ISSN 2471-190X

The cover image is courtesy of Sergio Souza.

Except where otherwise noted, this work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/). This means each author holds the copyright to her or his work, and grants all users the rights to: share (copy and/or redistribute the material in any medium or format) or adapt (remix, transform, and/or build upon the material) the article, as long as the original author and source is cited, and the use is for noncommercial purposes.

Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community is produced by the [University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing](https://www.libraries.umn.edu/) and the [University of Minnesota Institute for Advanced Study](https://www.umn.edu/ia/).

Editors

Editor:
Patrick Nunnally, Institute for Advanced Study,
University of Minnesota

Managing Editor:
Laurie Moberg, Institute for Advanced Study,
University of Minnesota

Administrative Editor:
Phyllis Mauch Messenger, Institute for Advanced
Study, University of Minnesota

Media and Production Manager:
Joanne Richardson, Institute for Advanced Study,
University of Minnesota

Contact Us

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

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

ISSN 2471-190X

Editorial Board

Jay Bell, Soil, Water, and Climate, University of
Minnesota

Tom Fisher, Minnesota Design Center, University
of Minnesota

Lewis E. Gilbert, futurist

Mark Gorman, Policy Analyst, Washington, D.C.

Jennifer Gunn, History of Medicine, University of
Minnesota

Katherine Hayes, Anthropology, University of
Minnesota

Nenette Luarca-Shoaf, Lucas Museum of
Narrative Art

Charlotte Melin, German, Scandinavian, and
Dutch, University of Minnesota

David Pellow, Environmental Studies, University
of California, Santa Barbara

Mona Smith, Dakota transmedia artist; Allies:
media/art

CONTENTS

Introductions

Introduction to Issue Sixteen By Patrick Nunnally, Editor	4
--	---

Feature (Peer Review)

Eroding Memories and Erecting Risk on the Amite River By Craig E. Colten	6
---	---

Features

Flood Narratives of the Lower Subarnarekha River Corridor, India By Debika Banerji	24
The Gift of Water By Leslie A. Johnson	38

Geographies

Invisible Infrastructure: Documenting the Hidden Flood Control Infrastructure in Las Vegas By Jessica Rossi-Mastracci	54
--	----

In Review

Time in the Canyon By David Morrison	64
---	----

Perspectives

The Urban Mississippi: Valuing Connections in a Changing Climate By Emily Green, Bree Duever, and Amit Pradhananga	72
---	----

Primary Sources

The Power of Place: Finding Enduring Value(s) in the Landscapes that Surround Us By Patrick Nunnally	82
---	----

Teaching And Practice

Science 101: Teaching Scientific Anthropology in the Age of “Alternative” Facts By Olivia Navarro-Farr	88
---	----

Editorial

Thank You By <i>Open Rivers</i> Editorial Staff	97
--	----

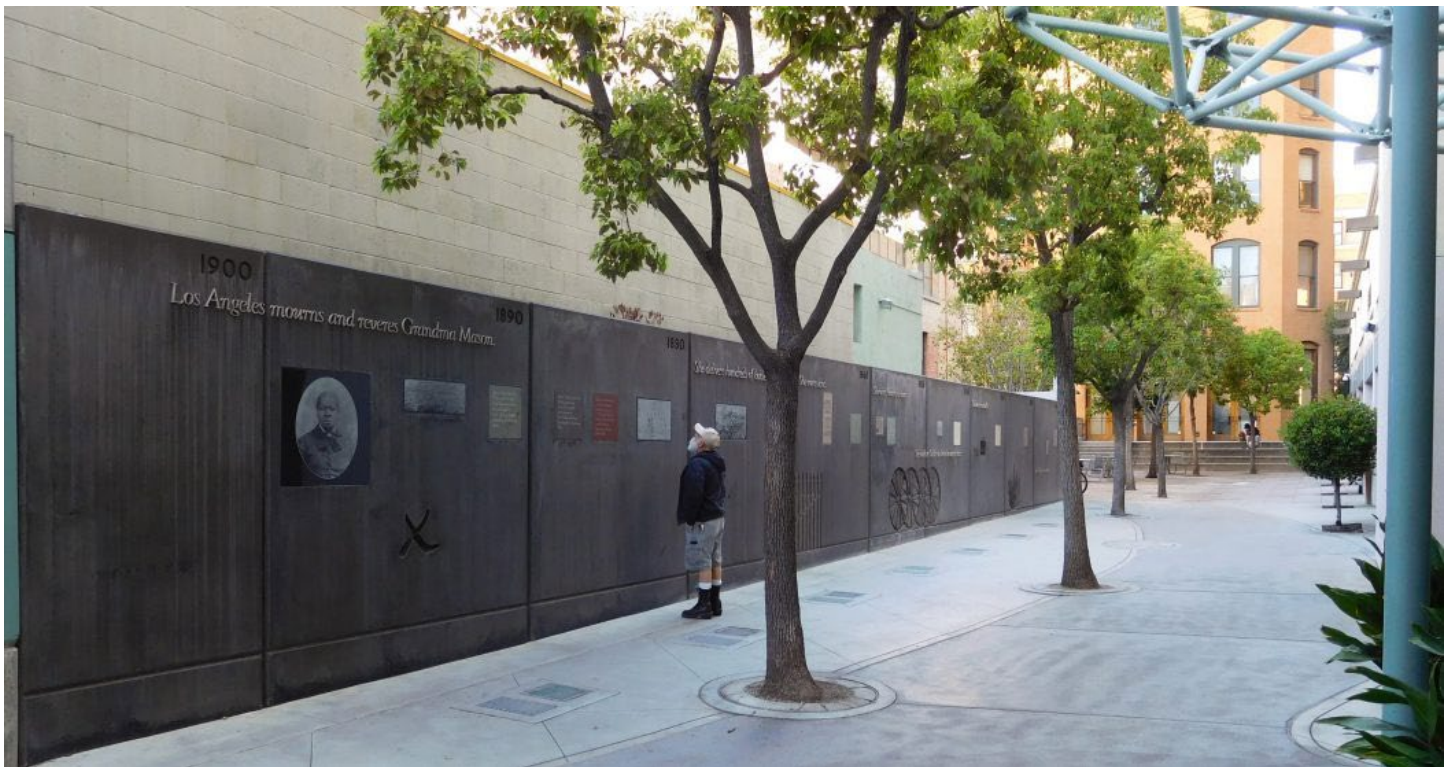
PRIMARY SOURCES

THE POWER OF PLACE: FINDING ENDURING VALUE(S) IN THE LANDSCAPES THAT SURROUND US

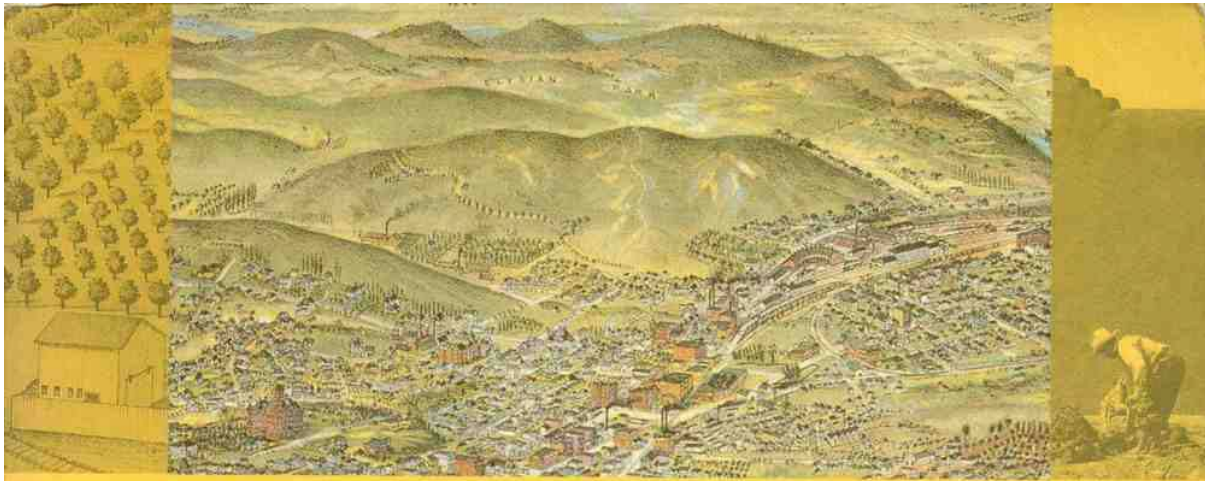
By Patrick Nunnally

Dolores Hayden’s book, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (1995), has been a “primary source” for my thinking and practice since it came out in the mid-1990s. By “primary source” I mean a text and set of ideas that I come back to over and over, that have informed my work so deeply that I can actually now no longer remember how I did my work

before I came across the book. It is therefore “primary” for me in the sense that it has become a starting point, a foundation for many generative ideas that have found their way into my teaching, writing, and program work. And it is a “source” because I turn to it again and again, finding new concepts, expressions, and ways of thinking every time.



Bidly Mason park, a surprising “pocket park” in downtown Los Angeles honoring Mason who was moved to California as a slave in 1850, was freed, and became a successful midwife and landowner. Image courtesy of Don Barrett (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0).



The Power of Place

Urban Landscapes as Public History



Dolores Hayden

Hayden, Dolores. 1995. "The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History." Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Hayden's book arises from and describes the Power of Place project, which she and colleagues conducted at UCLA for several years in the 1980s and 1990s. The heart of the project was to make vivid places in the urban landscape that have been underrepresented or misrepresented by planners, preservationists, and many academic historians, landscapes important to working class communities, women, racial or ethnic groups. Working in response to historic preservation practice at the time, the Power of Place project highlighted how the histories of communities can be and should be part of the urban landscape, even if the material connections to that place are gone. For example, the pre-World War II Japanese flower market on First Street in Los Angeles was eradicated by the forced removal of Japanese and Japanese-Americans during the war. Although the buildings themselves are gone, the Power of Place worked with descendants of the market growers to understand its importance and develop artistic representations of the flowers to be etched into the sidewalk on the site of the old market.

There are two parts of the book that I return to over and over in my teaching and practice. The first part is the way Hayden defines a sense of place, grounding her work in particular places and their histories. As she puts it, "'Place' is one of the trickiest words in the English language, a suitcase so overfilled one can never shut the lid. It carries the resonance of homestead, location, and open space in the city as well as a position in a social hierarchy" (15). Not only does she create space for a sociocultural as well as physical dimension of "place," but she also attends to the varieties of physical spaces that hold meaning and memory for people. Rather than just being concerned about monumental architecture, or "natural" areas, she acknowledges that "natural features such as hills or harbors...frame the lives of many people and often outlast many lifetimes" (9). Drawing these two components together is what made this work innovative at the time and why it continues to resonate today.

The other foundational concept in the book for me is Hayden's use of story to amplify themes that cut across usual ways of understanding population differences. Admittedly, "story" and "theme" are very broad-based ideas, but Hayden brings them together when she writes, "public culture needs to acknowledge and respect diversity, while reaching beyond multiple and sometimes conflicting national, ethnic, gender, race, and class identities to encompass larger common themes, such as the migration experience, the breakdown and reformulation of families, or the search for a new sense of identity in an urban setting" (8–9). The means by which these themes are heard, understood, and shared is often through story.

Biddy Mason's story makes up the center of Hayden's book and is perhaps the most well-developed project by the Power of Place. Mason came to Los Angeles in 1851 as a slave and won freedom for herself and her family in an 1856 court case. From that point until her death in 1891, she was a pillar of Los Angeles' small African-American community, serving as a midwife, and holding status as a homeowner and community builder. From her earnings, she was able to purchase several lots in what is now downtown Los Angeles, and transfer them to members of her family, establishing an important presence in the city. Working with local community partners and artists, the Power of Place project helped establish Biddy Mason Park in this area and inscribe the presence of her community onto public space bounded by Third and Fourth Street, between Broadway and Spring Street. Biddy Mason's story is a woman's story, an African-American story, an entrepreneurial story of community formation. Her story defines intersectionality without using that term specifically.

Case studies from the Power of Place project make up much of the book, but it's important to understand that the practice, and the book, are grounded explicitly in theoretical concepts that continue to have currency in the academy



Portrait of Bidy Mason (1818-1891).

and elsewhere. I am not a theory-forward practitioner, but I do understand the ways Hayden invokes the work of Henri Lefebvre in her work. For Lefebvre, societies organize spaces to enact both economic production and social reproduction. With apologies for drastically oversimplifying complex ideas, I would extend the point to say that American cities, and the countryside also, for that matter, can be usefully understood through the lens of these twin imperatives. The creation of wealthy and working-class neighborhoods, or the spatial relationships that have wealthy people in proximity to environmental assets while low-income people and communities of color are located near environmental hazards, are not accidental or the result of some “natural” set of forces that determine how cities are laid out. The histories of who has been placed in relation to which waters—whether the monumental waters of Twin Cities lakes and the Mississippi River or mundane waters of creeks that overflow—is a central part of my work and my own public-facing scholarship; Hayden and Lefebvre help me articulate the narratives of how the world we inhabit was created. Public-facing scholarship needs strong, accessible theoretical bases for the claims that it makes about public issues, theoretical frameworks that can sometimes be taken for granted within a discipline. It’s not always sufficient to tell members of the public, or agency staff, that “the Mississippi River is a created place.” Making the argument that the river has been shaped for economic means since settlers arrived, and that Indigenous societies saw the river as a social as well as economic place can lead to further, fruitful discussions about the multiple futures possible for the river.

So if *The Power of Place* is a “primary source” for me, it behooves me to explain how it is part of my practice. Hayden’s conception of themes that respect but that also transcend the identities of particular groups has regularly come to mind as I have worked with various groups planning the future of the St. Anthony Falls Heritage Zone in Minneapolis. For three decades or more, agencies

such as departments of the City of Minneapolis, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, and, more recently, the National Park Service, have told stories of captains of industry who conquered the falls and put them to work making flour to feed the world. These are still important stories; General Mills and Pillsbury, both of which originated at the falls, are globally important companies. But my question remains: How do we find river stories that resonate with new residents in the city, or people for whom the traditional pieties about capitalist accomplishment don’t mean much? Put another way, what river stories need to be told in this place that will be important to the people of Minneapolis’ future, the population of which will more than likely be more ethnically and racially diverse, as well as older, than at present. Perhaps Hayden offers us some guidance when she writes of the importance of “the migration experience, the breakdown and reformulation of families, or the search for a new sense of identity in an urban setting,” all of which, I imagine, speak to people who already know the river is important as well as newcomers (9).

Elsewhere in the Twin Cities Mississippi River corridor, planners are pursuing similar strategies. The Minnesota Historical Society has for a number of years been gathering community insights on what stories are central to the place that is now occupied by Historic Fort Snelling, the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers known to Dakota people as *bdote* and considered to be their origin place on earth. Farther downstream, the St. Paul Great River Passage program is very intentionally engaging with a broad cross-section of community members as it plans for the future of this 17-mile stretch of the Mississippi. In both of these instances, as well as the work at St. Anthony Falls, planners are working to create a Hayden-style “sense of place” for the Mississippi beyond its mythologized, Mark Twain-oriented past. River stories must go beyond the simplified mythologies and include Indigenous people, working people, women, communities of color, and others in a more

nuanced understanding of how the urban river system has been changed to meet contemporary needs. Only by adding complexity and transparency to overlooked narratives of our water system (of which the Mississippi River is the most visible part) will we be able to respond appropriately to the climate change that is happening.

Here again, it turns out, Hayden is exemplary. All of her case studies involve finding ways for people in a particular community to tell their own stories, facilitated, perhaps, by a public artist or a graduate student, but owned and directed by the community itself. Hayden's examples show us that adding complexity and nuance to the stories told in and by and about a place is not just a matter of hiring a different consultant, but of listening to the people who have the deepest experience with a place. This change is hard for overworked public agency staff, where often

the most efficient approach—hiring someone who has delivered good results in the past—is attractive. But if “placemaking” is not simply to be “place-taking,” we must listen to the people who have valued this place before, starting with the communities that are Indigenous.

We can no longer be satisfied telling just the river stories we have told for decades. Although we will always need to have some “River 101” content in our programming, both on campus and off, that is necessary but not sufficient. Issues of a changing climate, and recurring questions of environmental equity and justice demand that we extend the scope and depth of our knowledge, and bring that knowledge to the public in innovative ways. For me, Dolores Hayden's *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* continues to be a roadmap to future work.

Bibliography

Hayden, Dolores. 1995. *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Recommended Citation

Nunnally, Patrick. 2020. “The Power of Place: Finding Enduring Value(s) in the Landscapes that Surround Us.” *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 16. <https://editions.lib.umn.edu/openrivers/article/the-power-of-place/>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.7194>

About the Author

Patrick Nunnally coordinates the River Life program in the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Minnesota. He serves as editor for *Open Rivers* and was one of the lead scholars for the University's John E. Sawyer Seminar which focused on the Mississippi River and was funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.