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Mobilizing a Riverine Border City: Plans and Memoirs of St Louis, 1910–60

The paper's methodology is that of approaches derived from recent applications to literary studies of mobilities theory from geography and sociology, together with my own notion of Deep Locational Criticism. In it, I use these approaches to produce an analysis of St Louis, Missouri, as lived and conceived place between 1901 and 1960. The specific method would be to compare the very comprehensive and ambitious city plans produced in St Louis during this period (which started out with St Louis as a very prominent city but ended with it clearly declining), with individuals' recollections of the city, including arrivals and departures.

The diverse individuals whose memorials and reconstructions of the city are covered include the poet T.S. Eliot (1888–1965) and the boxer Henry Armstrong (1912–88). Eliot was born into a prominent St Louis family, but after the age of 16 lived elsewhere, studying at Harvard and in Paris, then settling in London. He had powerful memories of the city which fed into his poems, however. Armstrong was born in rural Mississippi, graduated from Vashon High School on the North Side of St Louis, then became a world-champion professional boxer, eventually based in Los Angeles. Both Eliot and Armstrong reached the absolute peak of a profession with claims to global status.

Aspects of the irrational or mythic and of the African-American experience, conveyed by Eliot and Armstrong's memoirs, are notably absent from the modernist, scientific and apparently ultra-hygienic views of the city shaped in city plans by its extraordinarily powerful chief planner Harland Bartholomew (1889–1989) over 37 years from 1911 to 1948. As a meeting point between North and South, East and West in the United States, St Louis contains many of the country's most dynamic contradictions. Its twentieth-century history could be written as one of disastrous urban failure, or alternatively as representative of shifting patterns of suburbanization and residential segregation that characterized the entire USA during the same period.