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A Secret History of American River People

2015 |

Author(s): Modes, Wesley; et al.

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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.

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