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RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

WOMEN & WATER : CALLING



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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image of Ann Raiho with a canoe, is courtesy of Natalie Warren.

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FEATURE

HOW THE RIVER MOVES US: WOMEN SPEAK THEIR STORY

By Victoria Bradford Styrbicki

For the past twelve years, I have been honing my art practice around a theory of social choreography. The “social” part of this has to do with listening, community, and story. Through various projects and in collaboration with others,

I have worked to develop a radical listening practice in which we recognize our judgment and let it go as we listen in order to build relationships and be fully open to a story. Throughout my work, what I am listening to varies from project to



*Sitting with Renita Green and Alyssa Phares outside Marquette Tower in Cape Girardeau.
Image courtesy of A House Unbuilt.*

project. I have listened to the domestic labors of dinner and the people who gather to share a meal in my series *Dinner Dance* with Hannah Barco. I have listened to the architecture of Chicago neighborhoods with my series *Neighborhood Dances*. And most recently, I have listened to the stories of the Mississippi River with my *Relay of Voices* project through productions such as *Declivity*, *When Fear Hits the Body*, and my new video story series *Niimikaage* (presented below).

The “choreography” part of social choreography has to do with where and how we listen and then share. Central to these projects is the practice of listening with the whole body; of taking in

stories not just through words but also through actions, gestures, behaviors, routines, rituals, and rhythms. This involves focusing intently on the storyteller, absorbing the energy of the moment, and allowing time to flow with little to no constraint. I listen for how words get tangled in silences, caught under the breath and body, or bellow out and fill all the spaces. I observe the back and forth of the limbs and the subtle shifting of weight. I look for gazes, cyclical gestures, and patterns the body expresses throughout our time together. This immersive listening practice tells a story through both language and movement that evolves and takes hold in the body through the process of re-processing and re-performing the interaction.



Dance artists trained as endurance athletes perform in “Declivity” at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, a project by A House Unbuilt in preparation for the relay down the Mississippi River that developed new techniques in movement research. Image courtesy of A House Unbuilt.

The act of sharing or re-telling stories is important and must happen through the body as well. Storytelling through social choreography is not just about moving the body but about how we can move community and culture by listening to stories the body tells us. We can discover new things through speaking others' words and moving through their gestures. This process for me is one of transformation through movement—a phase change that takes place through repetition and slippage. As the original transcribed gestures begin to fall away, vulnerabilities are exposed, new subtleties in the narrative are revealed, and unspoken moments find their voice. There is always loss in reproduction, but new knowledge can be gained from exploring a different perspective. After this transformation of movement comes the choreography, which can take place on site or on screen. Much of my work has been site-specific choreography consisting of several bodies in a physical space, like a museum or public space, that includes interaction with an audience along with other components like lighting, time duration, and costumes. Sometimes the work is better suited for the screen, as is the case for this article.

The *Niimikaage* presented below address loss and creation through text, primary footage, re-telling, and generative movement. As I described above, this movement or dance—a style that is perhaps unfamiliar to most audiences—pulls directly from everyday actions and behaviors of the storyteller and transforms their gestures through repetition and abstraction to create resonance with the sentiment expressed. These videos emphasize and expand the story like music in a film. I have included a “movement vocabulary” with each *Niimikaage* to anchor your own body while you read the text and watch the videos below. Key words and phrases throughout

this article are formatted in bold to indicate words paired with unique movements and vibrations. This is an invitation to feel these gestures yourself as you experience the story, engaging with key rhythms of the storyteller.

The creation of this project is in tandem with a larger undertaking to produce a digital experience that envelops the entire archive from *Relay of Voices*, a 120-day human-powered journey down the Mississippi River in collaboration with hundreds of individuals and communities along the way. A storytelling website will launch in Fall 2022 containing the full series of *Niimikaage* as well as other videos, audio recordings, photos, and stories. *Niimikaage* is feeding from a rich archive of story material yielding new conversations, understandings, art works, and publications. Working through the pandemic, I have found that studio production rather than live performance is an optimal way to make new work and reach new audiences. Working with a database full of video footage that captured these original interview moments, I was moved by the raw images of the storytellers. Their voices begged to be shared and included in the artistic process and product. While the archive reaches upward of 600 voices, I will highlight the five women below for this *Open Rivers* issue on women and water. I have chosen to title this project *Niimikaage* after the Ojibwe word meaning “she dances for people/for a purpose” out of reverence for the tribal lands I traversed while gathering these stories and to emphasize that there is a creative power in putting someone else’s story into another body. As a work of social choreography, *Niimikaage* is meant to listen to the movement of the Mississippi River through the lives of people connected to it. Whether their story is directly connected to the river or not, water shapes the world around them.



Albertine walks up the levee. Image courtesy of A House Unbuilt.

How can I get that water over here?

Albertine Kimble—lone resident of Carlisle, Louisiana, and perhaps the loudest Coastal advocate we met downriver—is known as the “Duck Queen.” You can likely find her hunting or driving her airboat in the marshes off the east bank of the Mississippi River.

Voice gathered on the afternoon of October 31, 2019 on her land in Carlisle, LA.

Movement Vocabulary: *Cave, Drop, Lean In, Hands Recycle, Thumb Over*

It was a cold morning—not quite 50 degrees—and I was in shorts. As a Louisiana native, I was expecting 80 degrees in November, not this blast of fall weather. We came to Carlisle, Louisiana to meet Albertine Kimble, a local legend known as the “Duck Queen.” We were told she would provide us a lunch of shrimp stew, green beans, and iced tea and give us a tour of the swamp. Upon arrival, we **climbed up** the enormous flight of stairs to her home where Albertine graciously welcomed us in. Before we could really introduce ourselves, Albertine **broke into** a story about



Albertine takes us on the east side of the levee. Image courtesy of A House Unbuilt.

the “tin can” we were standing in—that is, her trailer **lofted** high above the east bank of the Mississippi River, **tucked into** a hollow of cypress trees, **perched** on the edge of marshland leading out to the Gulf of Mexico. Albertine is one of the few residents here in Plaquemines Parish with no back levee, and she is glad for that fact. “You’re gonna get water here,” she said, “because you’re **outside** the levee. I don’t want a back levee,” she went on. “I know I’m **gonna flood**. The water’s **coming in and out**. If I could just **get rid** of that levee,” she said, motioning dramatically to the Mississippi River banks, “I would be good.”

Now you can already tell, perhaps, that Albertine Kimble is not afraid of water. Albertine initiated this conversation with the story of a storm up in her “tin can.” “The dog woke me up,” she told us, explaining how she usually sleeps through bad weather, but her sister was staying with her, and had a dog in tow. After Albertine woke up, her sister asked, “What’s going on?” Albertine said simply, “Olga. Tropical Storm Olga.” In the trailer they could literally **feel the wind** of the storm, but Albertine was not worried. She told her sister, “Don’t worry. Katrina, Rita, Gustav, Ike, Tropical Storm Lee, Hurricane Isaac—I’ve made it through everything. I mean, this trailer never lost a window, tin, nothing—**tucked in** the trees... and when I’m telling you them trees were **bowed out**, they were **bowed out**. Those cypress trees. So, you could **feel it**.”

There is a reason Albertine is so welcoming of these storms, and the water of the Mississippi River **overtopping** its levees. She is looking to **rebuild** the marshland habitat for her beloved duck hunting ground. But she is passionate about more than hunting. It is about the future of Louisiana. “You gotta **put back** on your resource when you **rob it**,” she said. “If you don’t do that, you have nothing. It’s just like oil and gas. Everybody’s going, ‘I wonder why everything is **sinking**.’ Well first thing,” she carried on, “you’re **sucking** all the sulfur and oil and gas out of this place, and you’re not **putting them**

back. What’s going back in is water. What happens? She **sinks**.”

With a **sinking** marshland as her back yard on one side, and a **vulnerable** levee as her front yard on the other, one might wonder why she chooses to live in a place like this, with so many challenges and threats. But Albertine Kimble is not afraid of water. She’s only afraid of those not willing to **adapt**.

See the video [*A Moment with Albertine Kimble*](#).

What are you doing here?

Renita Green is the pastor of St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church and an activist for homeless concerns in Cape Girardeau, Missouri and beyond.

Voice gathered on the afternoon of September 10, 2019, outside the Marquette Tower in Cape Girardeau, MO.

Movement Vocabulary: Perched, Reclined, Circling, Pointing, Raise Up, Squeal

Renita Green is *shepherding* a historically Black church in southeast Missouri; some might call it the South. She was assigned this church, but as Renita said, “you don’t really get to be the pastor until people let you *pastor them*.” Since arriving in Cape Girardeau, she actually *lost* about 75% of her congregation, perhaps because she is a white woman who does *not cave* to a conservative doctrine. “You’re not gonna ever hear

me *preach* about sins, personal sins,” she said. “I’m just not. Whatever we think sin is, it’s a result of our brokenness. Nobody needs to know that they’re broken—they need to know how *to heal*.”

According to Renita, Cape Girardeau’s poverty level *grew* by 48% in 2018, in just a year’s time, and she attributed that to the *decline* in the “Bootheel”—the southeasternmost part of Missouri that is primarily rural farmland. “I mean, there are towns that are just *closed*,” she pleaded, “*are closing*. There are no resources, there are no services, there are no jobs, they don’t have transportation. Even in the community where I work, in Charleston...businesses *are closing down*. There’s no new businesses *opening up*.” Without public transportation, cell service, internet, and other basic modern conveniences, not only can businesses not survive, Renita told



Renita sharing her story. Image courtesy of A House Unbuilt.

us, but people *can't practically live* in these communities anymore.

Her flagship mission is homelessness, and she has **transformed** her small church parish, which has under 20 recurring parishioners but masses of volunteers, into a shelter of sorts. Renita is **seeking** more systemic change around the issues of homelessness, poverty, and racism. She is **taking the time** to **build** relationships with the people living under the overpasses and on the park benches—the “characters” others often **ignore** or **dismiss**. She is instead **recognizing** them and **taking time** to talk with them about what they need, what they want.

Our time in Cape Girardeau, with Renita and others, taught us that southeast Missouri—not the Mason-Dixon line—might be the real gateway to the South. As we traveled downriver stereotypical signs of southern culture started to reveal themselves. There were grits on a diner menu in Elsberry, Missouri, crawfish roadkill just outside of Cape Girardeau, and barbecue in Cairo, Illinois. We started to ask ourselves, where does the South really begin? A more sobering remnant of southern culture is the division between Black and white people. Renita presented us with the common thread that, in Cape Girardeau, “racism is very prevalent, but people are very nice and polite. And you learn **to just be nice** and polite about it. And you **don't talk** about it.”

As a white woman pastor in a Black church, Renita operates under this cloud of polite racism. Despite her best efforts, she may be **perceived** as racist even by her congregation because she is bringing in “white” ways through her language, the way she manages church business, and the partnerships she cultivates. Her position in the Black church is like a violation, she explains. She is **violating** a safe space where Black people don't have to be “on” all the time. It should be a space where “you don't have to worry about your vernacular. You don't have to worry about your cultural expression, your faith expressions. Where you can really **release** the

emotions that have been pent up and release it through spirituality, whether that's through songs or prayers.” And then here comes Renita. The now safe space **has been violated**. But she was **called** to this work and is **working** to make it right: “I don't know what I'm supposed to do with that,” she said, “because I know this is where I'm supposed to be.”

See the video [*A Moment with Renita Green*](#).

They were all appalled!

Angela Chalk is the founder of Healthy Community Services. She is a sixth-generation resident of the Seventh Ward in New Orleans, Louisiana, where she works to increase community engagement with and awareness of environmental issues.

Voice gathered on the afternoon of October 23, 2019 at Angela's home in the Seventh Ward in New Orleans, LA.

Movement Vocabulary: *Finger Wave, MmmMmm, Swat, Point Out, Laugh*

We had to drive around the highway to get to the Seventh Ward. It seemed to cut right through the neighborhood, abruptly disconnecting the landscape. We parked along the street and walked to the second story entrance of Angela Chalk's home. The door was slightly ajar, but we knocked. A voice from the back of the house **called out** for us to **come in**, so we made our way inside and **waited**.

The television was on in the living room and all the lights were lit as we waited for several minutes before Angela emerged. She was **smiling** and **warm**, giving us each a hearty handshake, inviting us to sit down. We quickly learned that the house we were sitting in had quite a story in itself: five generations of her family had lived here, and the house was initially won in a card game. The house also **sat in** six feet of water during hurricane Katrina, after which the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) said all the homes in the area needed to be elevated. However, instead of **raising** hers up on stilts, Angela just turned the downstairs into storage and **built** stairs up to a new second floor as the primary living space.

Storm prevention is not the least of Angela's inventions and interventions in her Seventh Ward neighborhood. After a career in public health, she has now **taken on** the climate health of her community through an organization she has founded called Healthy Community Services (HCS). As Angela said, "there are a lot of people out there that are doing this work. But are they doing it for the right reasons, and are they doing it [in a way] that's going to **impact** the community in a meaningful way? I'm doing it for the right reasons because if I don't **get this right** then they're gonna say it **stigmatizes** the whole community, whether you're Black, white, poor, Indigenous. 'They can't do anything right.' That's the narrative that will be said. 'They can't do anything right. They can't **learn** about this important topic of climate change.' And I'm here to say, 'no!' because the conversations are happening at the barber shop, at the bar. We are **meeting** people where they are and **explaining** it in terms that they **understand**."

Healthy Community Services is also **engaging** children outside of the classroom. "We're teaching about coastal restoration and land loss. We're **teaching** about our environment, such as our waters—brackish water, salt water, fresh water—and what that means," Angela **goes on**. HCS partnered with the National Audubon Society in 2020 to launch the Native Plant Academy for kids ages 12 to 19 from rural and urban areas around New Orleans. "Orleans parish is coastal and we're **right there** along that watershed, but our kids don't see that," Angela explains. "When we **get to show** them how flood waters are **pumped** from the river to the lake and then how they all **connect back** together," they have their aha moment, she goes on. That aha moment **extends** to the field trips they take



Angela shows me drainage solutions installed on her block. Image courtesy of A House Unbuilt.

into the wetlands in Plaquemines and St. Bernard Parishes as well as Lower Jefferson, learning how these watery marshes provide a natural barrier to storm surge. This holistic view of their ecosystem and its economy is inspiring these young people to ask what their role will be in all this. Where do they fit in?

One student in particular amazed Angela after going from a meek, quiet member of the cohort on day one to becoming a confident eco-activist by the end of the course. This young woman used her social media acumen to help stop the State of Louisiana from deforesting Fontainebleau State Park amidst the COVID-19 financial crisis. Angela

told the story like a proud parent, “she sent me a campaign notice, a petition asking for my signature to sign ‘cause of what? Fontainebleau. And I was like, ‘oh my gosh, she **taking on** the state!’ And then to be successful at it!”

Another young man, after learning that the land they were standing on was built by the river, got interested in urban agriculture. He started learning about the soil compositions in South Louisiana. In Orleans Parish the soil is more clay-dense whereas just downriver in St. Bernard Parish it becomes loamier, and then in Plaquemines Parish at the end of the river it’s even more fertile. “And so,” Angela narrates,



We sit down in Angela’s living room to talk about her life story. Image courtesy of A House Unbuilt.

“he made the discovery that, ‘Oh! It’s even more fertile in Plaquemines Parish because all the sediment nutrients from the rest of the country is **settling in** Plaquemines Parish!’ And we like, ‘Yep.’” So, this was another amazing moment for Angela, not to mention that this young man and his grandmother also started a garden together. This kind of intergenerational action is exactly the kind of unintentional good sparked by Angela’s work with the Native Plant Academy.

Angela Chalk is not just a teacher, she is a prophet: “Folks have to decide in this green sector work, what do you want? You know? Do you want this for the moment, or do you want a legacy? I choose to have a legacy because I see the **impact** that it has just on this small scale. And this small scale **translates** to even a larger scale. And so I get calls, and people stop me, and I’m just Angela.” As humble as she may be, Angela also emphasized that she is an educated Black woman, and she knows she is **standing** on the shoulders of others who came before her, like Leona Tate who integrated schools in New Orleans. It is now Angela’s shoulders that others are standing on.

See the video [A Moment with Angela Chalk](#).

It was in the winter.

Liz Burns is a Cuyuna-area mountain bike enthusiast and committed snowshoer.

Voice originally heard from her on the afternoon of July 21, 2019 at the Milford Mine Lake Memorial in Crosby, MN.

Movement Vocabulary: *Chomping, Whole Body, Arms, Landscape*

Apparently, Liz Burns was going to take us to one of the most beautiful places in the world. That is what she told us. We met at her home in

Deerwood, Minnesota and piled in her truck. As we drove through Crosby over to the area called Milford, we learned a little about Liz's simultaneous sense of wanderlust for places elsewhere and nostalgia for her family's homeplace. While she **grew up** in the big city of Saint Paul, Minnesota, her extended family is all from the Crosby area. Many of them had **worked** in the Milford mine where we were now **heading**.

"When we first **came here**, my husband and I were trying to **start** a family. Why not do it in a small town? But God had another plan."



Sitting with Liz Burns at Milford Mine Park. Image courtesy of A House Unbuilt.



Inscription honoring the miners at Milford Mine Memorial Park. Image courtesy of A House Unbuilt.

While she and her husband never had children, they enjoy small town life, she explained. They don't have to move anywhere to retire. They can **go** places for an adventure, but they don't really have to "go" anywhere else. As we were talking, the breeze **carried** the sound of a bird singing, and Liz interjected, "you can't hear this in the Cities. You know the wind—the wind has a specific speed that gives off specific sounds and depends upon the birds." In the clear, clean air of the day, we could hear the bird song aloft on the wind much truer than amidst the muffled sounds of the city. Someone like Liz, who is outdoors most every day, must know those sounds like familiar musical notes.

Convening with the birds and beautiful spaces in nature is one of the main reasons Liz and her husband **find** themselves in this quaint, quiet community in northern Minnesota. She spent much of our time together trying to **recruit** me into a snowshoeing practice, explaining it is just a simple little walk, slow, where you can **listen** to the birds (yes, there are even birds in the winter). You can take in the time, she said, especially when snowshoeing at night in the moonlight. "It's absolutely beautiful. It's a way of **feeling free** 'cause in the winter you don't want to always be **bundled up** in your home. You want to **be outside**, when...all of a sudden the snow **comes**."

Crosby offers opportunities for outdoor recreation thanks to its many natural areas, lakes, and proximity to the Mississippi River. Recently, some of the abandoned mine areas have been **developed** into extensive mountain biking trails. Cycling, then, is of course Liz's second passion, but she is not just in it for herself. She mentors little girls on mountain bikes, and she **leads** a women's group ride weekly. Liz participates in a community education program for kids called "Rangers Ride" where kids can try mountain biking. According to Liz, they get "a few days of riding experience—teach them how to use their brakes. If you start a kid young enough biking, it gives them a sense of adventure. And

not only that, but gives them a lifelong something they can do for exercise."

Deer flies **circled** our heads and nipped at our legs as we walked the paths in Milford Mine Memorial Park on a hot July afternoon. Liz's "most beautiful place" was a memorial located where Foley Lake had catastrophically flooded the Milford Mine in 1924, drowning 42 miners, including Liz's great-great grandfather. Together we **stood** on the footbridge looking over the disaster site, and Liz explained just what happened to make this place what it is today.

See the video [A Moment with Liz Burns](#).

He's not coming back.

Sally Fineday is a leading member of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe in Cass Lake, Minnesota. A lover of the water, she lives on its shores and advocates for her people and their stories.

Voice originally heard from on the afternoon of July 12, 2019 in Sally's fishing boat out on the waters of Cass Lake.

Movement Vocabulary: *Hold Up, Look Away, Ok, Fingers, Head Bob*

Our afternoon with Sally began at Norway Beach Campground in the Chippewa National Forest, a forest held in trust for the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe. We set out in Sally's SUV driving through the forest lands, **crossing over** the Mississippi River on our way to her family's tribal allotment. She began our conversation like a practiced interviewee: "So my name's Sally Fineday. I've lived here and grew up here and **left** the area when I was like 16, and I've lived a good deal of my adult life in the Twin Cities area. I **returned** here recently since '07, twelve years now. It's been really an eye opener as far as getting to know all the communities, 'cause there are a lot."

Apparently, there are sixteen communities across the tribal lands of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe. Sally has dedicated her adult life to serving these communities, both as an employee of the Leech Lake Band as well as a member of the Local Indian Council. Sally is not just concerned with what's happening on the reservation today; she is also a student of history. "I think that for most of my adult life I've been studying my history," she told us, "because I didn't get it in high school. Nobody tells you about anything, so I've been educating myself about, 'Who am I?' 'Where did I **come from**?' 'Why am I here?'" She told the story of how the Leech Lake reservation was **formed** and how her great-great grandfather, Chief Winnebagosh, **received** his 80-acre

allotment of land. Her grandmother on her father's side also got 80 acres that the family still has today. She drove us around this family land, telling us about her three sisters, one brother, and extended family who were somewhat poverty-stricken. We continued to discuss the struggles of the local indigenous community, and Sally related how when the Great Depression hit in the '30s, they were not really affected because feast or famine had always been their way of life.

Part of Sally's discovery of who she is as a Native American woman also involves the spiritual traditions of the Ojibwe people. She is very involved in the sweat lodge tradition, or what she prefers to call the "purification lodge," where you go into a dome-shaped hut and immerse yourself in medicinal steam emitting from hot rocks. "When you get done with that," she explains, "it's like going to the sauna. It really—you feel clean, inside and out." She is also the leader of the Midewiwin Lodge. According to Sally, every lodge is different, but "mide" means heart—the way of the heart—and at the lodge people surrender their hearts through mourning or prayer. "So, if someone was really sick and needed a lot of help, they could have that ceremony. And it's all about prayer and a belief in our prayer and the sincerity of our prayer."

Sally has **left** home and **returned** multiple times out of a **calling to serve** her people, and to serve her Ojibwe name, Oshikawebie, which means "one who **crosses over**" or "between this world and the other world" (the spiritual world). She was given her name at birth by the oldest living woman in her family. While this name definitely foreshadowed Sally's path in the spiritual traditions of her tribe, I couldn't help but notice that she crosses over in her work life, too. Sally works to **bridge** the gap between native and non-native communities and end the separation between them by bringing recognition to the history of her people. Sally's ability to "cross



Sally Fineday along the Lady Slipper Byway. Image courtesy of A House Unbuilt.

over” is also what led her to **reconnect** with that spiritual side of her ancestry; to come back home; to **rediscover** who she is as Ojibwe. At age 28, while working for the Indian Health Board in Minneapolis, she **looked** at her hand and said to herself, “this is the hand of a Native American Woman—I have no idea what that means. Well shoot. I better start figuring that out!” From then on, she has been studying and learning to figure out what that means. She recognizes that a lot of people in Leech Lake do not have the chance to learn about their history, especially about how the federal government **took** their land and **made** and **broke** their treaties.

As we drove along the Lady Slipper Byway through Chippewa National Forest, Sally explained, “We were a large, a large number of people, and in order to actually **take** the land from the people, they **made** treaties.” These treaties **created** the reservations that **forced** people to live in reservation areas, which as Sally clarified, were usually the poorest quality of land. “But that’s the government,” she said, “the government can do that.” She went on to mention the Apostle Islands off Lake Superior being turned into a national forest. At that site, there was a controversy over “these peo— some of these non-native people that have been living there since the beginning of time, well a hundred years ago, five generations or whatever” being **forced** to sell their land to the government. There was also some Ojibwe land being **placed** into trust. According to Sally, people are asking why it’s happening, and her answer was simple and from a place of knowing. “I’m a Native American and this happened to me and my people for a lot of time, so it’s [that] the government can do what it **wants**, and they will, with their laws. If they want to do it, they can do it.”

The government not only **took away** the land, but it took away the Ojibwe religion and language, declaring it illegal to practice both until the Indian Reorganization Act of 1978. Sally explained how her father refused to teach her the Ojibwe language, saying: “This world isn’t

ours anymore. You’re going to have to learn, get educated. This is the white man’s world now.” While not versed in the Ojibwe language herself, Sally **tells** a story to describe a thing, just like the language does. She explained how her father and his brothers would be outside talking in the language and she would wonder what they were saying. Simple phrases like “pick that up” mean different things when said with spiritual language versus everyday language. There were moments when I felt like Sally was speaking in spiritual language with the weight of her presence, intonation, expression, sweeping gestures, and her simple, glistening smiles.

Sally has a deep connection to the reservation and her family land. Her home **sits** right on the bank of Cass Lake, part of the Mississippi River. We set into its warm waters in her boat that afternoon, learning more of the Ojibwe history and lineage. Sally went into a story about getting **kicked out** of history class for denying the Bering Strait story. For her, crossing the Bering Strait to populate the Americas didn’t quite jive with the Ojibwe creation story. “We got a really darn good brainwashing. That’s all we’re **allowed** to learn in public education is what they want you to learn, so it’s like are we really **free**? Not really.” This led to Sally telling us her people’s origin story, starting with Turtle Island, North America, where three animals **dove deep** to get a bit of ocean floor to **bring back** up and make some land. The most magical part was Sally’s explanation of the migas shell and the beginning of man. She **held up** her hand making something of an OK sign to **indicate** the size of the shell between her thumb and index finger. “That is the one the creator **gave** to us and **blew** life into man with sand and earth and fire and water—all of that is inside of us. So that is how we became Anishinabe, which means ‘the original man.’”

Sally told many of these stories as we floated out on her boat on Cass Lake after driving along the Lady Slipper Byway through Chippewa National Forest. The day seemed to go on and on as we soaked in the sun, never **looking** at our watches.

When we got back to Sally's house we looked over the map of the lake to see where we had been, **procured** our special mosquito repelling sticks for the campground, and said our good-byes. There are not enough minutes now to type out all that was shared and felt.

See the video [A Moment with Sally Fineday](#).

I didn't have an agenda when I set out to gather these stories. While many people wanted me to narrow my focus—climate change and the environment, poverty and race, or farming and industry—I was motivated by the water itself. I wanted to trace the Mississippi River through the lives of people who lived along it. I couldn't say what I would find there, but I had a theory that, despite the different geographies and circumstances of the people I met, the water would shape their stories. Water gives and takes away. Water is beautiful and threatening. Water has shaped my own life. As I mentioned, I come from a very watery place in south Louisiana, and the backwash

of the Mississippi River shapes my state and the land that is now subsiding into the Gulf of Mexico. I wanted to know my home by way of this particular water, so I traveled the length of the Mississippi River on foot to gather these stories. I traveled in my body, human powered, listening to the landscape, listening to people, communities, and individuals. I wanted to listen and see where the river would take me. As Freda Hall of Grand Rapids, Minnesota shared with me, the river is like magic because "it's always going somewhere, but it's also still here."

The river speaks through each of these women in their different places. Their stories intertwine and travel with the water; simultaneously going somewhere together while deeply rooted in place. Albertine Kimble has a deep love of the river. She is embedded in it and needs it to rebuild her home. But she is fighting climate change and human intrusion on coastal lands. She is fighting, but she is interested in talking. I hear her loud voice, leaning in, hands waving as an invitation to



Sally demonstrates the shape of the migas shell. Image courtesy of A House Unbuilt.

the party, as if to say “hey, let’s get together and talk about this and save our land!” The coastal restoration conversation is complex and feels like an impossible task, but a story like Albertine’s can spark another story or another person planting marsh grasses, mangroves, or trees in the Seventh Ward. Like Albertine, Angela Chalk is fighting. These are two strong voices raising the issue of climate change within their communities. Sitting with Angela, stories of family, community, and climate, all ran together along with her infectious laugh and finger wag emphasizing the close of a thought. Not only was her door open to us the day we met, but she welcomed us into her intimate life as if we were cousins or neighbors. For me, the trouble with both Albertine and Angela’s stories was feeling impotent to participate in the work they are doing on the ground. Telling their stories somehow feels like not enough.

Renita Green was another strong voice, perched on the edge of her chair, often squealing out about her situation. Like Angela, she is facing the challenges of being in Black community. The conversation she raises about privilege and being an outsider steering the needs of a minority community resonated with me as a white woman trying to share the voices of others. “It’s a hell of a struggle,” she says, as she’s facing it every day with her congregation and the homeless community that she is ministering to in Cape Girardeau. I feel I need to struggle more with it. I need to feel Renita’s words, movements, and struggles in my own work, and not gloss over the impact I might be having on the story of marginalized populations. In a less charged way, but with the same consideration, I am reflecting on Sally Fineday’s origin story of the Ojibwe. Like Angela, she welcomed us in such a familiar way, sharing personal

places, spaces, and stories while always smiling, nodding, looking ahead. In some indigenous cultures, their origin story can only be told by an elder or a specific person in the tribe, but Sally shared the sacred story of the migas shell with us, and now I am giving voice to her story through a different body. How do I acknowledge that?

Sally and Liz were drawn to the water to memorialize their ancestors. All these women were rooted in a place that reveals their stories. Each woman opened herself up to us, like Liz did when she took us to her “most beautiful place in the world” and told us about her family. Every story had a thread of the familiar for us strangers to flow through, like a gift from the river. Liz made her home in Crosby because of the water, the land, and her family lineage there. Home is an ever-present theme in each of these stories—whether it is a family home, a home one is trying to save, or an adopted home in which one is now deeply embedded. When I started gathering these stories I wondered, “What is home?” I underlined that question with the notion that just as all water meets, homes shaped by water would meet as well. The stories, words, and images here create an opportunity—a space for us to meet. While we can recognize that we may be from a different place, race, class, or situation, these stories show us we can build relationships through listening.

What I want to say to you is this: meet me where the river is going, friends. Let’s listen to the water, to our bodies connected to that space. Let’s listen to the way we move in this world and with each other, to our voices as we speak. Let’s listen to the places where the words and the movement meet.

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About the Author

Victoria Bradford Styrbicki (b. 1980) is an artist and cultural producer working across the lines of performance, research, and activism. She currently works as executive and artistic director of A House Unbuilt, a non-profit organization built around radical listening practices, a way of reading and writing movement from life through field and studio research. This work of “social choreography” has led to such noted projects as *Dinner Dance* (in collaboration with Hannah Barco), *Skirts* (in collaboration with Jessica Cornish), *Neighborhood Dances*, and most recently *Relay of Voices*. Victoria is now living and working in Stillwater, MN.