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PRIMARY SOURCES

OWÁMNIYOMNI: STILL WE GATHER

By Kachina Yeager, Shelley Buck, and Sage Yeager

Mni Wičoni. Water is life.

For many of us, water truly is synonymous with life—and not only because human life as we understand it necessitates water for survival. For me, as a Dakota person who also happens to be a poet, I think of water as a type of lineage. I can use waterways as a map that transcends borders of nationhood, of spatial and temporal constraint. In this way, water is a map of not only my life, but all those lives interwoven into the same cycle of

water. No matter where or when I begin this map, it starts with the Mississippi River: Ĥaħa Wakpa.

This river is a constant I return to again and again, as it always had been for my ancestors before me. And so a few years back, when our world and my personal life were both changing in ways dramatic and radically unexpected, I found refuge in the act of bringing myself to the water.



The falls and the lock. Image courtesy of Owámniyomni Okhódayapi.

This almost daily pilgrimage to the river brought me to the far edge of Nicollet Island, where you can see and hear Owámniyomni—also known as Saint Anthony Falls. In four different seasons and all kinds of weather, I walked from my Northeast Minneapolis apartment to the southeastern point of Nicollet Island where I would sing, talk to, touch, and just be alongside the river and the falls. After all, no matter how injured or sick, the river and the falls are relatives who deserve to know they are not alone, that they have not been left behind.

If the river and the falls are an ancestral attachment, then it is only fitting that it has morphed into a family affair for my mother, my sister, and me. We are each, in our own ways, not leaving our waterways behind.

On behalf of *Open Rivers*, I had an extended conversation with my mom and sister about their work at Owámniyomni Okhodayapi—a Minneapolis-based, Dakota-led nonprofit currently working to transform five acres of land at the site of the falls, a place that has been changed dramatically by the settler history and contemporary practices it has been subjected to. Currently, the falls are surrounded by the industrial remnants of Minneapolis' riverfront mill and lumber district, including the recently decommissioned Upper St. Anthony Falls Lock & Dam, and the ongoing bustle of the city's downtown.

At the center of the work my mom and sister do at Owámniyomni Okhodayapi is a deeper conversation about self, about ancestral inheritance, about Dakota history, connection to place and,



Oil painting, "St. Anthony Falls," done in 1857 by Danish-born landscape artist Ferdinand Reichardt. It shows the Mississippi River, looking upstream toward the gorge and St. Anthony Falls prior to alteration for locks and dams.

Image courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

moreover, to water. Our conversation begins aboard Amtrak's Empire Builder line with the three of us sitting at a table in the observation car somewhere between Red Wing, Minnesota and Winona, Minnesota.

[Kachina Yeager for *Open Rivers*] Would you please share a little about who you each are and about your connection to the place of Owámniyomni?

[Shelley Buck] I am Shelley Buck, president of Owámniyomni Okhódayapi and formerly a tribal leader for our community, Tinta Wita Prairie Island in Minnesota. I'm also your mother.

[Sage Yeager] I'm Sage Yeager, outreach and communications assistant at Owámniyomni Okhódayapi and also your little sister.

[KY for OR] And so how did you both come to be in connection with Owámniyomni, the place?

[SB] Well for me, I didn't actually know it was a sacred site and I hadn't ever been there before—

[SY] Me either!

[SB] But during my time as Prairie Island Tribal Council President, I was asked to serve on the Native Partnership Council at Friends of the Falls (the previous name of Owámniyomni Okhódayapi, OO), and it was there that I learned a lot more about the site's history and significance from other Dakota leaders and community members. As my last term on council was coming to a close, the former president of OO was stepping down and asked if I'd be willing to fill the position, and I happily accepted. Now, it's very much part of my goal to get this site and its Dakota history more visibility, especially within Minneapolis where it often feels like Dakota people are routinely forgotten.

[SY] [laughing] Yeah, and I just followed my mom into this work.

[KY for OR] [laughing] Classic little sister move. Y'know actually, I think I was the first one in our immediate family to form a connection with this portion of the river and the falls since I would come and visit it every day, walking Nicollet Island. I love that it's become a full family affair for us; it feels extra special. What's the Dakota name for that island again?

[SB] I believe Wašte Wita was the name associated with Nicollet Island.

[KY for OR] Oh Wašte Wita, the Good Island! It is a good island. I love being able to see the top of the falls from the island and hearing its rapids. It's fun thinking about how many times I've sat there and sent čaŋšaša [red osher dogwood bark, a traditional medicine for prayer, etc.] and watched it float down towards the falls themselves. Speaking of, how would you describe the place of Owámniyomni to someone who had never been there?

[SB] In its current state? It's pretty cold and not representative of the spirit of the place or of Dakota values.

[SY] Yeah, in fact, it's actually a pretty good representation of the impact of industrialization and the harm it has caused Indigenous communities and cultures.

[SB] Very true. I guess despite the destruction and loss of Wita Wanagi [[Spirit Island](#)], there's still very much a spirit and a presence there. These days, I think there's also hope here. We've got an eagle nest, three muskrats, and other species returning to the area. Now, because of our work, people that live around this area seem really interested and want interpretive tours or walks of the site to learn more, so I think there's an excitement here, too.

[SY] As far as a literal description of the place goes though, I would say the lock and dam built [at Owámniyomni] by the Army Corps of

Engineers really blocks any view of the falls from the city and from the public. You can see the remnants of Spirit Island. You can see parts of the [Mill City Ruins](#) there, too.

[SB] And yet there's no real place to actually connect with the water; it's actually very inaccessible in its current state.

[KY for OR] Right, right. I think that's one of the big things that feels so detrimental about how sites like Owámmiyomni have been treated—there's a deliberate disconnection from this body of water which serves the goal of making it feel less like a relative and more like background. It sort of feels like it works to obscure the history of the place, too.

Which kinda leads us into the next question pretty well: the [Owámmiyomni Okhódayapi website](#) shares a bit of the history of this place, but I'd love to hear from you two about the history of this place and its significance for Dakota people.

[SY] It has always been a significant site for Dakota people specifically, but also other various Indigenous peoples throughout time, too. It's been a place of feast, of prayer, of trading; it's known as a place of power. Wita Wanaği was a place that women would come to give birth, allowing for the spray of the falls to be part of their birthing process and rites.



*The view across the Upper St. Anthony Falls Lock & Dam to the river.
Image courtesy of Owámmiyomni Okhódayapi.*

[SB] I've heard some people call it an international treaty site, too, as various Indigenous nations throughout time would come and make treaties there. And then when the colonizers came, they realized the power of the falls and tried to harness it for monetary purposes, and that's when a lot more of the lumber and flour mills popped up and when much of the falls were destroyed.

They're about a third of the size they used to be. And actually, the falls, they moved throughout time—

[SY] Yeah, and the Army Corps has this narrative around that, that if they hadn't locked the falls in place with the dam, that they would've just been destroyed but—

[SB] Right, but they wouldn't have been! They would've just kept moving like they always did, like our people knew they did before. I've also heard stories of how there are water beings—Unkethi—that protect the waters that live there. And some say that when the tunnels that the settlers were trying to build underneath the falls area collapsed, that was Unkethi doing their job. And some elders tell that Unkethi is just one creature, but others tell there are multiple; it just varies from tribe to tribe and family to family.

[KY for OR] We've been talking a bit about the falls as its own place and site, but we've also been talking about Owámniyomni Okhodayapi, the organization. Could you talk a bit about how OO came into being and what it means for this work to now be Indigenous-led?

[SB] Well it really all originated in 2016 as the Saint Anthony Falls Lock and Dam Conservancy. It started because Congress deauthorized boat navigation at the site due to invasive carp working their way up the Mississippi. So, they needed to do a disposition study and convey the land to local ownership [rather than keeping it under federal authority through the Army

Corps of Engineers]. And because there was a hydropower company coming in called Crown Hydro, they wanted to put another hydro station [at the St. Anthony Falls, Owámniyomni]. The city and residents didn't want that, so that's when the organization [Saint Anthony Falls Lock and Dam Conservancy] started to fight that, and they were able to get passed through Congress in, I think 2018, through WRDA [Water Resources Development Act], that the land would be conveyed to the City of Minneapolis or its designee.

And from there, the organization went through some transitional names. They became Friends of the Lock and Dam, and then once they started doing community engagement, it really became more about the falls rather than the dam itself, so they became Friends of the Falls. And then, once they started doing more community engagement with Native communities and leaders through their Native Partnership Council (NPC), they started to realize that this place has this whole entire history involving the Dakota people at the site that they had no idea about. So that's when the focus turned to the four Dakota tribes in the state, hoping to give them ownership and making them the city's designee. The tribes ultimately didn't want legal ownership because why should they pay to restore stolen land? And that's when the then Friends of the Falls became the entity the tribes wanted to be named the City of Minneapolis' designee.

Then, when I came on, we decided we needed to change the name to be more reflective of this deep and rich history of Dakota culture here at the site. So, I reached out to a few language teachers for suggestions, surveyed the team and the board, and Owámniyomni Okhodayapi, which translates essentially to Friends of the Falls, was what we all landed on. And now our focus is working in partnership with the four Dakota tribes in Minnesota on what they want to see happen at the site, and they decided they wanted 100 percent land restoration. At one time,

Friends of the Falls’ goal was to build a visitor center, but since then, the tribes decided land restoration was much more appropriate for the site and the falls and so that’s the direction we’re following.

[KY for OR] Period. That sounds like the right direction then! I was just going to ask about what the primary goals of the organization are at this point, and it sounds like land restoration is up there at the top?

[SB] Yes, land restoration at the site. So that means bringing flowing water back to part of the area where it once was, bringing back native plants and animals to the site, bringing Dakota culture back to the site—

[SY] Well, and I would say bringing Dakota *people* back to the site and to Minneapolis in general, too.

[SB] Oh yes! And I think bringing Dakota values back to the site is important too, y’know? Bringing Dakota people, Dakota values—such as Mni Wiconi—and Dakota culture back to this site and into Minnesotans’ communal existence is the goal, too.

Which I think is a big part of this organization now being Dakota-led: it means a whole different direction for the site; it means it will be more natural, be more environmentally and economically sound; it’s going to be welcoming to all relatives. It means that the process itself has a different view—our design and engineering team is now centered by Dakota knowledge keepers throughout the entire process. They’re not just brought in once and spoken with to check off a box; they are present and central to the whole life of the process. There’s also now a three-part consensus-based decision-making model where there’s: the tribes represented by the Tribal Working Group; Owámniyomni Okhodayapi represented through the Program Advisory Group; and then the design team centered by the Dakota knowledge keepers. These three groups

together help steer the design and programming shared at the site. Obviously, the programming could impact the way the site should be designed, so if we think about things like having canoes and bringing back the practice of dugout canoes, we’d need to have something like a boat launch there, so it’s just important to have all these different people giving their input throughout the whole entire process so we think of things like this.

[KY for OR] Well, I know Owámniyomni Okhodayapi talks about the changes being made at the site as “seasons of transformation.” What are these seasons and why is this framing important? How does it change the way people think about and engage with this place?

[SY] So [the seasons of transformation] align with the four seasons of the yearly cycle. We begin with Season One: Winter, which is a time of storytelling and gathering information. We use it as a time of community engagement and that’s where the bulk of our efforts go in this season and where we do much of our research. Following this is Season Two: Spring, which is where the organization finds itself now. It’s a time when things come alive again; it’s the beginning of our programming at the site. It’s the time when the design and engineering processes have started.

We are interrupted by an announcement over the Empire Builder’s PA system. The conductor is telling us we can look out of the windows on the right-hand side of the train and see the Sugar Loaf in Winona, Minnesota.

“Let’s see what they have to say about this,” my mom remarks with the knowing tone of someone bracing themselves for the all-too-common misrepresentation of their culture, people, and homelands.

The conductor says the rock formation was human-made, but the rest of his sentence is garbled beyond recognition and hidden by the loud rumble of the train.

One woman asks the whole of the car which window to look out of. Sage points her to the right-side windows. My mom asks me if I know the Dakota name of the Sugar Loaf (I don't). The woman then asks the three of us if the rock is human-made, to which my mom says she doesn't think so, even though that's what the conductor had announced. I look it up later and find that the bluff—which is itself an important landmark in Dakota cultural history—is called Sugar Loaf Bluff, but the formation that marks its highest point is *also* called Sugar Loaf so the two are often conflated and used interchangeably, causing occasional confusion. While the bluff is naturally occurring, the strange landmark at the top is reportedly from the quarrying of the bluff early in the town's settler history.

My mom tells this friendly stranger that Sugar Loaf has a Dakota name, a Native name, that was thrown aside by settlers. The woman smiles and says it makes sense there would be a Native name because “that rock has clearly been around here longer than English have been.”

This develops into an exchange that reminds me of what makes my mom such a fantastic leader: her eagerness to learn is equally matched with her willingness to share and teach the things she learns to just about anybody. I forget that my phone is recording our conversation but when I remember all this has been captured, I know that it is going to be a recording I treasure for the rest of my life.

My mom tells the woman that the story of this bluff out our window is connected to a story about He Mni Čaŋ, Barn Bluff, in Red Wing. She says the bluffs were sisters, but the people were warring over the area and so one bluff went upriver and the other went down to keep the peace.

Mom turns to Sage and I and says, “Right?” We both tell her we think that sounds right.

She laughs and says, “Just wanted to check she wasn't accidentally ad-libbing.”

Sage laughs, too, and says, “Or mixing together two different stories; you do that sometimes.”

Our train car companion laughs and says, “Well, it's the privilege of the storyteller, right?” We all laugh, agreeing, as she adds, “Plus, you seem to have these two accountability buddies by your side.”

The woman asks my mom if this is her peoples' area, and my mom warmly and openly gives her a brief history of the Dakota people, this area, our home. The woman listens raptly, and it doesn't escape my notice that a few other passengers lean in to listen to this impromptu history talk. I love moments like this, where my mom, in all her confidence and charisma, still turns back to ask my sister and I if that sounds correct. She asks us to add to her stories, patch up parts that need it, and it feels like what the futures of our people have been built from for millennia.

Eventually, the train settles back into the rhythmic grind of wheels along the tracks and we return to Owámniyomni Okhódayapi and their seasons of transformation.

[KY for OR] So, we left off just after your second season, Spring, which was the time where things are coming alive again and is the stage the organization and site are currently in.

[SY] Right, okay, so that's followed by Season Three: Summer, which will be focused on transforming the site, especially through environmental restoration. It's the season when everything really starts coming to full growth and flourishing.

[KY for OR] Ah, it's that beautiful summer green lushness this river valley knows so well!

[SY] Right, right. That's then followed by Season Four: Fall, which is all about the ongoing life of the falls. It's where everything is implemented. By that stage, we're seeing programming and restoration in action. We'd love to see the site be tribally owned at that point, and really we are overall focusing on the longevity of the place and the connection to it.

[KY for OR] Very cool, I like it. I also just want to circle back to the portion of the question about why this framing as seasons is important in how it can change the ways people are thinking about and engaging with Owámniyomni?

[SY] I think it's just more aligned with the way Dakota people move through life.

[SB] Yes, exactly, and it's just more representative of a Dakota-centered worldview and way of being. I think our culture and values are more present in that representation, and I think they instruct us to treat relatives like the falls and the river better, and I think we hope that encourages people to follow suit. I think also when you break these ideas and goals into parts like this, like seasons, it makes it easier for people to digest and understand—

[SY] Right, like there's a certain intentionality there that feels like it's built to last longer.

[SB] Yes, and so far, it seems to have really only drawn people in.

[KY for OR] Well that leads perfectly again into my next question: I'm wondering what some of the key successes of this work have been so far, and also what some of the greatest challenges have been?

[SB] One of the key successes has been the enormous support we've gotten from the surrounding community: residents, the City [of Minneapolis], the Park Board, the National Park Service, the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Friends of the Mississippi River, the Mississippi Watershed Management Organization. We've also had support from the State of Minnesota, and a few foundations have donated, such as the Bush Foundation and the McKnight Foundation, the Saint Anthony Falls Heritage Board. I'm sure I'm forgetting some sources of support, but all that to say, we just have really great support and community behind us, which is absolutely a key success.

[SY] Oh, we also just signed that lease—

[SB] Oh right, we just signed the 25-year lease with the Army Corps which gives us site control and the ability to do site programming, which is all just a holdover until the land is conveyed to us permanently.

[KY for OR] Nice, well and if I'm remembering correctly there was something about the plat for the site that just happened recently?

[SY] Yes, the plat name was officially designated as Owámniyomni for our project site.

[KY for OR] Right yes, that's what I was thinking of! That's so cool. To sort of look at the other end of things here, what would you guys say are some of the greatest challenges so far and looking ahead?

[SY] The Army Corps of Engineers.

[SB] Yup, the Army Corps of Engineers. Also, the jurisdiction challenges. There's just so many different jurisdictions abutting the site, so working with those various stakeholders is a lot, especially when you consider the amount of time that our consensus-based model takes, and that's important to us.

[SY] Well and it's a process that is sort of just incompatible with the bureaucracy of the jurisdictional systems at play.

[SB] But yeah, ultimately, I would say the greatest challenge is the Army Corps. They have such particular processes they have to follow, and they also have a lot of challenges raising funds, so that's something we've had to try and help with. Not only for our work, but for theirs, too. It just makes things so much more complicated at every step.

[SY] And it ultimately makes it harder for us to fix the things that they've destroyed.

[KY for OR] What do you want people to know about this place and this work moving forward, especially non-native people and folks outside of Minnesota?

[SB] I want people to know the beauty and the power that's still there. I want them to learn about the Dakota culture and history of the site. I want people to be able to enjoy the full scope of what this place has to offer, just like our people have for so long.

[SY] I would say I'm hopeful that the work we're doing will shine greater light on the challenges that face Indigenous communities everywhere and demonstrate the hurdles and hoops we have to jump through when seeking justice of any kind, not only for ourselves, but for the land, too.

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[KY for OR] How can others support the work that Owámniyomni Okhódayapi is doing?

[SB] They can go to our website, owamniyomni.org, and sign up for our newsletter, follow us on social media, and check our site and pages for interpretive walks that we schedule at the site. They can participate in the Run with Respect (the last one took place September 22nd), and just keep an eye out in all those online places for volunteer opportunities as we get further along in our seasons. There's also a really great and easy-to-use [donate](#) button on our website!

[KY for OR] Awesome! Well, pidamayayepi, thank you for doing this process with me. Is there anything that I haven't asked about that you'd like to share in closing?

[SB] I think just that I'm really honored to be able to do this kind of work and to help one of our relatives, the falls, you know?

[SY] Yes, and I would add that I'm just excited for more Dakota people to return to this site. Just like how Mom and I didn't really know much about this place before we started doing this work—which is obviously a result of colonization and boarding schools and genocide—so it's a really beautiful and powerful thing to see people: Dakota people, able to come back here and build that ancestral connection again.

About the Authors

Kachina Yeager (they/them/she) is an enrolled member of Prairie Island Indian Community (Bdewakantuwaj Dakota) in Mni Sota Makoče and a full-time graduate student of poetry in the Creative Writing MFA program at the University of Minnesota, from which they also hold a Bachelor of Individualized Studies degree combining American Indian Studies, sociology, and Global Studies with a focus on Global Indigeneity. When not at home in Imniža Ska Othunwe (Saint Paul), in the classroom, in a book, or staring into the looming void of the blank page, they can most often be found at the banks of Ĥaħa Wakpa (the Mississippi River) watching ducks swim and trees grow.

Shelley Buck (she/her) is an enrolled member of Prairie Island Indian Community (Bdewakantuwaj Dakota) in Mni Sota Makoče and became president of Owámniyomni Okhódayapi in January 2023. Prior to this, she served for 12 years on the Prairie Island Tribal Council, including six years as president. She holds a variety of degrees, including a bachelor's of science from Indiana University, a master's of art from Concordia University, and a master's of jurisprudence in Indian Law from the University of Tulsa. Buck currently serves on the boards of the Minnesota Wild Foundation, Great River Passage Conservancy, Meet Minneapolis, and Wakaŋ Tipi Awaŋyaŋkapi in St. Paul. She also held the position of alternate regional vice president for the National Congress of American Indians.

Sage Yeager (she/her) is an enrolled member of Prairie Island Indian Community (Bdewakantuwaj Dakota) in Mni Sota Makoče and currently works as the outreach & communications assistant for Owámniyomni Okhódayapi (OO) in Minneapolis. Prior to joining OO, Sage owned and operated her own videography business specializing in wedding films and varied contract work with local entities such as Prairie Island Indian Community, where she also previously served as the tribe's enrollment clerk.