

# Decolonizing Visuality: The Artistic and Social Practices of Andrea Carlson

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**Abstract** The article demonstrates how images of the Mississippi River presented in European *Mississippi. An Anthropocene River* project, form knowledge about this region in relation to global challenges of the climate crisis. In the text, I examine visualizations of the river created by the Indigenous artist Andrea Carlson, whose works relate to decolonial methodologies and restore places, communities, beliefs and philosophies eradicated in colonialist practices. Visuality in Carlson's work isn't frozen in a place and time, but constitutes a type of social practice in which knowledge is produced. In analysing her works, I take into account their processuality: that, which took place before their creation, what they refer to, what they reveal, and what the process of their creation.

**Keywords** Climate crisis. Decolonial theory. Visual art. Indigenous Art. Anthropocene. Knowledge production.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Erasing and Restoring Images and the Creation of Global Models of Power. – 3 Visual Representations of the River in Western Maps and Global Systemic Models. – 4 Images of the River in the Anthropocene(s): Controversy and Negotiation. – 5 Conclusions.



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## 1 Introduction

The article is devoted to selected works by the visual artist Andrea Carlson, born in the Grand Portage Ojibwe Indian Reservation, with French and Scandinavian roots, who presently lives and works in Chicago, Illinois. These works either date from 2017, or were once again presented in 2019 as part of the European project *Mississippi. An Anthropocene River*. Research conducted in areas adjacent to five field stations along the Mississippi River revealed rapidly changing ecosystems marked by the brutality of colonial practices, and affected by both human and non-human activities and interventions. In examining Carlson's visual works, I will present images of the Mississippi that argue with Western research methods and concepts. These visualisations restore people, places and histories eradicated in the European, and later American colonial project. They take into account the philosophies and cosmologies of marginalised communities, and reveal a certain global logic behind the project of colonization, whose effects can be seen in contemporary global crises. Image-making here is a process taking place across various timescales, spaces and knowledge systems. Existing methods of image analysis are not, therefore, adequate for the examination of the multicontextual issues involved, which include that, which took place before the image existed, how it was created, what it reveals, what it relates to, as well as what change it is capable of enacting.

Andrea Carlson designs visualizations of the river from a perspective grounded in specific geopolitical and cultural contexts. She includes in this process the history and knowledge of Indigenous Peoples, as well as non-human individuals marginalised in colonial hierarchies and dominant scientific paradigms. Her works are aesthetically and ideologically related to the Indigenous Futurism movement, and are based on video formats. They are always tied to a specific location and address its multicontextual issues.

The article is comprised of three sections. The first is devoted to *The Uncompromising Hand*, a video projection that took place in 2017 and 2019 on the walls of the St. Anthony Lock and Dam, on the Upper Mississippi River. This visual intervention in the industrial landscape of the river, is devoted to Spirit Island, which was destroyed during the construction of the lock and dam system, and before European settlement served as a sacred site for the colonized and displaced Dakota tribes. I will examine how images of the Mississippi presented in this project reveal the complex issues surrounding research in this area.

The second section is devoted to images of the river which emerge from the history of the Upper Mississippi, closely tied to industrialization, technological development, as well as the relationships between the colonizers, the colonized, and the Indigenous tribes themselves.

A closer examination of these components allows me to demonstrate their impact on the displacement of Indigenous communities from specific places to areas marginalised on world maps.

The third part is devoted to the theory of the Anthropocene; titular to the *Mississippi. An Anthropocene River* project. In this section, I will present images of the river from the perspective of the AWG research group, as well as Andrea Carlson's and Amina Harper's animation *Anthropocene Refusal*, which dispute its primary geological assumptions.

## 2 Erasing and Restoring Images and the Creation of Global Models of Power

In 2017, a video by Andrea Carlson entitled *The Uncompromising Hand* was projected on the wall of the Upper St. Anthony Lock and Dam, located on the Upper Mississippi River. Two years later, this work became part of the activities conducted at Field Station 1 for the *Mississippi. An Anthropocene River* project. The animation consisted of sketches based on six photographs of Spirit Island. These photos, taken from the MN Historical Society's collection, documented the location from the 1890s through the 1960s. Carlson's three-dimensional drawings depicted bright red fragments of the island, placed against backgrounds consisting of historical maps. On the visualizations presenting the region changing over the course of time, names of territories surrounding the river appear, hand-written by the artist in Dakota, English, and Anishinaabemowin:

*Owámmiomni* – Turbulent Waters – Spirit Island – *Manidoo Minisiniban*  
*Dakhóta Makhóche* – Dakota Land – *Bwaanaki*  
*Wakpá Tháŋka* – Great River – *Gichi Ziibi*  
*Ĥaháwakpa* – River of the Waterfalls – *Gaakaabikaang*<sup>1</sup>

The area of the Upper Mississippi was initially inhabited by Dakota tribes. They lived on this territory until their first contact with Europeans (Anfinson 2003, 252-3). For Indigenous communities, Spirit Island, located on this area, was seen as a sacred place, and a site devoted to spiritual practices. It was used to create buildings and urban infrastructure. The island also underwent constant erosion in its interaction with the river. In the 1960, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers irrevocably destroyed the island, and wiped it from the map. The reason behind this was the planned construction of the Upper St. Anthony Lock and Dam, which would make the city of Minneapolis a

<sup>1</sup> See <https://vimeo.com/426744913>.

navigation hub. The event was treated as an ‘engineering marvel’ and an industrial triumph symbolic of the victory of (Western) Man over the geologically troublesome and energy-efficient St. Anthony Falls (Anfinson 2003, 253). In 2015, the lock was closed to navigation and opened to the public as a tourist attraction. Two years later, as part of the *Illuminate the Lock* program,<sup>2</sup> it was temporarily transformed into an art gallery devoted to the presentation of site-specific works.

Carlson’s film was a visual intervention against the industrial landscape that dominated the Mississippi. In the artist’s piece, the titular ‘illumination of the lock’ restored, symbolically, a long-destroyed place, along with its multicontextual history. The piece constituted an official recognition of Indigenous communities’ belonging to the territories once taken from them, as well as their relationship to the land.<sup>3</sup> The projection depicting the island in the form of overlapping images in contrast with the concrete wall of the dam, invoked themes tied to the project of colonization of the peoples inhabiting the area. Both Indigenous and English names of regions, written out by the artist and projected onto the visualization, demonstrated the political and ideological role of language as well as the significance of its use in the creation of specific ontologies and epistemological approaches.<sup>4</sup>

*The Uncompromising Hand* exposed overlapping colonial processes that include: the marginalisation of populations, their culture and knowledge systems, the exploitation of land, destruction of ecosystems, and the creation of social, political, and epistemic hierarchies. It can thus be interpreted as a form of visual representation of the global logic behind the colonization project. This concept, defined by some decolonial researchers as the ‘coloniality of power’ forms the basis for understanding the world order built during the process of colonization. It defines the identity and place for the individual in the world, and creates new orders of power and knowledge under decolonial politics.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Illuminate the Lock* was an artistic program that took place over two weekends, created in association with Northern Lights.mn, Mississippi Park Connection and the National Park Service. See <http://northern.lights.mn/platform/illuminate-the-lock/>.

<sup>3</sup> This type of declaration known as Land Acknowledgement, an increasingly popular practice among Western institutions, non-profit organizations and art groups, is part of Indigenous protocol. It is always tied to a specific area, where research activities or interventions are undertaken, and is situated in the present as defined by the colonial process. See <http://convention.myacpa.org/columbus2017/land-acknowledgement/>.

<sup>4</sup> Insofar as the English language, dominant in the naming of territories adjacent to the river, accentuates objects, entities, acts of ownership, this invoking approaches connected to the dominant position, in the language of the Anishinaabe, which is heavily verb-based, emphasis is placed on relationships and interactions between entities.

<sup>5</sup> Annibal Quijano’s concept of the coloniality of power has been expanded upon globally since 2000 by a group of researchers connected to the Modernity / Coloniality Group. See e.g., Quijano 2000, 2007; Wynter 2003; Lugones 2006; Mendoza 2016; Mignolo 2018; Grosfugel 2011.

According to Annibal Quijano (Quijano 2000, 2007), the coloniality of power is comprised of three elements: domination, exploitation, and conflict, which are directly embedded into four primary dimensions of social existence: labour, sexuality, authority and subjectivity, as well as their resources and products.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, racial hierarchisation influenced not only commonly accepted models of employment and exploitation of land and resources, but also legitimized, in the eyes of the colonizers, European hegemony over culture, the definition of the subjectivity of individuals, their identity, ways of knowing the world, and systems of knowledge production. According to the Argentine philosopher Walter D. Mignolo, coloniality as opposed to colonialism, is neither a European nor an American product, as it functions as a sort of model that supports colonialism, forming a basis for the understanding of the world from the perspective of marginalised peoples (Mignolo, Walsh 2018, 148). It is a model for decoding methods in which particular groups form histories of the world, revealing universalist models of understanding reality as unique and encompassing all living entities. Mignolo defines the process of decolonialisation as the Third Nomos (Mignolo, Walsh 2018, 204). It constitutes simultaneously a crisis of Western civilization, deprived of the necessary tools to solve the problems that it itself created. Expanding upon the theme, Catherine E. Walsh adds, that in the current crisis of civilization, universalist models and Western paradigms are disintegrating before our eyes, and the catastrophe we are experiencing is symbolic of the war against all manifestations and forms of life.

It is a war that aims to break the social weave, and to engulf and destroy all – including beings, knowledges, lands, and ways of thought and existence – that obstruct and impede its path. (2018, 15)

An analogy to Andrea Carlson's project can easily be drawn from the above quote. The removed island, whether in the process of increasing exploitation or complete eradication, can symbolize the victim of war in Walsh's writing. In this case, this war is set on the uncompromising quest for progress, acting in the name of modernist values and worldviews, which annihilate not only places, but entire cultures and peoples, subjugating them to the dominant systems of authority. Decolonial politics stand in opposition to Western universalism, which in itself contains embedded epistemic violence (Spivak 2010, 35). In exchange, it offers a pluriversal approach (Grosfugel 2011) in which many disparate concepts and worlds exist without mutual exclusion

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<sup>6</sup> These key premises of Quijano's concept are presented by dr Luiza Prado de O. Martins in one of her lectures for Universität der Künste Berlin *Poetics of Anticolonial Joy*. See <https://www.luiza-prado.com/anticolonial-joy>.

nor the division between allies and enemies, but instead communicate and cooperate with one another (Mignolo, Walsh 2018, 2). The image of the island does not exist in place of that of the lock, but alongside it, and I can thus interpret it as an example of a decolonial practice.

In her essay *On the Uncompromising Hand: Remembering Spirit Island* (2018), that tackles issues specific to the project, Andrea Carlson speculates on the process of planning the construction of the Upper St. Anthony Lock and Dam. The artist pointed out the role of sketching maps, and architectural drawings often being the first material imagining of the 'progress' of the river's area. In this context, the role of technical skill in drawing becomes political, and along with the creator's own position, influences visions of future landscapes – those which will come to be, and those which will be eradicated. Carlson tells the story in which the map's creator begins working on the blueprint in the fifties, which is to say, before the official unveiling of the new industrial construction project. In doing so, he sketched places, which later irreversibly altered the course of the river and the functioning of its ecosystems: environmental, economic, political, cultural and social. The creation of a symbolic imagination of the artist that positions him as someone rooted in a specific contexts, is a significant practice of decolonial methodologies. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith comments, knowledge of genealogy, as well as cultural, social and political experiences concerning specific environments can be understood as a survival tactic not just for communities, but for entire ecosystems (Smith 2002, 2). The artist depicted by Carlson recreates in his drawing elements of the space in which the infrastructure of the Upper St. Anthony Lock and Dam will be built in the future, without acknowledging the presence of Spirit Island. In Carlson's words:

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. (Carlson 2018, 64)

Using the drawing as a tool in her everyday work, the artist brings attention to the significance of creating sketches, paintings, and visual representations. Their moral neutrality is preserved only when one ignores the possibility that they may be used as propaganda in the future, in the creation of maps, blueprints or the introduction of physical changes in existing landscapes. They may migrate across space and time, transforming from hand-drawn lines and shapes on sheets of paper into real actions: interference with ecological, political and social systems, signed treaties and deeds, erased names, places and communities, as well as new systems of authority and domination.

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. (2018, 68)

### 3 Visual Representations of the River in Western Maps and Global Systemic Models

In her previously cited critique of *The Uncompromising Hand*, Andrea Carlson comments an article "Famed Falls of St. Anthony as They Looked at an Early Day", published by Frank G. O'Brien in *The Minneapolis Tribune* (1899). The article describes Spirit Island as a beautiful natural object destroyed by "the uncompromising hand of man, to make room for the (paddle) wheels of progress" (1899, 3). In her view, the author's lament over an island destroyed by settlers is spurious, and yields to a narration favourable to the colonialist drive towards progress. Carlson juxtaposes the newspaper text with Marc Turcotte's poem entitled "Woman Calls Water" in *Exploding Chipewas*, (2002, 55-6) dedicated to Susan Power, a Chicago activist and Dakota elder. In the poem, the 'progressive' tools of the settlers, including the maps they devise, are described as hostile towards Indigenous communities. They define lines of material division, and act destructively towards the environment, and the lands and animate and inanimate entities that comprise them.

Current maps of the Upper Mississippi River, are part of a complex and prolonged process that fits within a model of the coloniality of power that I have cited here. Its origins can be sought in the areas around St. Anthony Falls and Mille Lacks lake in the seventeenth century, upon arrival of one of the first Europeans, the Franciscan priest Louis Hannepin (Anfinson 2003, 252). Imprisoned by the Dakota, he drew maps of the landscapes he observed and took notes on the customs and traditions of the local population. Once transferred to paper in the form of sketches and notes, the effects of his work inspired and encouraged further European exploration, as well as a perception of the lake and waterfall regions in terms of their commercial, economic and energy-producing potential.<sup>7</sup> By the early eighteenth century, an ever-increasing number of water mills, sawmills and barracks were being built in the area. Their construction fuelled the production of flour and the clearing of forests, the transport of timber, local agriculture, and by the end of the nineteenth century, the geological exploitation of limestone islands in the region, including the very site fundamental to Andrea Carlson's work - Spirit Island. On-

<sup>7</sup> The European priest's name was also given to, among others, one of the islands in this region, Hannepin Island.

going field work conducted by Europeans, initially visualized through sketches in journals, influenced the subsequent exploitation and settlement of lands belonging to the Dakota, and contributed to the irreversible transformation of their landscapes and expansion of settler maps. It is not coincidental that Linda Tuhiwai Smith, identifies the word 'research' as one of the most negatively perceived words in Indigenous vocabularies, invoking only negative memories, arousing suspicion, and associated with the process of destruction and appropriation of not only territories, but also traditions, beliefs and identities (Smith 2002, 44). It is for this reason that when considering the research process, it is of such importance to become aware of its political implication. For Indigenous communities, it often becomes a method and a methodology, working out the dynamics of what is local, regional and global. It is based on trust and the sharing of knowledge, and often plays a more significant role than the research itself, as well as its conclusions (2002, 45).

Along with the commercial development of St. Anthony Falls, large metropolises such as Minneapolis and St. Louis came into being, as well as hydropower management companies such as the Minneapolis Mill Company and the St. Anthony Water Power Company. At the same time, dams were built alongside a system of channels that regulated the flow of the river, and enabled an expansive exploitation of the land. Economic factors alone did not influence these incursions into the Upper Mississippi. In the nineteenth century, violent erosion of rocks underneath waterfalls threatened their destruction and became the basis for building further locks and dams as well as a concrete barrier that regulates the flow and water level of St. Anthony Falls (Anfinson 2003, 260). The falls had become a significant source of electrical energy and prompted the construction of hydroelectric power plants that gradually supplanted individual mills. In the thirties, in order to fulfill ambitions of turning Minneapolis into a nexus for inland water navigation, it was necessary to adapt this geologically challenging area to its new function. The Upper Minneapolis Harbor Development Project started 1937 and was financed by the city of Minneapolis. These plans were implemented, and individual elements of the landscape removed. The shifting image of the river was visualised in the first European drawings that attempted to capture the wild beauty of the surrounding landscapes, appearing in the architectural blueprints. It was preserved in constantly evolving maps, expanded by subsequent, captured territories, cities built, and infrastructure subjugated to manage locally sourced and globally distributed resources and products.

In the history of the modification of the Upper Mississippi's landscape, it is worth pointing out the relationships between the tribes living in this region, as well as their diplomatic efforts with the government of the United States. In the seventeenth century, the Ojibwe initiated the process of pushing the Dakota from their lands in a se-



ries of tribal conflicts. David Treuer, a writer, literary critic and lecturer, as well as an Ojibwe himself, in his account of the history of and life within the American reservations (Treuer 2020, 78-89) emphasizes that the Mille Lacks and St. Anthony Falls areas were inhabited, conquered and lost long before the Dakota appeared. It is an important theme, as it points to other eradicated places and communities that can not be reinstated in the dominant historical narrative as sufficient information about them no longer exists (2020, 81).

Since signing the Treaty of Paris in 1783, the United States government freed itself of British influence, and conducted negotiations pertaining to the settlement of each region directly with Indigenous tribes themselves. In 1825, the U.S. government signed a treaty in Prairie du Chien with local communities (including the Ojibwe, Dakota, Ho-Chunk, Sac and Fox, Menominee and Iowa), which was to ensure peace between the warring tribes and to enable free trade and settlement of these lands. The Ojibwe, who still constituted a formidable military power, eventually lost access to new land and resources, and in 1837 signed another treaty with the American government (2020, 83). The stabilization and security that they counted on turned out to be illusory, and led to the mass clearing of American pine forests by the government, which fuelled the industrial development of cities in the region. Further treaties signed until 1862 were in turn broken by the government, and Indigenous tribes deprived of their land and rights. The brutal war fought in the 1860s between the Dakota united with a subset of Ojibwe tribes and the government was a consequence of the deteriorating situation of Indigenous communities and the cruelty which they experienced at the hands of the American authorities. The Dakota were resettled from their native lands for over a century (2020, 88).

According to Andrea Carlson, treaties signed during the Dakota/Ojibwe conflicts, that forced the former to do abandon their lands, were often staged as ceremonies, and their terms were honoured (Carlson 2018, 69). The Ojibwe also continued the tradition of protecting and caring for places of spiritual significance to the Dakota people. During the drafting of new colonial maps and renaming places that had been resettled, Americans primarily consulted with Ojibwe communities, with whom they had closer relations that stemmed from past mutual interests.

In this context, it can be said, that the changes that took place in the landscape of the river were dependent on two interwoven factors: the relationships forged between particular groups, as well as the approaches these groups represented. Among Indigenous communities, who were no strangers to war and territorial conflicts, respecting the beliefs and traditions of conquered peoples played an important role. Western settlers, however, intent on domination on every level – social, political, cultural, epistemic – annihilated every-

thing that served as an obstacle to realising their objectives. In projecting Western civilization, subjugated to progress, against the existing image of the river and its surrounding terrain, they erased not only enormous areas of land, but also people, and their homes, their beliefs, and traditions.

In the understanding of Linda T. Smith, designing maps in acknowledgment of decolonial theory strengthened the position of Indigenous communities at the periphery of the world, in areas marginalised in Western models of authority (Smith 2002, 150). The distinct Western perception of space and time also contributed to the growth of systems of domination, which in turn influenced the delineation of borders and territorial boundaries, and the definition of centres of colonial power. They shaped historical models based on a linear time scale in which all that is modern (European) displaced that, which is traditional (Indigenous). The consequence of this disparity was the separation of individuals from the land and landscapes they inhabited. Smith comments that:

Through the controls over time and space the individual can also operate at a distance from universe. (2002, 56)

The position of distance in the Western approach allowed the river to be seen as a part of a global system. Its visual representations can be found in the historical processes of designing the Earth as a whole, initially conducted as part of the European colonial project, and resumed in the second half of the twentieth century by the United States (Jelevska 2019, 21). The emergence of the first known globe in the fifteenth century, progressively updated with new conquered territories, and of the concept of the Earth as a cybernetic model, a single organism comprised of interdependent human and non-human systems and its development into the Earth System Sciences super-discipline based on advanced algorithmic models both situated Western man with regards to the planet in different ways. He was, successively, a conqueror of territories, a holistic manager adapting to new scientific and technological discoveries, working in the interest of colonial, economic, and political systems.

Currently, representatives of Western institutions, in response to the global climate crisis, are attempting to include the notions held by Indigenous communities in their research. The reasoning behind this practice is the desire to draw upon the experiences of colonized peoples, whose primary “research” goal for over 500 years is, in fact, survival. In light of this, perspectives are emerging that advocate ‘becoming local’, (Chandler, Reid 2019) the creation of knowledge related to the Earth and a return to the Earth from remote measurement stations, (Latour 2018) the acknowledgment of multiple entangled worlds existing concurrently, and the relationships between the ecological and social spheres (Danowski, Viveiros de Castro 2015).

#### 4 Images of the River in the Anthropocene(s): Controversy and Negotiation

As I pointed out in the introduction, the visual works of Andrea Carlson comprised a part of the actions that took place at the first field station during *Mississippi. An Anthropocene River*.<sup>8</sup> Its goal was to seek new methods of producing knowledge and educational practices in relation to the concept of the Anthropocene, a geological epoch shaped and dominated by human activity, first posited in 2000 (Zalasiewicz, et al. 2019, 2).

*Anthropocene Refusal* is another animation created by Andrea Carlson, this time working together with Minneapolis-born and based Amina Harper.<sup>9</sup> The project consists of visualizations aesthetically and ideologically tied to Indigenous Futurism. Works situated in this movement depict the past, the future, and the present from the perspective of Indigenous communities in the context of themes such as: colonialism and the colonality of power, and the resulting environmental destruction, systems of social hierarchisation, and differences in the perception of time and space (Fricke 2019, 109).

The video projection *Anthropocene Refusal* consists of a series of single shots, or two shots in a single frame next to one another on a split screen. The animation begins with a large-scale satellite image of the Mississippi as a line winding its way through the land, standing out through its shape and darker colour. This is the only image of the river seen in the film from such a great distance. Subsequent footage shows the Mississippi and its related spaces and structures shot from a much closer vantage point. Among them are: the rhythmically undulating surface of the water; a human hand extended towards the river, with the surrounding landscapes digitally superimposed upon it; hands rendered in a similar technique being immersed in the water intermixing with it; another shot of the river's surface set on a split-screen against floral beadwork;<sup>10</sup> the same floral beadwork superimposed on the outlines of hands submerged in the river. These images show humanity, and its products in constant relationship and inseparable from the river, water and Earth. Simultaneously, in between the images, an incomplete list of Indigenous kin appears, who are living in close relations with the Mississippi and Dakota lands. Among those mentioned are: Mona Susan Power, Mona Smith, Kate Beane, Dakota

<sup>8</sup> The *Mississippi. An Anthropocene River* project was part of a wider initiative, the Anthropocene Curriculum, developed in Berlin since 2013, and presently realised around the world.

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.anthropocene-curriculum.org/contribution/anthropocene-refusal>.

<sup>10</sup> The beadwork presented in the film were likely from bandelior bags, which were worn by members of Indigenous Ojibwe communities.

Hoska, and Gwen Westerman: artists, activists, social activists whose work, much like that of Andrea Carlson, concentrates on reclaiming the erased images of the languages, histories, and lands belonging to Indigenous communities. Significantly, the work that many of them produce or perform in the field of decolonization of the regions of the Upper Mississippi, is political, and results in social change, and thus steps beyond theoretical, artistic or symbolic domains. As an example, the work of Mona Smith, a Dakota artist and media producer who is one of the names mentioned in the project, provoked a series of educational practices in Minneapolis that were based on, among others, collaboration with city organizations. It also resulted in the creation of the Healing Place Collaborative, a non-profit organization bringing together Indigenous artists.<sup>11</sup>

The post-war decolonial research program, implemented more intensively since the sixties, managed to reformulate itself from locally-focused activities to a kind of global mission based on strategic collaboration between individuals situated in disparate geopolitical and cultural spaces (Smith 2002, 384). According to Linda Tuhiwai Smith, it is based on two primary approaches. The first takes the form of community-based research and it embrace the local initiatives or tribal research devoted to solving particular problems. They are often supported by Indigenous academics, often educated in Western academia. The second approach is related to work inside institutions, where research centres and education programs that make use of Indigenous methodologies are created. They can steer academic interest towards solving specific local problems and forge new research strategies. In this developing program, it is not only the focus on local histories, relationships, beliefs and philosophies emphasized in Carlson and Harper's images that becomes visible, but also the manner in which they shape global processes.

The *Anthropocene Refusal* project presents an alternative vision of the planet's survival, consistent with the beliefs and cosmology of Indigenous communities. It denies dystopian prospect of the extinction of humanity, and concentrates on its healing. The titular refusal of the Anthropocene stems from the creators' view of the concept's causality of the destruction of local and global environments, and the universalist, and thus colonial view of humankind. In the artists' view, the geological quest for the moment when the epoch begins is always tied to a vision of its end. To Indigenous communities, however, the end of the world is not situated in the past, but has been on-

<sup>11</sup> Smith's 2006 installation, entitled *City Indians*, shown at the All My Relations gallery in Minneapolis, resulted in the Bdote Memory Map project, which contained the original names of places inhabited by the Dakota, and recordings of Indigenous peoples' stories related to the history of colonization in these territories. See <http://bdotememorymap.org>.

going for over 500 years, from the moment when the first Europeans appeared on their land (Danowski, Viveiros de Castro 2015, 107). The experiences of genocide, loss of their land, the downfall of the local environment, culture, traditions and ways of living have long been a part of the lives of people whom the foundations of the Anthropocene epoch, in its geological sense, do not acknowledge.

In an article published on the Anthropocene Curriculum website entitled *The Mississippi River is the Opposite of the Anthropocene*, Andrea Carlson takes this view a step further, stating that the imposition of the theory of the Anthropocene on the regions of the Mississippi, as it was assumed by European design, threatens these regions with isolation from their colonial contexts one more time turning them into “theoretical unoccupied zones” (Carlson 2020). The first image shown in the film *Anthropocene Refusal*, depicts the Mississippi from a distance, in its entirety, in the form of a satellite image. The image delivers information about the river only available at this scale, but is devoid of any closer local histories placed in multiperspectivist historical contexts that Carlson refers to in her work. In her view, it is exactly those histories that allows us to correctly understand how the Anthropocene could function in the river and its environments, without turning it into a sort of ‘mascot’ necessary for the validation of a new geological idea (2020).

Activities that in some ways visualise artist’s own fears can be found in a series of essays written by members of AWG for the *Mississippi. An Anthropocene River* project. Their purpose is to deliver proof of the researchers’ earlier hypothesis that treated the Mississippi as an “icon of global Anthropocene transformation”.<sup>12</sup> Images of the river are, in this case, designed from a distance, separating the observer from the object, allowing for it to be seen in its entirety, for enormous data sets pertaining to it to be analysed and combined, and for processes taking place in river infrastructure to be joined with the activities taking place on a global level. In these interpretations, the Mississippi is an element of the technosphere and the hydrosphere, fuelling their metabolisms, simultaneously making use of their infrastructures and functions in the interest of their survival (Haff 2019). It also constitutes a distinct fragment of the global river system, identified by man, with a defined length, width, beginning, end, and number and types of outflows. The transformations of the Mississippi’s ecosystems are perceived in a linear time scale and, according to AWG researchers, have accelerated since the process of European colonial expansion began. Industrial development, deforestation and new construction all influence the shifting of river sediment, which consequently leads to the

<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.anthropocene-curriculum.org/project/anthropocene-working-group>.

gradual flooding of adjacent land. From this perspective, the Mississippi is an example of a place, where the anthropogenic layers of the Earth contain elements completely different than those characteristic of previous geological epochs (Russell et al. 2019). The future of the river speculated upon by researchers affiliated with the AWG, is a continuous process of adapting to environmental changes: the resettlement of populations deeper inland, expansion of technological infrastructure, and the migration of animal and plant species (2019). More so than a dystopian vision of the world, it manifests as a scenario for the continuation of the present model of 'being in the world', based on Western values, methodologies, methods, and philosophies. In the geological Anthropocene, humans are not represented by Indigenous members of the Ojibwe or Dakota tribes, but by Western settlers whose own destructive activities have placed them in a crisis known to many marginalised populations. Proof of the above can be found in an essay by AWG members, defining the beginning of human impact on the river's ecosystems. According to the researchers:

The human impact on river systems, including the Mississippi, did not start in the Anthropocene. The Mississippi was likely changed in some way by the Indigenous North Americans through variable deforestation and the introduction of agriculture, with that change accelerated by the early European settlers through agriculture, mining, and urbanization. (2019)

In this take on the Anthropocene, if it is indeed the epoch of humankind, then it is one defined by Westerners, and begins with the European colonization project. Scientists attempting to officially define this epoch in geological time unit outline yet another colonial division between the dominating and the dominated, without acknowledging in the geological concept of "humanity" the presence of societies other than those of the West. Within theories this dangerously universalizing and bound to the destructive logic of the coloniality of power in the face of a global crisis, the images designed by Andrea Carlson and Amina Harper seem to take on even greater significance. They draw attention away from Eurocentric, modernist, distanced cognitive models and literally bring the viewer closer to the Earth's elements, which macroscopic visualisations are unable to take into account.

It should be pointed out, however, that since it was officially presented by geologists, the Anthropocene has been rather thoroughly dealt with by Western researchers from both ecological backgrounds as well as humanistic and social ones. In the context of political agency, so often missing from philosophical theories themselves, it becomes fundamental to the introduction of epistemological changes, and the creation of new ontopolitics within Western academia. The

Anthropocene breaks with modernist dichotomies such as nature/culture or sciences/humanities, destabilising their fundamental assumptions. It also suggests that so-called 'natural' processes do not exist in separation from social, political, historical and economic effects (Chandler 2018, 5). The suggestion of a new geological epoch, strongly criticised by many researchers and artists, posed new questions about what it is that ought to be investigated in terms of the sudden changes occurring within a global crisis, and what methods and contexts are to be employed, if previous methods are no longer effective. According to Donna Haraway, the Anthropocene constitutes a boundary event situated in between two epochs, of which the first (the Holocene) worked in accordance with the model of management and 'being in the world' that is no longer functional, and the second has not yet been formed (2018, 7).

It can be stated that the *Mississippi. An Anthropocene River* project produces different images of the river, dependent on the different research approaches. On the one hand, it makes use of methods known from Western scientific processes, based on, among others, field research, seminars, discussions, or art exhibitions. Furthermore it makes use of knowledge based on macroscopic technologies, which is apparent in the collaboration between the project's creators and the AWG. On the other hand, field stations are related to the multi-threaded history of the regions in question, predominantly tied to the processes of colonization. Here, the river is presented close-up, revealing how water and earth are tied to humanity and constitute one of its inseparable elements.

The meeting of these two theoretical concepts, scientific methods and methodologies used not only by Western researchers, but also artists, practitioners and scientists connected to decolonial theory, as well as representatives of Indigenous communities, concentrated around the contentiously perceived Anthropocene, reveal its pluriversal nature, situated in specific geopolitical and cultural contexts. As comments Anna Tsing, an anthropologist connected to new materialism and the co-creator of the digital platform *Feral Atlas comments: The More-Than-Human Anthropocene*:<sup>13</sup>

We need the skillset of the sciences, humanities and the art. We also need the experience of careful observers outside the academy, including those whose knowledge stems from BIPOC communities, that's Black Indigenous and People Of Colour.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> <https://feralatlantlas.org>.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vVMrLLL630&t=207s>.

## 5 Conclusions

The images of the Mississippi selected for this article depict the river from multiple perspectives: from modern representations on Western maps, satellite images, blueprints and global systemic models; through focus on the landscapes of the Upper Mississippi as they transform over time concurrently with the growth of industry and the assumption of power by European, then American settlers; to territories under the protection of Indigenous communities, removed in the process of colonization and restored in contemporary art projects and social actions. These visualizations are related to research approaches and ways of 'being in the world' characteristic of communities situated in various geopolitical and cultural contexts. The use and interpretation of particular images is therefore determined by perspective. The process of their creation, however is political in nature, and affects the removal of certain places and their replacement with new ones, subservient to concrete models of authority. Andrea Carlson, for whom drawing is a primary tool in her work, uses it in order to decolonise the river's terrain. Using video projections of the eradicated Spirit Island on a concrete lock on the Mississippi recalls the presence of Indigenous communities, their beliefs, cultures, identities and how they forged relationships with the Earth. Looking at surviving blueprints of the construction plans for the St. Anthony Lock and Dam, or at map fragments depicting the Mississippi through the prism of images incorporated into the works of Andrea Carson, a multitude of aspects and contexts that extend beyond the Western, modernist course of history are revealed. Her works point out that the removal of specific sites in order to replace them with ones that function in the interest of global market growth constitutes a part of the global logic behind the colonization project, referred to by some decolonial theorists as the coloniality of power. This concept, adapted to work within various geographical spaces, conditioning the functioning of global systems from the fifteenth century until the present, is founded upon Western domination, universalist methods of perceiving the world, the production of knowledge and education, and social hierarchisation. As a result, non-Western societies were situated in marginalised spaces of maps, and the lands taken from them, such as those surrounding the Mississippi, were subject to gradual modifications, introduced in the interests of global economic growth. The destructive consequences of these changes, shifting from local environments to global systems, accumulate in the problems of the global climate crisis. Researchers attempting to deal with these problems, particularly those connected to environmental sciences, originate from Western culture and make use of methods based on macroscopic imagery collecting and comparing data gathered at a



very large scale. These research approaches are visible in the interpretations of the river proposed by AWG members as part of the *Mississippi. An Anthropocene River project*. Observing the Mississippi from a significant distance, framing it in terms of the geological Anthropocene and its parameters, as well as identifying the actions of Westerners as the primary agent of change in its ecosystems becomes a continuation of a research process based on universalist and colonialist values. In the *Anthropocene Refusal* project, Andrea Carlson and Amina Harper respond to such practices by presenting significantly magnified images of the river, shifting the viewer's attention away from eurocentric narratives, towards those of the Indigenous and marginalised.

Research by the AWG as well as by Indigenous artists and researchers, such as Andrea Carlson, were presented as part of a European project, whose objective was to seek new methods of producing knowledge and educational practices in the face of global crisis. It connects decolonial approaches with Western research methods and places them alongside geological concepts, such as the titular Anthropocene. Making use of technological tools, algorithmic data, and geological analyses conducted by Western researchers, as well as through the addition of epistemological approaches represented by Indigenous communities, it attempts to use the theory of the Anthropocene to provoke an elimination of systemic divisions between that, which is natural, and that which is political, social, or cultural. Images of the river presented in the project become a complex process of rediscovery of places, people and both animate and inanimate matter. Equally important are the tools employed in the modification of landscapes, the process of their creation, aspects to which these images refer, as well as that which they conceal, erase or restore.

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