

UP THE CREEK! A Site-Specific Oral History Project

Fereshteh Toosi, Columbia College Chicago

*UP THE CREEK!*¹ is a site-specific oral history project focusing on stories about Onondaga Creek, an 18-mile waterway that runs through rural, urban, and Native American land in central New York state. Unlike a traditional oral history archive, interviews are edited and presented in smaller samples specifically chosen for their connection to particular locations along the creek and surrounding neighborhoods. Site-specific oral history is an especially useful strategy to engage environmental history. The challenge is that listeners must make a commitment to the experience, traveling to a specific location to hear forgotten stories about places that seem, on the surface, unremarkable. This untraditional method rewards listeners by letting them conjure up marginalized histories and encourages them to imagine other possibilities for the future.

To experience the project, CD players are available at the local library or audio files may be downloaded from the internet, free of charge. In this way, the project can be experienced at any time, at the convenience of the listener. Each location showcases a compilation of voices, emphasizing stories about the past, present, and future of the landscape and focusing on how human interaction with local geography has changed over time. During the recorded interviews, many older residents of the area contributed memories of ice skating and rope swings, significant floods, and drownings that inspired the nickname “Killer Creek”. Others interviewed share accounts of cultural and environmental damage stemming from the mistreatment of waterways in Onondaga County.

In addition to flowing through downtown Syracuse, the creek runs through rural areas that are sacred to the Haudenosaunee, the indigenous people of Onondaga Nation. The creek is a part of their creation story, and has been an important resource for medicinal plants, fishing and hunting, and drinking water. However, contamination of the creek has undermined its potential as a natural resource.

UP THE CREEK! calls attention to this contamination by focusing on the construction of a sewage plant in the Syracuse neighborhood known as the Southside. In 2004, families were forced from their homes as construction began on a wastewater treatment facility that contributes to the environmental damage of the creek and the people who live nearby. Moreover, only 32 of the 437 high-

¹ This project is made possible with funds from Onondaga County and the Cultural Resources Council, a regional arts council. Also produced with support from the College of Arts and Sciences at Syracuse University, and a Ford Foundation grant to promote civic engagement through the Public Humanities, Arts, Architecture, and Media. Additional funding provided by a Faculty Development Grant from Columbia College Chicago.

paying, union construction jobs were awarded to residents of this low income African American neighborhood. With the decision to place the sewage plant in this area instead of in a more affluent white neighborhood, the county and city government failed to address the community's needs and perpetuated a long history of environmental racism. The audio that accompanies this essay presents this perspective through the voice of Syracuse resident Elmore Davis. Davis is a member of the grassroots group Partnership for Onondaga Creek, an intimate group of neighborhood residents and friends that has been one of the strongest advocates for the creek, striving for over ten years to educate local residents and to make changes to the public works' infrastructure. During a potluck dinner organized for UP THE CREEK!, Davis shared her story with other Partnership for Onondaga Creek members including Aggie Lane and Gary Bonaparte, whose voices can also be heard on the recording.

Though Partnership for Onondaga Creek was not able to block the construction of a new facility in the neighborhood, its actions helped to halt construction on a proposed \$250 million dollar plant planned for downtown. As Davis states in a later part of the recording, "...I think although they built the plant, everything we did was worthwhile. Every single thing." In 2008, the community activists' perseverance paid off when a new county executive was voted into office. The government officials were convinced to implement alternative options by the Partnership for Onondaga Creek and other concerned citizens.

Like most present many cities in North America, Syracuse is built on an aging infrastructure that flushes wastewater through natural freshwater rivers, lakes, and streams. In a combined sewage overflow system, precipitation, sewage, and industrial waste flow through a single pipe system that intentionally overflows during periods of heavy rain or snow. Wet weather days occur frequently in central New York, and on these occasions raw sewage is dumped into Onondaga Creek and neighboring Harbor Creek and Onondaga Lake. Due in large part to persuasive arguments from local activists, the county is now investing in alternative green options which include rooftop gardens, rain barrels and permeable paving to improve traditional "gray" infrastructure that relies on pipes, storage units, and mechanical systems.

UP THE CREEK! asks listeners to consider the creek's potential and to understand it with a fresh perspective. My interest is in documenting memories of the creek while simultaneously raising awareness about the environmental health of the land. The choice to use sound to reach this goal was deliberate. As an artist, I chose audio for its small carbon footprint, compared to other art forms. I also use mobile technology such as portable music players to directly engage the landscape and geographical space.

Listening to oral histories in situ creates an intimate experience that surrounds listeners and guides them into a narrative space. What better way to tell the story of a place than to situate one's physical body in that space, calling attention to what is there? Site-specific oral histories provide a multi-sensory experience accessible to a wide audience. And the digital media used to disseminate the interview recordings is capable of being played infinitely by an unlimited number of users.

In reference to the audio walks of Janet Cardiff and George Miller, Bartomeu Mari writes, "Although they always begin in an institutional or institutionalized venue, they inevitably take us either outside it or towards areas we are usually forbidden from entering. We thus enter certain spaces where we feel ourselves to be 'behind the scenes,' that is, spaces in which we should not theoretically be or that we are not traditionally meant to see."² Although Cardiff and Miller's work is usually fictional, the experience of going "behind the scenes... to places that we are traditionally not meant to see" is relevant to oral history work that aims to address the invisibility of blight, environmental racism, gentrification, and other issues of urban development. The geography of these struggles is physical, but the history of a landscape is easily forgotten. Through the simple act of listening, oral history can inspire people to notice particular aspects of place. Listeners are asked to look and look again as we re-frame and recontextualize the visible landscape and physical geography through audio prompts.

UP THE CREEK! broadcasts the voices of people who have a direct connection to the land and preserves the story of a little-known resistance movement. In addition to drawing attention to the creek as a natural resource, *UP THE CREEK!* aims to provide inspiration for the continuing struggle for environmental justice.

² Bartomeu Mari, in Ralf Beil and Bartomeu Mari, eds. Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller: *The Killing Machine and Other Stories* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2007), 18-19.