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Onondaga Lake Cleanup: A Case Study of Environmental Conflict & Cross-Cultural Coalition

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ONONDAGA LAKE CLEANUP: A CASE STUDY OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICT & CROSS-CULTURAL COALITION

Abstract

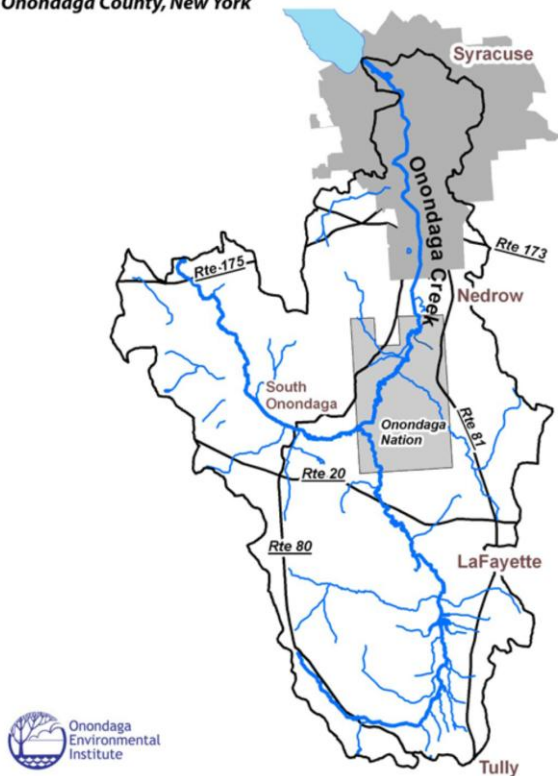
Onondaga Lake in Syracuse and its principal tributary Onondaga Creek in Syracuse, New York were seriously polluted with toxic industrial waste and municipal sewage effluent throughout the twentieth century. Cleanup plans included partial removal of toxic waste and locating a stigmatizing sewage treatment facility in a low-income African-American neighborhood. A cross-cultural coalition came together to fight corporate polluters and county government for a more complete and equitable outcome. These partners included Onondaga Nation leadership; advocates of the urban neighborhood threatened by sewage plant construction; community-connected environmental organizations; and local peace & justice activists. Each of these sets of actors had distinct ways of relating to the waters in question, of defining issues, and of pursuing their agendas. This paper analyzes how and why this coalition worked and ultimately succeeded in producing a paradigm shift in local environmental policy.

Onondaga Lake, a sort of “thumb” near the Finger Lakes of Upstate New York, adjoins the city of Syracuse in Onondaga County. Its principal tributary, Onondaga Creek, rises in glacial drumlins south of the contemporary Native-American Onondaga Nation Territory. It flows through the Territory and then traverses part of Syracuse before

debourching into the lake.ⁱ Most of the creek's urban segment crosses a low-income, mainly African-American neighborhood known as the Southside. Onondaga Lake and Creek lie at the heart of the traditional Onondaga territory, a land base now reduced to 5% of its extent at the time the US was founded. The lake was infamous throughout much of the 20th century as one of the most polluted lakes in the United States. When a court order finally forced a cleanup, the ensuing struggle over how to do it brought together six different sets of actors with distinct ways of relating to the resource, of defining issues and outcomes, and of pursuing their agendas. These actors in the conflict included corporate polluters, local government and its engineers, community-connected environmentalists, peace and justice activists, Southside community development advocates, and the traditional leadership of the Onondaga Nation.

Longstanding activist networks linking the last four of these groups facilitated formation of a cross-cultural coalition capable of effective cooperation. Working in complementary ways, this coalition was ultimately successful in changing the course of cleanup strategy in ways that acknowledged socially toxic environmental injustice as well as the chemical toxins of pollution. It also successfully pushed for a paradigm shift in local environmental policy thinking from emphasizing the "grey infrastructure" of water pipes and treatment plants to reliance on the "green infrastructure" of rain gardens and porous pavements. This success was made possible by the arrival of an opportune historical moment, in which a new generation of politicians took the reins and green consciousness and the technology of green urbanism gained mainstream acceptance.ⁱⁱ

**Onondaga Creek Watershed,
Onondaga County, New York**



This was not the first conflict in which Onondaga Lake has figured strongly. The lake was the geographic centerpiece of the legendary founding of the Haudenosaunee (a.k.a. The Six Nations, or League of the Iroquois), an event that ended an era of inter-tribal warfare centuries before the arrival of Europeans to this land. The resolution of that earlier conflict established the Onondaga Nation in its current form, while the inland penetration of European colonialism in the 1600s initiated a long history of illegal takings of and damage to Native lands in Central New York as throughout the New World. Since past conflicts in what is now Onondaga County continue to inform the present ones it is helpful to review this history, and to understand how past environmental injustice forms a relevant legal and cultural context for contemporary struggle.

1. The Onondaga Nation & The Great Law Of Peace

Onondaga means “People of the Hills” and the Onondaga people have lived for many centuries in the hilly country where Syracuse, New York, is now located, in contemporary Onondaga County.ⁱⁱⁱ In the 1600s their main village was on the shores of Onondaga Lake, but French attacks forced them to retreat several miles to the south. Nonetheless, the lake remains a historical, cultural and spiritual center of the Onondaga world. The Onondaga Nation was one of the founding tribes of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. The word Haudenosaunee means “People of the Longhouse” and it refers to their traditional dwellings sheltering an extended set of matrilineally and affinally

linked relatives, each family with their own fire hearth along its length. The term also refers metaphorically to the bringing together under one roof of diverse peoples speaking Algonquian languages living across what is now Upstate New York. That is, from west to east, the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida and Mohawk nations. The Tuscarora migrated into the region from the south and joined the Confederacy in the early 1700s. The Onondaga occupy a geographically and symbolically central place, as the Keepers of the Central Fire, and their territory remains the meeting place of the Grand Council of Chiefs, the traditional ruling body of the alliance. Today, the council meets in a modern version of a traditional longhouse, which also serves as a location for community social, cultural and spiritual activities.

According to oral tradition, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy began as much as two thousand years ago, and was ceremonially founded on the shores of Onondaga Lake. Warfare and bloody feuding had been endemic among the five tribes, and so the Creator sent a hero-messenger known as the Peacemaker with a plan for a new order—often referred to in English as The Great Law of Peace. Charged with carrying the powerful words of peace to all the five nations, the Peacemaker traveled miraculously in a stone canoe, demonstrating his divine authority. An important Haudenosaunee symbolic meaning of the canoe is as a vehicle conveying a people together with their laws and customs, of which the Peacemaker bore a new formulation. One of the first to accept his message was Haionwhatha (popularly known as “Hiawatha.”) who, while grieving the death of his daughters at the hands of Tadadaho, the most implacable opponent of the new order, found words to console others who had lost loved-ones in the conflict. Modeling a way forward toward reconciliation, he devised a method to remember these words by stringing beads made from purple and white freshwater clamshells into a patterned strip, making the first wampum belt, one signifying the peace agreement and foundation of the multi-tribal confederation. Since that time, wampum belts have been made as documents expressing the core content of significant covenants and treaties. Together, the Peacemaker and Hiawatha gained the support of leaders of all the five nations, and finally won over Tadadaho himself. His conversion was rewarded by choosing him for the role of first-among-equals of the chiefs, an office that still bears his name. Their agreement to form the Haudenosaunee was ritually completed by uprooting a white pine tree on the shore of Onondaga Lake; throwing their war weapons into the hole, where they were washed away by a mighty stream; and replanting the tree—the Great Tree of Peace.^{iv} The peace among these nations has held since that time until today, and the Haudenosaunee system of confederated governance is still practiced by them.

The Onondaga Nation’s political legitimacy derives from its commitment to fulfill the spiritual, moral, and social mandates of the Great Law of Peace and to place itself under the authority of the Haudenosaunee Governing Council. Under the leadership of its chiefs, clan mothers, and faithkeepers the Onondaga Nation today maintains a traditional system of government, rather than a “tribal council” of the sort imposed on most Native peoples by the United States Federal Bureau of Indian Affairs. In spite of the pressures of the non-Native world they have maintained a relatively high level of cultural continuity to the present day, a feat that is important to their contemporary identity as a people. For example, Nation policy does not permit the sale of alcohol and has opposed casinos and

online gambling as antithetical to traditional cultural values. The Onondaga Nation has never ceded sovereignty to the United States, and its sovereign authority entails the power to pass laws, make treaties and act on behalf of the Onondaga people in relations with other sovereign nations.^v

The Great Law constituting the Haudenosaunee includes a set of spiritual, moral and social mandates for all member nations. It establishes a form of government whereby each nation may govern its own internal affairs, while relations with outsiders (such as trade and treaties) are managed by a Grand Council of Chiefs, proportionately representing all the member nations' peoples. These chiefs are considered equals, and are chosen by clan mothers in each nation. When in council, every chief has an equal responsibility and an equal say in the matters of the Haudenosaunee. The image provided by the Peacemaker's words is one of the chiefs holding hands in a large circle. It is the responsibility of the chiefs to protect the people within the circle and to make decisions for their welfare, mindful of their long-term consequences. This mandate for long-term thinking is expressed in terms of protecting the welfare of those seven generations into the future, a practice supporting environmentally sustainable decision-making. Each chief works with his clan mother and clan members and serves as their voice in council. When all chiefs agree on a decision the council is said to be "of one mind." The chiefs are designated advocates of peace, responsible for the welfare of the people and the environment that sustains them. The Great Law represents a durable and successful tradition of international cooperation. It is a model for consensus-driven political practice, emphasizing equitable sharing of collective resources and environmental stewardship.

Throughout their history of contact with non-Native outsiders, traditional Onondaga leaders have sought to conduct their relations with them in the spirit of the Two-Row Wampum^{vi}. The Two-Row Wampum was made to document the agreement reached between Dutch and Haudenosaunee negotiators when Europeans first began settling Upstate New York. The belt's design represents two peoples living side by side, neither interfering with the other. It consists of two parallel rows of purple beads running the length of the belt, separated by a field of white, representing two boats. One is the canoe holding the Haudenosaunee way of life, laws, and people. The other is the Dutch sailing ship carrying the Dutch laws, religion and people. The boats are to travel side by side down the river of life. The wampum symbolizes the agreement that the two peoples will respect each other's ways and not make laws against one another.

The Two-Row Wampum continues to represent the Onondaga approach to relations with outsiders and it is ritually invoked whenever they meet with non-Native government officials. It provides a time-honored image for the idea that Onondaga and outsiders should each keep a respectful distance, while maintaining a capacity to cooperate on important matters of mutual interest. The Nation Territory today is contiguous with Syracuse suburbs, and many Onondagas live and work in the city today, but their public profile as a distinct polity is muted. Few non-Natives visit the Territory other than on special occasions when the public is invited for a seasonal festival, art show, lacrosse game,^{vii} or to patronize the Nation's sports arena enterprise. When they do appear in

Syracuse media and public forums, traditional leaders project a dignified persona and are routinely accorded respect by non-Native journalists, academics, and public figures.^{viii} In the spirit of the Two-Row Wampum, Nation leaders have formed strong cooperative relations with non-Native peace and justice organizations and academics in Syracuse—especially the Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation (NOON), a group affiliated with the Syracuse Peace Council (SPC). The SPC is a community-based antiwar/social justice organization. It was founded in 1936 and is the oldest anti-war organization in the United States, except perhaps for the Haudenosaunee League itself.^{ix} These allies help to educate non-Natives about Onondaga sovereignty, model respect for Native culture and mediate conflict between the Onondaga and non-Natives in the area.

2. Roots Of Injustice: Land Loss And Environmental Damage

The present-day territory of the Onondaga Nation is approximately 7,300 acres just south of the city of Syracuse. This is what remains of an historic territory of some 2.6 million acres—an area 30 to 50 miles wide stretching from what is now the Canadian border well into Pennsylvania to the south, bordered on the east by the lands of the Oneida and on the west by those of the Cayuga. Between 1788 and 1822, the Onondagas lost possession of about 95% of their land through a series of “takings” by the State of New York, in defiance of U.S. Federal laws forbidding states from making land deals with Native peoples.^x New York State took much of this land in order to redistribute it to Revolutionary War veterans in lieu of wages the state had no money to pay.

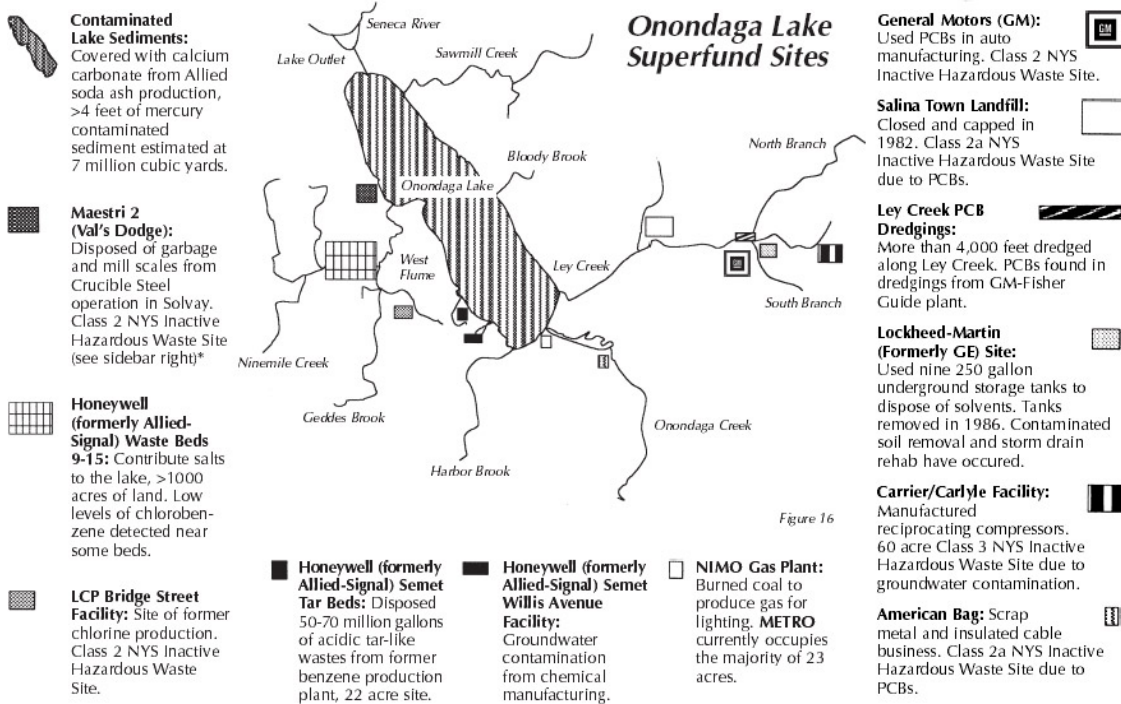
It is impossible to overstate the cultural significance of their traditional lands to the Onondaga people, and especially that of the heartland of what is now Onondaga County. Onondaga Lake is central to their traditional history, way of life, and identity. The surrounding watershed is the people’s ancestral home, containing dozens of former settlements and uncounted thousands of burial sites, many of which have been disturbed by subsequent development. The landscape is filled with Onondaga history, every hill and stream infused with the significance of events of which others are largely ignorant. The ground holds the bones of their ancestors from time immemorial. The area’s fish, animals and plants provided food; clothing; medicines; as well as materials for tools, baskets, homes, insignia, and ornaments to sustain the Onondaga people and their way of life. Access to waterways was essential to the traditional lifestyle; fish provided the most important source of dietary protein and water plants were used in medicine and ceremonies. Five of the nine clans are associated with water animals: turtle, beaver, snipe, heron and eel.

Most important in solidifying the identity of traditional Onondaga people with the place and its living things is the belief that it was entrusted to their stewardship by the Creator in his first instructions to the people. They consider it their duty to keep the eco-system healthy so it can sustain the people, and to seek long-term solutions to environmental and social problems. Failure of the traditional leadership to strive for environmental restoration and harmony among peoples would represent an abdication of their sacred responsibility. But the challenges to fulfilling this duty have been gargantuan.

Under United States control, the Onondaga homelands suffered severe environmental degradation. Just upstream and south of the Nation Territory, the land and waters were damaged by salt mining using brine-pumping wells, resulting in sinkholes and subsidence today. As early as 1899 the urban segment of Onondaga Creek itself was indicted by a grand jury as a public health nuisance because it was essentially an open sewer. The lake itself was fairly clean throughout most of the 19th century; though the detritus of additional salt mining activity marred the wetlands of the eastern shore, the western shore saw the development of several luxury resorts for tourists seeking to escape the New York City summers. But the “Golden Age” of Onondaga Lake resorts^{xi} gave way to the industrial development of the shoreline. The Solvay Process Company began manufacturing soda ash from brine and limestone on the lakefront in 1884, eventually dumping 6 million pounds of salty waste sludge on nearby shoreline and wetlands.^{xii} Solvay Process was taken over by the Allied Chemical and Dye Corporation in 1920, which continued to operate the plant until 1986. From 1946 to 1977 Allied operated a second plant, to produce chlorine by the mercury cell process, discharging an estimated 165,000+ pounds of mercury wastes directly into the lake, contaminating an estimated 7 million cubic yards of lake sediments, from which mercury enters the food chain of fish and fish-eaters. For decades, other companies released industrial toxins into several of the lake’s minor tributaries as well.^{xiii} Sewage contamination remained a severe problem into the 21st century. Throughout the nine-mile stretch of the creek through the city of Syracuse, an aging and leaky sewer system combined storm and sanitary drains.^{xiv} This meant that at times of heavy rainfall (occurring about 60 times a year) valves opened at over 60 overflow sites to relieve pressure on the overloaded system. These valves, known as Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs) released the mixture—including raw sewage—into Onondaga Creek at a rate estimated at more than 600 million gallons per year. Industrial abuse of the lake has also continued in recent years; gravel mining at the headwaters of Onondaga Creek and resulting mud boils downstream were pumping 30 tons of mud and silt a day into the creek in the 1990s. This has continued after mitigation measures were completed in 1995 at a daily rate of one ton, while manure from large-scale concentrated livestock feedlots poses a new and growing problem.

More than 100 years of unchecked industrial pollution and an inadequate municipal sewage system had turned this once-thriving lake into a cluster of toxic Superfund^{xv} sites. A layer of petroleum sludge laced with mercury and other heavy metals lay several yards thick on parts of the lake bottom. The water level was lowered decades ago to drain wetlands, and this combined with industrial waste reduced the lake’s volume by 40%. Towering wastebeds of calcium carbonate from the Solvay Process plant continued to leach salty effluvia from the southern shore. Salmon and lake whitefish disappeared by 1900, and ice harvesting was banned in 1901 due to water pollution. The lake was declared unsafe for swimming by 1940 and fishing was banned in the 1970s. By that time, Onondaga Lake had become a toxic soup, hazardous to plant, animal, and human health. Studies such as that conducted by the Onondaga Lake Cleanup Corporation (2001)^{xvi} concluded that the waters had unsafe levels of phosphorous, ammonia, and nitrates, and that the lake-bottom sediments contained dangerous levels of mercury, benzene, toluene, ethylbenzene, xylenes (BTEX), chlorinated benzenes, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), and polychlorinated

dioxins and furans. Mercury is a known neurotoxin. Benzene, PAHs, PCBs and furans are known carcinogens. Elevated levels of some of these contaminants extended to a depth of at least 25 feet in lake-bottom sediments. The elevated phosphorous, ammonia and nitrates from sewage pollution caused dense algae blooms that used up available oxygen, contributing to conditions that were hostile to a healthy freshwater ecosystem. The lake was dying.



3. Routes To Remedy And A New Injustice

Efforts to clean up the lake and its tributaries have been lawsuit driven and constrained by the slow development of a body of environmental protection law, standards and enforcement capacity. Since the 1970s numerous scientific studies have been conducted to assess the state of the lake. These were initially prompted by the Clean Water Act, establishment of the federal Superfund program for cleaning up the most dangerous toxic sites in the country, and subsequent regulatory changes. Onondaga County, which maintains major trunk lines in the municipal sewage collection system, undertook improvements in the 1980s to reduce the incidence of CSO events and upgraded its

Metropolitan Wastewater Treatment Plant (known as Metro), but this was not enough to achieve compliance with clean-water standards.^{xvii} In 1988 an environmentalist nonprofit corporation called the Atlantic States Legal Foundation, later joined by the New York State Department of Conservation, sued Onondaga County, alleging violation of its state discharge permit – resulting ten years later in an amended consent judgment ordering improvements. The effort to hold corporate polluters accountable heated up in 1989, when New York State sued Allied-Signal (which later went under the more mellifluous name of its subsidiary Honeywell), for pollution violations and resource damage, also resulting in a consent decree forcing them to negotiate and underwrite some level of remediation. The lake bottom and eight other toxic sites along the shore were added to the federal Superfund National Priorities list in 1994, making them eligible for federal cleanup money. An entity was established which came to be known as the Onondaga Lake Partnership (OLP) to cooperate in managing a process of environmental remediation of the lake. It was composed mainly of county and Army Corps engineers, corporate officials, state Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and local political executives and initially excluded Native or other public representation. Without inviting public input, this group sought remediation from Honeywell and negotiated a plan to address wastewater contamination (the Onondaga Lake Management Plan), obtained an Amended Consent Judgment, and began to implement it.^{xviii}

Among the dozens of measures outlined in this plan, two were especially significant: Honeywell agreed to undertake a limited cleanup of industrial waste in lake sediments and some of Allied's upland dumpsites—removing upper layers and capping the rest in place—at an approximate cost of \$500,000,000. The County was to complete \$400,000,000 in further upgrades to the Metro plant to significantly lower the levels of ammonia and phosphates released into the lake, and mapped out measures to reduce pollution from the remaining CSOs. Rather than going the route of repairing worn-out leaky pipes and separating the sanitary and storm sewers throughout the city, they planned to build a series of above-ground plants—referred to as Regional Treatment Facilities (RTFs)—to store, swirl, remove solids from, and chemically disinfect (rather than actually clean) combined overflows before releasing them into Onondaga Creek. These RTFs were to be located at strategic points in the collection system chosen by the county's consulting engineers.

Other than a small demonstration facility, the first of the new sewage treatment plants was planned for construction amid the homes off Midland Avenue in the Southside neighborhood. The image of a potentially smelly facility handling human excreta to be placed in their midst impressed residents with its obviously negative connotations. In addition to a stigmatizing sewage plant, plans included burying an up to 12-foot diameter pipeline through a mile and a half of residential properties. Prior to the announcement of this project, the neighborhood had been seeing slow but steady improvements in housing and community development. This was a well-established urban community struggling to regain economic stability in the wake of the widespread loss of good-paying jobs and the unraveling of social supports in the late 20th century. Signs of former prosperity were evident in graciously landscaped parks; and large houses, many of them now divided into multiple apartment units and many in need of repair. Just as evident were signs of hard-

won improvements and investment: a new roof here, a pocket park with a cooperative garden there, clusters of new affordable housing, and a well-equipped community center. Residents were working hard to revitalize and beautify this neighborhood. Decades of grassroots community development efforts on the Southside had generated strong organizations and experienced activists with established relationships with others across the city. Imposing a sewage-treatment facility here endangered all these efforts, and threatened the property values of homes that were in many cases the only significant asset of the owner-occupants. And most of all it carried an unmistakable symbolic sting that felt like a slap in the face. Community activists geared up to fight it.

4. FRAMING THE ISSUE: WHAT DOES ENVIRONMENTAL CLEANUP MEAN?

To the corporate polluters, the problem was one of liability and public relations, Honeywell representatives repeatedly pointed out that much of the toxic waste had been dumped not by their company, but by Solvay Process before it was bought out, and during an era when such disposal was not illegal. Although the corporation was legally responsible, their negotiators sought to minimize the cost to shareholders while implying that Honeywell was environmentally heroic for doing anything at all.

To local government in the late 1990s the wastewater problem was a long-standing financial nightmare, the technical aspects of which were properly handed over to environmental engineering consultants. To the consulting engineering firms the proposed clean-up projects represented a lucrative opportunity (\$550 million in sewage-related projects alone), to which they had a level of privileged access. In fact, the consulting group Environmental Engineering Associates (EEA) was formed as a limited partnership specifically to control and profit from these projects. The firms constituting EEA included O'Brien & Gere; Blaslund, Blouk & Lee; and Stearns & Wheeler—all large corporations and some with “old boy” connections to county administration.^{xix} The engineering perspective viewed the waters in question as a hydraulic system to be controlled by grey infrastructure solutions arrived at through technical analysis. Their role was to design profitable engineering solutions to problems as posed to them by policy makers, rather than to question the decision-making process or to worry about the social or moral aspects of implementation. For example, when plans emerged to leave 80% or more of the toxins in place in the upland waste sites and the problem arose of how to prevent them from flowing through groundwater to the lake, the engineering fix was to build a concrete barrier to at least partially contain the flow. Engineers offered this remedy rather than pointing out that full containment was impossible and that if further contamination of the lake were to be prevented, all of the toxic waste would have to be removed—a higher cost but more effective remedy. Similarly, charged with reducing CSO incidents they chose the Midland site and the above ground swirler *cum* disinfectant technology solution as a logical extension of the existing system, employing off-the-shelf technology, which they sold nationwide. Community-based critics who had researched alternative (including green infrastructural) solutions they believed would be less socially

disruptive, more environmentally friendly, and even cheaper, felt that their proposals were dismissed as unprofessional meddling by non-experts.^{xx}

As the process moved ahead and members of the public became aware of remediation plans for both sewage and industrial pollution, three great problems with the Lake Partnership's approach became obvious: its goals, scope and process. First was that, in the view of its critics, its goals set the bar very low; they were limited to achieving compliance with environmental standards and attaining the lake's "designated uses" of swimming, fish propagation, and secondary recreation. OLP members were not planning anything approaching restoration to the level of the nearby Finger Lakes, where fish are edible and the water is used for drinking. Indeed, according to the environmental attorney advising community-based proponents of restoration (more complete cleanup than just "remediation"), the plan failed to set cleanup levels acceptable to the state DEC's own standards for major pollutants.^{xxi} The chlorine-based technology proposed for disinfecting combined sewage before releasing it to the creek was more environmentally damaging than the sewer separation and wastewater capture approach being pursued by other municipalities with similar problems.^{xxii} Chlorinated effluents from the sewage plant, such as volatilized chloroform and other trihalomethenes, harm aquatic life and also degrade air quality. The latter was a particular concern in the Midland area because the Southside already had the worst air quality in Syracuse and asthma rates 13 times the county average.^{xxiii}

Second was that it focused narrowly on the lake itself and its immediate vicinity, rather than on the watershed as an integrated ecological system. Critics argued that comprehensive cleanup would have to take more seriously problems throughout the length of Onondaga Creek. And third was its undemocratic process, in which a plan devised by engineers and bureaucrats was to be imposed regardless of its negative impacts on marginalized communities. Opponents feared that county officials were favoring friends in awarding contracts and protecting pet development projects in whiter and more affluent parts of the city from stigmatizing RTFs.^{xxiv} The Onondaga Nation leadership, Southside community development advocates, community-connected environmentalists, and a seasoned network of peace and justice activists all cried foul. Each category of actors responded in their own way, with complementary efforts reflecting their own relationship to the waters in question, their own ways of understanding the issues, and their own capacities for action.

5. The Onondaga Nation's Land Rights Action & the Goal of Recovering "Skanonh"

To the traditional Onondagas, the lake was sacred, a source of their identity as a people, and its polluted state a peculiarly painful horror. Shut out from the deliberations over environmental remediation plans and spurred by their sacred duty to exercise stewardship over the local environment, the Onondaga leadership formulated its own response. In 2005, the same year that construction began on the Midland Avenue plant, the Onondaga Nation filed a long-awaited land rights action in the United States District Court, seeking redress for the illegal takings 200 years before.^{xxv} Several years previously a land claim filed by the Oneida Nation had been decided in the Oneida's favor by the U.S. Supreme

Court, though no final settlement with New York State has yet been reached. Other Haudenosaunee Nations have also filed land actions, all of which have been vigorously opposed in the courts and in the court of public opinion in upstate New York, where a group called Upstate Citizens for Equality organized angry protests against Native sovereignty and land rights.^{xxvi} Syracuse residents proved relatively tolerant of Onondaga aspirations, and cautiously accepting of public statements by Onondaga leaders explicitly ruling out any effort to evict non-Natives or to take their property involuntarily.

The special relationship of Onondaga people to the land in question is central to the reasoning presented in the land rights action. Its complaint opens with these words:^{xxvii}

The Onondaga people wish to bring about a healing between themselves and all others who live in this region that has been the homeland of the Onondaga Nation since the dawn of time. The Nation and its people have a unique spiritual, cultural, and historic relationship with the land, which is embodied in Gayanashagowa, the Great Law of Peace. This relationship goes far beyond federal and state legal concepts of ownership, possession or legal rights. The people are one with the land, and consider themselves stewards of it. It is the duty of the Nation's leaders to work for a healing of this land, to protect it, and to pass it on to future generations. The Onondaga Nation brings this action on behalf of its people in the hope that it may hasten the process of reconciliation and bring lasting justice, peace, and respect among all who inhabit the area.

The timing of the land action and its framing in terms of stewardship and healing of social relations were directly relevant to environmental conflicts roiling in Onondaga County at the time. Filing the action did not prove a wildly successful legal gambit (at least in the short run) but it got the attention of local government. While it did not result in any great shifts in local power relations, it did provide a conspicuous media platform from which to shift the dialogue over the environmental cleanup of the lake system. For the first time, Onondaga representatives were permitted a seat at the Onondaga Lake Partnership table and to observe the cleanup plan decision-making. In this context, the differences in cultural perspective were starkly apparent. The discourse of engineers, government officials, and corporate representatives emphasized technical, financial, and legal considerations about the problem of getting the lake up to regulatory standards. Their objectification of the polluted lake was exemplified in a plan requiring one level of clean water standards in the eastern half and a different one in the western half of the lake, as if the waters could be separated by drawing a line on a map. Onondagas, on the other hand, persisted in seeing the lake and the creek together as a living region, and reminding others to think of the problem in watershed terms, rather than viewing the lake as a separate object. They insisted that problems upstream and downstream needed to be addressed systemically rather than piecemeal, and in the long-term perspective of responsibility to the seventh generation rather than seeking a quick but partial fix.

In numerous public statements Onondaga spokespersons have framed the Nation's interest in both the land rights action and environmental cleanup in terms of "skanonh."^{xxviii} Skanonh is a word in the Onondaga language that refers to peace, health, and a state of balanced harmony. It is the ideal state within one's own body (with all parts

working together for good health), in the environment (with different species etc. in an ecological system interacting properly—“doing their duty,” in Onondaga terms), and between groups of people. It characterizes their traditional system of government, with power cooperatively balanced between men and women, and with everyone having a voice. It is the way things should stand among different communities in a peaceful world, with mutual respect and fair treatment. All this reflects skanonh—health, well being, peace, harmony and balance. This proper state is disturbed, thrown off kilter, by acts of injustice among peoples and by abuse of the environment. Both kinds of resulting conditions are seen as in need of healing in order to restore skanonh. If pursued in the right spirit, both processes are linked; in the words of Robin Kimmerer, director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, “In healing the land we heal ourselves.”^{xxx}

In framing the issue of their land rights, Onondaga spokespersons refer to their efforts in terms of healing and relationships. In order to restore harmony among peoples and put everyone back on a healthy path, the injustice of the treaty violations must be acknowledged and remedied. Cleaning up the lake is part of the same process of restoring skanonh—industrial and municipal damage to the ecosystem (of which people are a part, not a separate social system) must be acknowledged and remedied for the environment to be healthy again and functioning to sustain the people. The various components of the natural world—the stone, the waters, the plants and animals (including humans), the winds, the moon and sun—are referred to as “all our relations” in the traditional thanksgiving address that marks every significant occasion. The idiom of healing and reciprocity characterizes the Onondaga leaders’ approach to environmental cleanup and provides the link they see between that and the land rights action. Onondaga efforts to teach others about their perspective on the natural world are also about maintaining balance in their own relations with its forces. A faithkeeper explained it this way:

All our ceremonials begin with a Thanksgiving for everything in Creation. All its features are named and thanked for their gifts that support our life. It’s kind of long but I love this; it focuses people’s minds and brings oneness to the group. The main reason for us to get out there and share our way of life is environmental. To teach others is a way of returning gifts to the land. Keeping these traditions is a duty, a mandate, a responsibility.^{xxx}

This holistic view of the natural and social world accompanies the Onondaga “traditional ecological knowledge,” or TEK, as it is known in environmental anthropology. TEK is a component of indigenous cultures, that is, those of peoples who have lived in the same place for many centuries and have acquired enormously detailed and locally specific knowledge about their ecosystems and how to live sustainably as a part of them. Fikret Berkes has characterized TEK as “the cumulative body of knowledge, practice and belief concerning the relationships of living beings to one another and to the physical environment.”^{xxx} The goal of Onondaga activists regarding cleanup of the lake was not just to remediate or encapsulate the toxins, but to restore both the people’s relationship to the environment and the environment’s ability to provide the foods and other materials necessary to the traditional Onondaga way of life long into the future.

6. Southside Community Activists and the Partnership for Onondaga Creek

The Onondaga landscape carries a very different significance to residents of the Southside neighborhood affected by the County's municipal effluent cleanup measures, and neighborhood activists framed the issue in terms of racism and violation of civil rights. Although Onondaga Creek flows through this part of the city, it has not historically been a valued resource to urban dwellers. It is fenced off and canalized along most of its length, littered with trash and infested with urban rats. The neighborhood was built up as a middle-income community in the mid-twentieth century, when local manufacturing jobs were plentiful. As Syracuse lost most of its industrial base in recent decades to neoliberal restructuring and globalization, the economy of the Southside declined. Though many residents still own their homes, conditions have deteriorated with rising poverty. To community organizations based here, the lake was not the center of their interest; it is the neighborhood and its people that concerned them most. In the face of economic decline, they had been working hard to revitalize the area, working with residents to renovate homes and improve quality of life. For Southside residents, home ownership was a hard-won toehold toward a more secure, middle-class future for their family. All of this was threatened when the County forced upon the neighborhood its plan for constructing a stigmatizing wastewater facility there.

Seen through the eyes of Southside community leaders this is a very social landscape, with people's stories attached to houses, churches, and businesses. With the imposition of the Midland plant, community leaders complained that hope for a future of community revitalization was stolen from this urban neighborhood, and its residents mistreated in the process. In their view, the land is a resource that should be used to provide livelihoods to the residents and to improve their quality of life. They insisted that government decisions should be transparent, honest, and include the people affected in the decision-making. Community leaders were convinced that the government would have behaved very differently had it been a white, middle-class neighborhood; their mistreatment and exclusion from decision making felt deeply racist to them. In the words of one resident mobilized by the Midland Plant struggle:

This neighborhood used to be better off when there were manufacturing jobs. It has declined into bad conditions but people have been working to bring it back up by the bootstraps. Now that progress is undone. The County swindled the people here! They should be using this land and these resources to improve life for the neighborhood, to bring jobs here, not sewage. I was doing a presentation up at the University on what was going on here and it suddenly struck me: they think it's ok to bring sewage here because they think we're shit! Excuse me for using the word, but that's how they're treating us, like shit!

Claims were well founded that the way the county went about preparations for plant construction entailed mistreatment of Southside residents. During site preparation 35 families were summarily evicted from nearby public housing without adequate measures to preserve the well being of a vulnerable population. Seven households of homeowners were forced to sell out; they were approached individually and asked not to communicate

with others, in an effort to keep compensation costs as low as possible. The resulting disruption and dislocation were especially painful for those who had planned to live out their retirement in the home and to provide shelter to other relatives there. When blasting began for construction of the pipeline to convey wastewater to the plant, others were not adequately compensated for foundation damage. The county first offered the neighborhood \$3,000,000 of mitigation funds for community development to ameliorate the disruption caused by construction and then cancelled the offer.^{xxxii} Most frustrating to community development activists was that the plant was imposed without linkage to any broader community development vision for the neighborhood, as if such visions and plans did not exist or were not significant and legitimate. Critics contrasted such treatment with the county's process of holding public debates over siting another RTF near a thriving downtown business district.

Unlike the county officials imposing the plan, Southside residents were acutely conscious of the history of repeated disruption, dislocation, and marginalization their community had suffered as a consequence of municipal development initiatives.^{xxxiii} An area known as the 15th Ward had been a center of the Syracuse African-American community since at least the 1860s, when it included the homes of Reverend Jermain Loguen and other prominent Black abolitionists and professionals. One hundred years later, the 15th Ward was undeniably a ghetto, with poor housing conditions and exploitative absentee landlords,^{xxxiv} but it was also a tightly knit community. Its destruction in a 1960s urban renewal project to make way for SUNY Upstate University Hospital was a devastating blow that still reverberated 50 years later. Despite the efforts of an underfunded Syracuse Office of Urban Renewal to assist with relocation, the displaced population faced housing discrimination, redlining, and a lack of good quality affordable housing alternatives. Most former 15th Ward residents found themselves directed to the Southside, a declining neighborhood that by the late 1960s had become a largely low-income and African-American area^{xxxv}. Subsequent developments resulting in repeated evictions included an interstate highway that cut off the Southside from the more affluent, whiter, University Hill area, a large garage facility for the public bus system, an industrial park, and a steam plant for Syracuse University. Each of these displaced blocks of Southside residents and constituted marginalizing non-residential buffers separating them from other parts of the city.^{xxxvi}

The environmental issues of greatest immediate concern to Southside residents in the latter decades of the twentieth century included poor-quality housing, lead paint, and poor air quality near the interstate highway. When the county announced plans to construct a garbage-incinerating plant, Southside residents concerned over deteriorating air quality and rising asthma rates in the neighborhood joined other “downwinders” and the Sierra Club in the 1970s and 80s, in an unsuccessful battle to prevent it. Cognizant of this history, Southside residents were quick to see the Midland plant project as another in a series of discriminatory measures placing a supposed public good above the well being of a low-income and minority population.

Activists in the Midland Avenue area organized quickly once the county's plans were announced. An initial group incubated at community development non-profit Syracuse

United Neighbors spun off as a new organization, the Partnership for Onondaga Creek (POC). They set to work contacting affected residents, organizing protests including pickets at the County Executive's home, staging civil disobedience arrests, getting media coverage, lobbying policy makers, making presentations to members of local government, speaking to wider public audiences, researching the environmental and engineering issues, participating in creek cleanups and canoe tours; and developing alternative proposals. Some members of Syracuse city government came to support the movement against the Midland plant, swayed by their arguments and stung by the county's seizure of city land to build the facility. The POC also quickly activated links with other neighborhood-based organizations; the local chapter of the NAACP; with environmentalist groups including the Sierra Club, Citizens' Campaign for the Environment and SEAC (the Student Environmental Action Committee at Syracuse University); and with the Syracuse Peace Council.

County officials were taken aback by the highly organized, energetic, and skilled character of this resistance from a population they had clearly underestimated. Their initial response was an angry one, digging in their heels and refusing to make their analyses and decision-making process available to public scrutiny in an effort to stifle opposition and push their plans through regardless.^{xxxvii}

It became clear in 2003 that the county intended to pursue the RTF strategy promoted by its engineering consulting firms despite the proposal of a financially and technologically viable alternative. In response, the POC took formal action to file a Title VI claim of civil rights discrimination, assisted by Syracuse University's Public Interest Law Firm.^{xxxviii} This action was aimed at bringing the equity issues to public attention as well as stalling the plant's construction in hopes of re-starting negotiations toward what they saw as a fairer and healthier design.^{xxxix} The POC has vigorously pursued this claim to the present day despite foot dragging, dismissals and re-openings, and failures to investigate on the part of the USEPA's Office of Civil Rights.

7. Formation of a Cross-Cultural Coalition

The Onondaga people and Southside residents were the two groups whose lives were most directly affected by the measures undertaken to clean up Onondaga Lake and Creek, and both mounted organized campaigns to address environmental and social wrongs, but in very different ways. A successful strategy to counter the power of the corporate-county government block would require effective cooperation among these groups and other allies. A pre-existing citywide network of social justice and environmentalist activists provided much of the social infrastructure for making this happen. Grassroots organizing has been an important force in Syracuse since the time of the 19th century Abolitionist and Women's Rights movements.^{xl} At the beginning of the 21st century, networks of activists were in place linking Southside community development advocates, the traditional Onondaga leadership, peace and justice activists and environmentalists in academia and elsewhere. In many cases, these were relationships between individuals who had worked together on a variety of issues over the course of decades, who served as links between clusters of issue-specific activists and organizations. The network was rife

with strong connections among people who knew and trusted one another, and who could cooperate easily in organizing actions and coordinating tactics. Each of the issue-specific clusters brought with it a broader network of its own, whose support could be mobilized at significant moments in a struggle. These relationships and history of working together made the formation of a coalition possible despite differences in how groups related to the Onondaga watershed, and their different ways of framing the issues and goals regarding its cleanup.

Those pushing for more a comprehensive and socially just approach to local environmental issues had access to significant institutional capacities. In addition to Syracuse University, Syracuse is home to the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry (ESF), some of whose faculty had previously worked with both urban community development organizations and with the Onondaga Nation on revalorizing the Creek and re-envisioning it as part of an improved urban landscape. A high profile and well-publicized series of Community Forums on cleanup issues was held at ESF in 2006. Another well-networked nonprofit corporation was the Onondaga Environmental Institute (OEI), whose mission included public education, scientific research, and remediation of the environment. OEI became a key player when it won a series of EPA grants to work with others to revitalize Onondaga Creek, to work on habitat enhancement and control of non-point source pollution to the lake, and also to conduct water quality monitoring and public education on behalf of the Onondaga Nation. An OEI grant provided funding for an Onondaga Creek Visioning project, undertaken with ESF partners, to engage communities throughout the Onondaga watershed (including both Onondaga people and Southside residents) to learn more about the waterway's ecology, cultural significance, and potential for restoration; and to bring them together through community organizing all the way up and down the creek.^{xii} The local chapter of the Sierra Club was also notable for its activist character, and had worked in coalition with Southsiders before in efforts to stop construction of the county's trash-incinerating steam plant.

The challenges of organizing across these segments of society were nonetheless significant. The constituencies of coalition "partners" (who were in some cases only loosely connected clusters of organizations) tended to have different core priorities and to frame the issues differently. These differences may be summarized as follows, with apologies for the oversimplification:

Traditional Onondaga Leadership

Priorities and Core Concerns: maximal environmental restoration, recognition of their dispossession, a greater voice in local environmental decision making

Dominant Frame: healing the environment and relations among the peoples

Southside Community Activists

Priorities and Core Concerns: government should treat citizens with respect and honesty and include them in decision making; compensation to individuals and community for damages

Dominant Frame: civil rights struggle against racist system

Mainstream Environmentalist Organizations

Priorities and Core Concerns: remediating ecosystem damage, holding polluters accountable

Dominant Frame: ecological science and public policy expertise as tools to achieve environmental improvement

Peace and Justice Organizations

Priorities and Core Concerns: practicing solidarity with the oppressed, working for peace through justice and promoting cross-cultural understanding and respect

Dominant Frame: struggle against environmental racism

An organizer working to put together a protest event including all these partners explained the challenges this way:

Everyone has their own agenda and limited resources. The different groups in this coalition can support each other but not sustain an ongoing organization with everyone committing time and resources with no end date. There is lots of work around the lake and the creek but they're not necessarily working *together*. But pretty much in the same direction. I'm trying to pull the segments together for this Environmental Justice tour.

In fact this event was a notable success. The day before, celebrated anthropologist and UN goodwill ambassador Jane Goodall made an appeal for a clean lake and joined Onondaga leaders, POC members and other coalition partners in planting a white pine tree on the lakeshore near the legendary site of the original legendary Great Tree of Peace.^{xliii} The Onondaga Nation then hosted a stop on the nationwide Environmental Justice tour, with all coalition groups joining in an impressive demonstration. As one picket-holder's sign read, "Water Unites Us All."

Choosing the name "Partnership for Onondaga Creek" represented an effort to refocus Southside development activists' views of the immediate environment, which had tended to emphasize the social dimension and largely ignore the creek itself. By choosing to highlight their commitment to restoring the waterway as part of a strategy for socially just community development, the POC claimed common ground with the Onondagas and others seeking maximum environmental cleanup. Opposing the treatment plant on environmentalist grounds as well as social justice grounds freed them from the appearance of simply obstructing an attempt to solve the CSO effluent problem. Working hard to establish their own environmentalist credentials, POC members called attention to the Midland plant's design flaws and limitations, and worked with other environmentalists to develop credible alternatives. The Onondaga leadership also recognized the value of such a coalition and the importance of speaking out publicly to calm alarms in the wake of their land rights action. In an effort to educate others about their relationship to the land and their motivations in taking legal action, Onondaga spokespersons joined POC activists on stage in numerous academic forums and public presentations on the issues. While maintaining their sovereign character as expressed in the Two-Row Wampum, traditional leaders sought to work with those sharing a common interest in promoting environmental cleanup that was maximally effective and socially

just. One Onondaga leader expressed to me what she had discovered through these efforts: “We will accomplish more if we emphasize common ground with others. What we have in common, environmentally, is how we feel about it, how we respond to Nature with an aesthetic feeling of appreciation, gratitude.”

For their part, peace and justice activists embraced as a rare privilege the opportunity to work more closely with Onondaga leaders, whom they held in profound respect. They accorded the Onondaga a uniquely high moral ground because of what they saw as the Onondaga’s demonstrated commitment to genuinely democratic values, practice of peaceful co-existence with others, and spiritual teachings on the connection of all beings based on inter-relationships rather than domination. Translated into their own idiom, activists in the Syracuse Peace Council and its Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation program saw the land rights action as an exemplar of nonviolent direct action, in which the Nation had spoken truth to power by demanding that corporate polluters take responsibility for their actions. Speaking to me, one NOON member characterized colleagues in the group this way: “They want to relate to the Onondaga’s sense of identity and community. Here there is an absolute assertion of difference, of dignity, and cultural pride, but it is one that we value and want to learn from. This shapes the dynamic.”

Environmental organizations in Syracuse were also pleased to join this coalition. ESF, OEI, and Sierra Club already had positive relationships with Southside residents, from having worked together against the Incinerator, and on re-visioning of the urban stretch of Onondaga Creek. They were also already interested in Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), the usefulness of which was becoming well recognized in the field of environmental management. The “Scientific Ecological Knowledge” (SEK) that provides the dominant discourse at environmental research institutions such as ESF and OEI research can be compared to TEK in relation to the problem of environmental restoration. Robin Kimmerer, for example, points out that where TEK aims at restoration of the human relationship to the land, SEK speaks of restoration of the eco-system structure. Where TEK emphasizes the centrality of respect, reciprocity, and partnership with natural processes, SEK seeks to get eco-systems to regain their function for delivery of ecosystem services such as oxygenating the atmosphere, cleansing of groundwater, and absorbing stormwater runoff.^{xliii} Although they represent different ways of conceptualizing the environment and the place of humans in it, ESF had established a Center for Native Peoples and the Environment, where they were being brought together in complementary ways.

Despite its informal and decentralized character the coalition worked because the goals of its members regarding local environmental cleanup were generally compatible, because they could appreciate the healing message brought to the issue by the Onondagas, and because all of them were comfortable with the idea of working for social justice as well. Parts of the coalition worked in complementary ways and brought complementary capacities to bear. Even without any overarching institutional authority the pervasive network of personal relationships among activists willing to put in organizing energy and expertise even made the broad alliance capable of episodic collective action.

8. The Coalition's Accomplishments

Up until 2007 all of the environmental remediation plans had been formulated and pursued under the administration of County Executive Nicholas Pirro, in an atmosphere of animosity toward critics. Even under these conditions the coalition pushing for a more comprehensive and just approach made some headway. While installing the first 1000 feet of the pipeline conveyance, construction of the Midland plant hit a snag in the form of unexpectedly shallow bedrock, resulting in delays and cost overruns. The original plans called for blasting a route to bury this huge conduit through 1.5 miles of the Southside, so the pipe could conduct half the sewage and storm water runoff to be handled by the facility. Taking advantage of the delay, The Onondaga Nation and the Partnership for Onondaga Creek together fought to stop pipeline construction, arguing that it was too disruptive to the neighborhood. The coalition proposed instead a plan developed by a POC organizer (and retired engineer) and others to combine a series of smaller gray projects such as cleaning trunk lines, repairing leaking pipes, installing a small storage tank, and separating some storm sewers from sanitary sewers; with green measures such as green roofs, porous pavements and street swales to prevent runoff from reaching storm drains in the first place. The Pirro administration brushed aside this alternative, but coalition spokespersons found increasingly receptive audiences in their presentations to the public, county legislators, and the Syracuse Common Council. The coalition eventually persuaded DEC environmental justice office representatives to visit the Midland neighborhood and walk the proposed pipeline route, convincing them to support its cancellation on the grounds that the Southside had already been unfairly impacted by the project. So, when the Midland RTF went on line in 2008 it was as a scaled back version without the giant pipeline, and with the state-of-the-art odor control technology demanded by the coalition.

After launching the land rights action and beginning to work in close coordination with coalition allies, the Onondaga Nation leaders found their position for influencing industrial waste cleanup improved. As a spokesman explained:

Before, whenever Onondagas tried to call attention to it they were ignored. The bigwigs have their houses on Skaneateles or Cazenovia Lake, which they keep very clean. But this lake and this creek is the only waterway we have left. Since we filed the land rights action the Nation has more of an inside voice. We can sit in on the Lake Partnership meetings and have been accepted as a trustee for Natural Resource Damages.^{xliv} We are still excluded from the Honeywell cleanup, but we're making progress in getting research done on the damage they have done to the environment and in getting Honeywell to pay to restore it. We've also had much better success in repatriating remains and grave goods since then. Before, we were largely ignored.

Such changes address the social as well as environmental dimension of healing the Onondaga watershed. Onondagas seeking solutions for the seventh generation had opposed partial cleanup measures from the beginning because they saw them as temporary and incomplete. This view became more widely accepted after the release of studies showing that mercury levels in the fish of Onondaga Lake had risen three times

between 2003 and 2008, instead of declining as the cleanup progressed. Improvements at Metro had reduced ammonia and phosphorus effluents, which in turn reduced the algae population. With more oxygen in the water, fish were swimming to greater depths and feeding near the mercury deposits. It was clear that the Onondaga Lake Partnership's limited plan of dredging only 15% of the industrial sediments would never produce a healthy ecosystem and that more would be needed in order to truly heal the ecosystem. The land rights action also brought about broader recognition of the historical injustice of dispossessing the sovereign Onondaga Nation and of their special role as stewards of the Onondaga heartland. Both the recognition of past injustice and of their cultural rights to exercise stewardship are great steps toward healing the relations among the peoples, another essential part of restoring skanonh to the area. Working together in coalition with another marginalized cultural community, represented by the mostly African-American and female membership of the POC, and with other non-Native allies, was itself a healing process in this sense for traditional Onondagas. As one of the participants put it: "We are working with our neighbors to improve the environment for everyone. It's about healing and reconciliation. Working with people from the Southside on this has been a very healing experience. Politicians make decisions for the next election. The Onondaga make them for the seventh generation. We are pushing for a paradigm change."

9. Getting To Green

The paradigm change sought by opponents of the DEC-approved partial industrial-waste cleanup plan and RTF-based CSO abatement strategy actually came about through a serendipitous conjuncture of actions by coalition partners and events occurring independently of them. It was too late to stop the Midland RTF but with additional RTFs in the planning phase, opponents of the plan continued to work for better solutions. The complementary capacities of coalition partners and their ability to cooperate, combined with the rising tide of mainstream concern for environmental sustainability added up to a powerful result.

By 2007 scientists at the Onondaga Environmental Institute monitoring water quality in the creek were able to demonstrate that bacteria levels traceable to sewer leaks were high even in dry weather, not just after storms. This finding called into question the remediation plan focused only on eliminating CSOs and building RTFs. Educating public officials, engineers and DEC officers about the implications of this finding was crucial to getting them to reconsider their approach. That same year Joanne (Joanie) Mahoney, a former member of the Syracuse Common Council who had been swayed by a POC presentation years before began campaigning for county executive. During the campaign Mahoney, Onondaga Nation representatives and Southside POC activists cemented a new alliance, and when Ms. Mahoney was elected just a week later, she pledged to pursue a new course. As she was taking office in January 2008 the EPA released an action strategy titled *Managing Wet Weather with Green Infrastructure* and began urging municipalities to adopt it. Simultaneously, a representative from the Onondaga Nation teamed up with the director of Atlantic States Legal Foundation (ASLF), the entity that brought the original lawsuit resulting in the order to clean up the lake, to persuade the state Department of Environmental Conservation that a green infrastructural solution could

effectively replace the existing plan. Three weeks into her new administration, Onondaga County Executive Mahoney faced a decision. Site work had already begun on the downtown RTF and bids submitted for construction. To the astonishment of county administrators expecting a contract to be awarded for sewage plant construction, she announced her intention to abandon that project. Mahoney then obtained a moratorium to study greener alternatives and included POC, ASLF, and Onondaga Nation representatives on the county's new research committees who together laid the basis for a new amended federal court order for cleanup. The county had formally joined the coalition!

Any changes to the \$560 million program to clean up Onondaga Lake would require state DEC approval and the blessing of a federal judge. Accordingly, the team advising Mahoney, including the Nation chief counsel, the ASLF Director and a lead POC member, continued their campaign to educate state and local officials and county engineers about the effectiveness of green alternatives in other US cities and how such a course could be implemented in Syracuse to prevent 95% of the stormwater from reaching the drains. They made PowerPoint presentations to the top state environmental officials in Albany, brought in experts from around the country,^{xlv} and by the fall of 2009 achieved this goal. In November a U.S. District Judge approved a new consent order to replace the one calling for the RTF solution with a grey-and-green technology approach.^{xlvi} The old plan was officially scrapped, and replaced with the alternative its critics had proposed years earlier, that emphasized green infrastructure to prevent run-off while combining it with underground storage, sewer separation, and replacing worn-out pipes. When the time came to contract engineering consultants to design the new plan, Mahoney avoided EEA and hired outsiders with "green-urban" experience and lacking local political connections. What had begun as an underdog's struggle by marginalized populations and "radical" environmentalists had achieved a transformation in local environmental policy and set the county on an entirely new course. "It really is democracy at its best," remarked a lawyer for the Onondaga Nation, "with people who are really involved demanding and achieving change."^{xlvii}

In spite of all the coalition's efforts, none of this change might have happened but for the arrival of an opportune historical moment. It was not until the first decade of the 21st century that the urgency of an impending global warming crisis became broadly accepted in mainstream American society and a wave of "green" culture swept the nation. Following behind a well-developed *avant garde* of exemplars, municipalities, corporations, and households all over the country adopted environmental sustainability as a watchword and began undertaking measures to conserve energy and reduce carbon emissions up and down supply chains and throughout urban systems. The technology of green urbanism, which had for many years been a part of the consciousness of city planners, became more available and more acceptable to others in local government, and especially to the younger generation coming into power. The City of Syracuse had already officially adopted an environmental sustainability stance (styling itself "the Emerald City") and joined the forces opposing the county's lake-cleanup plan. But what made it possible for county administrators to begin working together with its critics was the rise of Green culture. A career administrator in the County Executive's office

responsible for Onondaga Lake water quality projects related to sewage explained the shift this way: “In 1998, when lake clean-up plans were first formulated, the word ‘green’ never came up. By 2008 when Joanie Mahoney’s administration took over implementation it had become a normal thing to seek green solutions – green infrastructure instead of grey infrastructure – to deal with things like storm run-off.”

The long struggle over how to clean up Onondaga Lake transformed local environmental policy and increased the influence and standing of marginalized actors. It also strengthened relations across a broad spectrum of local activists who are now even better positioned to support each other in the future. This may prove to be a crucial element in addressing the outstanding issues connected with this struggle: recovery of resource damages from corporate polluters sufficient to underwrite a complete cleanup of toxic waste, resolution of the Onondaga land rights action, economic justice for a Southside community still suffering from disproportionate poverty and neglect, and biocultural restoration of the whole Onondaga waterway. Healing the historic conflicts, displacements and damage of centuries remains a distant goal, but this cross-cultural alliance has taken some important steps together.

Notes

ⁱ The maps included here are used with the permission of the Onondaga Environmental Institute.

ⁱⁱ The author is an anthropologist who carried out participatory research for this paper while working at a community-development non-profit in Syracuse, New York, and later as Interim Director of the Center for Urban and Regional Applied Research at Le Moyne College in Syracuse. Special thanks are owed to Wendy Gonyea, Joseph Heath, Sid Hill, Aggie Lane, Ed Michaelenko, Katie Nadeau and Louise Poindexter for their help and insights.

ⁱⁱⁱ Other Onondaga populations live in Ontario, Canada.

^{iv} A more detailed account can be found on the official Onondaga Nation website: <http://www.onondaganation.org>

^v The information provided here was obtained from the official Onondaga Nation website (Ibid.); and from conversations with chiefs, faith keepers, and from the Nation’s legal counsel.

^{vi} Onondagas and other members of the Haudenosaunee met as a sovereign, self-governing entity with delegates from England, France and the Netherlands in the years prior to American independence. During the colonial era the Haudaenosaunee made at least 50 treaties with European powers, most of which were expressions of peace and friendship. Some were made to share the land, but the member-states of the League retained their hunting, fishing, and gathering rights within the territory they agreed to open to settlers. After the Revolutionary War the 13 colonies each became independent states and began to conduct themselves as sovereign governments. Eventually they set up a process for unified government (its design influenced by that of the Haudenosaunee) and created the United States Constitution. The Constitution specifically vested the President or his appointed representatives with the exclusive power to negotiate treaties. The Commerce Clause further granted Congress the exclusive right to regulate commerce with Indian nations. With this mutual understanding as a backdrop, the United States government entered into three major treaties with the Haudenosaunee. Two of these have never been abrogated by either side and remain in effect to this day. The third, the 1789 Treaty of Fort Hamer, was superseded by the Treaty of Candandaigua in 1794. In 1871 the U.S. ceased treaty making with native nations.

^{vii} The game of lacrosse is a Haudenosaunee creation, and the Onondaga team competes at the international level

^{viii} For example, the current Tadadaho, Sidney Hill, was asked to take a prominent part in the installation ceremony for a new Chancellor of Syracuse University, where he appeared in his regalia to speak a traditional thanksgiving in the Onondaga language. Clan mothers perform a similar thanksgiving to open the solstice concerts of the Syracuse Community Choir. Representatives are in demand to speak to classes and assemblies in the area’s colleges and universities on topics such as traditional religion and environmental relations. Such ceremonial and educational functions aside, traditional leaders have not historically pursued strong political influence in Syracuse affairs, but kept their distance as dictated by the Two-Row Wampum.

^{ix} According to the Syracuse Peace Council’s mission statement, the organization “educates, agitates and organizes for a world where war, violence and exploitation in any form will no longer exist. We challenge the existing unjust power relations among nations, among people and between ourselves and the environment... we are committed to nonviolent means of conflict resolution and to a process of decision-making that responds to the needs of all.”

x The illegality of similar takings was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in its decision in favor of the Oneida land claim. The court ordered the State of New York to settle the claim, but it has not yet done so.

xi See Thompson, Donald L. 2002. *The Golden Age of Onondaga Lake Resorts*. Purple Mountain Press.

xiixii The Solvay Process used brine mined in the southern watershed of Onondaga Creek and locally obtainable limestone to produce sodium carbonate. The process produced salty wastes, made up of chloride, sodium, and calcium increased the salinity of the lakewater while reducing its levels of dissolved oxygen. The calcium produced excessive lake bottom accumulations by increasing the rate of calcium carbonate formation.

xiii For example, a General Motors plant dumped PCBs into Ley Creek and a General Electric plant dumped cadmium into Bloody Creek. The Sennet tar pits along the southern shore released acidic black tar, and a petroleum storage facility at the southern end of the lake known as Oil City contributed petroleum sludge and PCBs.

xiv In 2002 about 58% of the city's sewer lines were combined, according to the Syracuse and Onondaga County Planning Association (SOCPA) 2002, "Sewer Network in the Onondaga County Lake Basin, City of Syracuse" map.

xv The federal Superfund program was created by the Federal Comprehensive Environmental Response Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA) and is administered by the Environmental Protection Agency.

xvi Onondaga Lake Cleanup Corporation 2001, *The State of Onondaga Lake*, a research report approved for publication by the Onondaga Lake Management Corporation.

xvii This was at least in part due to the environmentally unfortunate (but less expensive) siting of the wastewater treatment plant on the upstream side of the lake. This was closer to the city but meant effluents went into the lake rather than into the less compromised outflow at the other end of the lake.

xviii Onondaga Lake Cleanup Corporation 2001, p.20.

xix For example, the Commissioner of Onondaga County's Water Environment Protection Department was a former vice-president of O'Brien & Gere, and the founder and president of Moffa & Associates was a fraternity brother of the previous commissioner. (Partnership for Onondaga Creek 2006, *A Study in Environmental Racism: "New and Significant" Information Regarding Title VI Claim 03R-04-R2*, Syracuse New York, p.1.

xx Aggie Lane (Partnership for Onondaga Creek organizer), personal communication.

xxi Joseph Heath, personal communication.

xxii Lane, Aggie and Tarki Heath (POC) 2007 "Environmental Racism in Syracuse, NY: A Case Study of Government's Failure to Protect an Endangered Waterway and a Neglected Community." State of Environmental Justice in America Conference, Howard Law School, Washington D.C., p.1

xxiii Ibid. p.9

xxiv Neighborhoods with similar sewer configurations to that of the Southside that were spared the imposition of RTF plants at the expense of the Southside included a Northside area the County Executive wished to make over as "Little Italy" and Franklin Square, the "baby" of influential Syracuse real estate mogul Roger Congel. A wastewater treatment facility planned for Franklin Square, a mostly white, middle class development, was downsized in 1988, shifting the sewage burden to other neighborhoods. In a design review, the engineering consultant linked this downsizing directly to a recommendation for "oversize pipeline in both Midland [Southside] and Clinton[downtown] to provide additional storage volume to replace the loss." Camp, Dresser & McKee "Preliminary VE Report, Value Engineering Review, Onondaga County CSO Control, Franklin Floatable Control Facility Planning Concept." Cited in Lane and Heath (op.cit.) p.6

xxv The long delay in bringing suit was because the Onondaga Nation was excluded from federal and state courts until 1974 and the Supreme Court did not decide such actions were viable until 1985. Since then, the chiefs and clan mothers had been working toward consensus on the best timing and strategy for entering the courts.

xxvi Upstate Citizens for Equality mounted a strident challenge to the sovereign status of Haudenosaunee nations, arguing that Natives should be legally treated just like any other ethnic minority in United States society.

xxvii <http://www.onodaganation.org/land/complaint.html>

xxviii I am indebted to Mr. Sid Hill, the sitting Tadadaho, for this explanation of the skanonh concept.

xxix Dr. Robin Kimmerer's address at Finding Common Ground: Indigenous Approaches to Healing Our Land and Waters, an event coordinated by Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation, November 8, 2010.

xxx Unless otherwise noted, particular observations and unpublished quotations from individuals were collected in the course of conducting fieldwork. Following the practice of anthropology, identities of the speakers are withheld.

xxxi Berkes, Fikret 2008. *Sacred Ecology* (2nd edition). New York: Routledge. p.3. For more on TEK's relevance to environmental management see Kimmerer, Robin W. 2000 "Native Knowledge for Native Ecosystems," *Journal of Forestry* 98(8)4-9.

xxxii Weiner, Mark. "County Drops \$3M Offer for Midland Improvement," *The Post-Standard*, Syracuse, New York, November 26, 2002. Cancellation of the mitigation funds followed a 9-month process of court-ordered negotiations over the CSO abatement plan in 2002, in which city and county representatives were obliged to include the POC as a representative of affected stakeholders. These weekly sessions produced a viable alternative to the large, chlorine-based plant, combining sewer separation and greater storage capacity to hold storm runoff until it could be treated at the METRO facility. But as consensus loomed, the county abruptly changed its conditions and the agreement collapsed. The POC interpreted the subsequent cancellation of the \$3 million as punishing the neighborhood for the POC's activism.

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- xxxiii Here I follow the lead of Laura Pulido, Steve Sidawi, and Robert O. Vos (1996) in “An Archaeology of Environmental Racism in Los Angeles,” *Urban Geography*, 17(5), in understanding such histories in terms of the processes by which neighborhoods become racialized and ultimately disproportionately affected by city planners and environmental policy-makers. By emphasizing processes, the analysis of environmental racism goes beyond characterizing it in terms of “deliberate and malicious targeting.” p.427.
- xxxiv Cornwall, Zoe, 1987. *Human Rights in Syracuse, A Selected History from 1963 to 1983*. Human Rights Commission of Syracuse and Onondaga County. p.5.
- xxxv Adams, Catherine Mahala, 2003. *Defending Our Place: Protest on the Southside of Syracuse*. Syracuse University Master’s thesis. pp.57-61.
- xxxvi For an analysis of the impact of these developments on Southsiders’ sense of place and motivations for activism around the Midland plant issue, see Adams, Catherine 2003 *Ibid*, p.51-73.
- xxxvii POC members and others in the Southside community claim the County sent plainclothes operatives to pastors of the neighborhood churches, pressuring them to tell their congregations not to have anything to do with the POC.
- xxxviii Financing for the Midland RTF relied partly on federal monies, Citizens could challenge federal funding for the project under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act because it prevents the federal government from funding projects that have a disparate effect on protected populations. The proposed RTF was slated for a protected neighborhood as defined by income and ethnicity.
- xxxix Lane and Heath 2007, *op.cit.* p.4
- xl The Onondaga Nation hid fugitive slaves on their territory and abolitionist networks organized through both Black and white churches in Syracuse prevented the return of captured fugitives and assisted hundreds to freedom in Canada. The area was home to Mathilda Joslyn Gage and other early feminist organizers who admired the Onondaga’s system of shared power between men and women. The Women Rights Declaration of Sentiments was proclaimed in 1848 at a convention held in nearby Seneca Falls.
- xli This socially dynamic and productive envisioning project provided a pointed contrast to that pursued by the corporate and government-dominated Onondaga Lake Partnership. As one OLP member ruefully remarked, “Yes, we are doing ‘envisioning’ – with focus groups, surveying the general public and decision-makers. But the results will not feed into a decision on what will happen in the cleanup order. We’re just organizing the trees in the park.”
- xlii This event was titled “Roots of Peacemaking: Indigenous Values, Global Crisis,” and it was jointly organized by Neighbor of the Onondaga Nation and traditional leaders of the Onondaga Nation, who presented Dr. Goodall with an award. (Syracuse Peace Council 2006, *Peace News Letter #757*).
- xliii Kimmerer, Robin, 2010. *op.cit.*
- xliv In 2009 a Trustee Council made up of NYDEC, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Onondaga Nation was formed to assess natural resource injuries at the Onondaga Lake Superfund site, and to plan and implement revitalization activities.
- xlv On the local level this campaign included a presentation attended by county officials by Nancy Stoner, a former EPA official who co-directs water programs for the National Resources Defense Council and co-author of “Rooftops to Rivers,” the RDF’s guide to green infrastructure; and Franco Montalto, a Drexel University hydro-engineer who runs a company specializing in green infrastructure, who toured local sites and met with county officials.
- xlvi Knauss, Tim, 2009 “Federal judge approves Onondaga County using green technology to reduce Onondaga Lake pollution,” *The Post-Standard*, November 16, 2009.
- xlvii Joe Heath, quoted in “Activists’ Persistence on Sewage Pushed Onondaga County to ‘Go Green,’” by Tim Knauss, *The Post-Standard*, January 18, 2010