

# Tree Stories

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Figure 1: *Cottonwood tree, Chicago area* [shadow detail] © Marie Scatena

In this autobiographical essay memories, excerpts from oral history interviews and from books written by experts describe how trees and green space impact the tellers' lives. Thematic narrative threads reflect on the ways more than human life communicate with each other and with humans. These stories are about identity and change in the borders of large urban areas where trees not only define borders, they often indicate the health of a community. Intersubjectivity in oral history describes spaces where memories and sometimes new awareness and growth can occur—and how the co-creation of narratives embodies a sense of 'we.' This essay seeks to explore how aspects of oral history practice relate to the sciences, visual art and storytelling. Identity, belonging and the ethic or philosophy of ecological aesthetics are introduced as they relate to the lives of trees.

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When I was a child I played outdoors with my friends in a big, empty lot near our homes we called the 'prairie.' In it chunks of concrete and other construction materials were thrown near tree stumps. Banana spiders, earthworms and crickets lived among the debris and tall weeds. A small stand of eastern cottonwoods populated the corner of a golf course across the street from our house. In the summer and fall we were serenaded by the shushing of cottonwood leaves. In early summer breezes cottonwood seeds swirled like snow. The 'cotton' stuck to windows, door screens and in our hair. During long summer breaks from school I would sometimes lay across my parent's bed and look up through a window mesmerized by the cottonwood leaves fluttering against blue, blue skies. Some call cottonwoods 'dirty trees' but I love their deeply grooved, corky bark and nubby branches that scatter on the ground after thunderstorms. In urban forest preserves the cottonwoods messiness provides an edible cushion for chipmunk and squirrel nests. Cottonwoods are sometimes known as an invasive species because although they are native to the Chicago area their root systems can complicate home sewer systems. Many years later while sitting in a course for volunteer arborists I learned eastern cottonwoods are a species who like wet feet. Their towering crowns signaled that water was nearby to settlers crossing the tall grass prairies in covered wagons. This is a story I have been telling for decades. In my telling the cottonwoods get bigger and smaller but they remain together, unlike the solitary cottonwoods of the true tallgrass prairies. But we lived in a suburban-urban border zone then. Without the interference of humans, cottonwoods do not typically grow in forests. The wood of the eastern cottonwood is weak, its trunk is hollow. It doesn't live very long for a tree—only about one hundred years. In contrast to old-growth forests with layers of vegetation where life cycles are choreographed, cottonwoods thrive as pioneers in open spaces where they can get sunlight as they grow rapidly—80 to 100 feet tall—and water, they love water. Their leaf rustle reminds me a little of rushing water. These impressions are my ecological memories, my comfort memories, my nostalgic musings.

I discovered Irish artist Katie Holten<sup>2</sup> when I lived in New York City. Commissioned by the NYC Parks, The Bronx Art Museum and Wave Hill, Holten curated the TREE MUSEUM to commemorate the centennial anniversary of The Grand Concourse, a once elegant boulevard that is now a worn, concrete thoroughfare. Holten's project included an outdoor audio walking tour where people's memories of the Grand Concourse could be accessed via cellphone. Stories were connected to one hundred mostly scrawny trees along the Concourse. Audio guide users were rewarded with a majestic Cottonwood at the north end of the Concourse, thriving in its concrete world. Recently Holten rendered the precarious lives of trees and language in *A New York City Tree Alphabet*. Her work is a love song and call to action that points to the cooperative and regenerative qualities of trees. Which was why I moved from Chicago to New York City for graduate school—to revitalize my work as a museum educator and oral historian. I wanted to learn

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<sup>2</sup> Holten's idea to create a tree alphabet which could be used as a planting guide emerged from her own writing and public art project. *A New York City Tree Alphabet* is an interactive online guide <https://www.katieholten.com/new-york-city-tree-alphabet>.

how to collect and interpret stories from the perspective of a curator. Now I wonder about life stories from the perspectives of trees.



Figure 2: TREE MUSEUM sidewalk marker, Bronx, New York City © Marie Scatena

In New York I interviewed high school age students about their neighborhoods and what it was like to grow up in the city. In almost every interview there was a sense of what I call nostalgia for the present. Nostalgia for the present is my shorthand definition for *solastalgia*, a word coined to describe bittersweet feelings as a kind of homesickness evoked by environmental change. These teenagers described how green spaces in city parks and playgrounds they grew up in were disappearing. Their sense of loss was poignant because in times of ecosystem stability, humans live with seismic changes within their own bodies as they grow up; their sense of loss was powerful because they were aware the problems were global. Exactly one hundred years ago, in his book of short stories Wanderings: Notes and Sketches,<sup>3</sup> the Swiss-German author and philosopher Hermann Hesse articulated what I hoped to convey to those teens, 'Home is neither here nor there. Home is within you, or home is nowhere at all.' (Hesse, 1988: 53) Having ease within oneself seems like a luxury to many young people who are dealing with violence to their own bodies and to our earth. In another chapter of Wanderings: Notes and Sketches Hesse asserts that, 'Trees are sanctuaries. Whoever knows how to speak to them, whoever knows how to listen to them, they can learn the truth.' (Hesse, 1988: 53)

<sup>3</sup> The first edition of Wanderings, Notes and Sketches was published in 1920. It was a hybrid journal and diary. It included Hesse's poetry and paintings of trees observed during his trekking across Europe.



Young climate change activists hear the message loud and clear. They understand green canopies are a vital part of our home. In an interview last year with Chicago area high school senior Isabella Johnson and co-founder of *Illinois Youth Climate Strike* modeled after Greta Thunberg's Fridays for Future shared these thoughts about belonging and purpose:

'So many cities have such good green spaces—almost anywhere I could find a special place...and we're supposed to be stewards of the earth, to take care of the earth.'<sup>4</sup>



Figure 3: *TREE MUSEUM* Cottonwood tree, Bronx, New York City © Marie Scatena

<sup>4</sup> Isabella Johnson and her sister Olivia are organizers with several U.S. environmental groups.



Oral history interviews allow the narrator and interviewer to exchange energies. When that happens memories become tangible in the form of stories. The nuances that lie beneath the surface of words — body language, vocal tone, eye contact — amplify, deepen or sometimes tell an entirely different story than the narrator does with words. Like the underground mycorrhizal networks of trees, unspoken language in interviews and especially silences, give clues about what is important to an individual—what he loves and what he needs. Trees use their networks to share vital information about food sources — the availability of water, threats or imminent challenges from disease. How trees function and oral history practices have this in common — intersubjective relationships and reciprocity. Rarely do we consult trees for advice because our culture is not attuned to asking questions of trees. How do you listen and what do you listen for when you meet a tree?



Figure 4: Cottonwood tree, Chicago area wetlands [detail] © Marie Scatena

In The Songs of Trees: Stories from Nature's Great Connectors,<sup>5</sup> British-born American biologist and author David George Haskell shares insights about the significance of bioacoustics. Humans may be a visual species but, he says, '...sounds reveal things that are hidden from our eyes because the vibratory energy of the world comes around barriers and through the ground. Through sound, we come to know the place.' (Haskell, 2017: 192) Haskell details how tenacious roots of cottonwoods growing along river

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<sup>5</sup>Haskell lives and teaches in Sewanne, Tennessee, near old growth forests. His award-winning book The Forest Unseen: A Year's Watch in Nature details his scientific research there. The Songs of Trees: Stories from Nature's Connectors has a global focus. (2017: 192,179,142).

banks in Denver, Colorado purify water polluted from salt used to de-ice roadways. In this same passage, Haskell describes the relationship between beavers, cottonwoods and the Platte River. Haskell passionately asserts, ‘We have no deficit of nature, we are nature, even when we are unaware of this nature (Haskell, 2017: 179). He posits that if we are in right relationship with forests we would not have zootropic diseases.’ Haskell believes our tendency to focus on individuals at the expense of networks has led us to distance ourselves from nature. ‘Dogmas of separation fragment the community of life; they wall humans in a lonely room.’ This separation causes us to misunderstand our roles in the community of life. ‘Ecological aesthetics is not a retreat into an imagined wilderness where humans have no place but a step toward belonging in all its dimensions.’ (Haskell, 2017: 149)



Figure 5: Evidence of beavers, Chicago area wetlands [detail] © Marie Scatena

As the dominant species on the planet it is more important than ever to understand what it means to share our home. Haskell’s philosophy of ecological aesthetics is an ethical principle about the ability to perceive true beauty through an embodied, sustained practice in a particular community. *Openlands* Treekeepers are a collective of volunteer tree guardians. I joined this group to learn about trees—and maybe to find out how to communicate with trees.

As an *Openlands*<sup>6</sup> Treekeeper I prune and mulch trees and help to plant trees in Chicago’s communities. The city and surrounding area has about 70,000 acres of protected forest preserves. From any point in the

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<sup>6</sup>*Openlands: Conserving Nature for Life* <https://www.openlands.org> was founded in 1963 to preserve urban parks, forest preserves, prairies and lakeshores in Chicago and surrounding region. Openlands Treekeepers program began in 1991. It is a corps of trained volunteers.



city of Chicago you are less than twenty minutes from an urban forest. Stewardship of these forests is under the care of several groups, but care is still underfunded and understaffed—that is where Treekeepers are helpers. As in most big cities the built environment takes precedence over trees. The Chicago area has lost about one million trees due to disease and other factors in the past ten years and most have not been replaced. Worldwide 18.7 million acres of our earth's forests are lost every year—this is equivalent to 27 soccer fields a minute.<sup>7</sup>

I began treekeeping with *Openlands* out of a fondness for Chicago's green canopy, concerns about climate change and a wish to give back to the sources that literally help us to breathe. My treekeeping is also connected to a story my mother likes to tell. She remembers encountering California redwoods for the first time when she traveled there with her mother. The year was 1945 and she was twelve years old. Today she can instantly recall how those massive life forms impressed her — and worries about the conditions of those trees today. When my father died suddenly of a heart attack her eulogy likened their love of each other and family to an oak tree. So, as they say, I come by my love of trees naturally.

Chicago area pastel artist Mary Ann Tryzna paints landscapes. In our 2018 interview she describes how a tree, the environment and her process came together in an award-winning painting titled *Winter Tree*:

'...when I drive to the studio I go past several areas that are wooded or farm land or forest preserve. This was along farm land and it's this huge tree that is broken. But it's still a powerful looking tree. I was admiring it again today. A year or two ago, it was winter. It (the tree) is not in a place that's easy to pull off without worrying about your car getting stuck, but I pulled off and snapped a few pictures, and then I went into the studio. What I painted is more of an impression of this tree. The tree filled the space. It was winter time, so there were no leaves. And the interesting thing about a bare tree is the space it defines.'<sup>8</sup>

I later learned the broken tree was a symbol of grief and survival—and that what is not visible in an image is as powerful as silence is in a narrative.

To be an oral historian is to love the sound of stories. Listening to stories helps me to appreciate the complexity of life. So does working with trees. Both show me how our changing, often contradictory natures can provoke new consciousness. After decades of interviewing people I wonder now—what stories are trees telling us? Do they like living with humans? According to American Indian cultures, stories are alive. Stories are hard-working. They provide us with myths that guide us and form our understanding of the world.

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<sup>7</sup> *World Wildlife Fund* blog <https://www.worldwildlife.org/stories/what-s-a-boreal-forest-and-the-three-other-types-of-forests-around-the-world> and *Global Forest Watch* blog <https://www.globalforestwatch.org> post similar statistics. *Global Forest Watch* includes crowd-sourced data, real-time maps and dashboards. *Global Forest Watch* is an initiative of *World Resources Institute* <https://www.wri.org>.

<sup>8</sup>Mary Ann Tryzna is an award-winning pastel artist known for her Midwest prairie and lakeshore landscapes.

Robin Wall Kimmerer is a Potawatami Indian, a writer, and Professor of Environmental Sciences and Forest Biology. Her ideas about the power of stillness, and sustaining the lives of our most upstanding global citizens deeply impressed me. Her book Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants<sup>9</sup> sits at my bedside. Her way of being emanates from her words, 'I go to sit with my Sitka Spruce grandmother to think. I am not from here, just a stranger who comes with gratitude and respect and questions about how it is to belong to a place.' (Kimmerer, 2013: 212) I know that trees can and will tell us stories we need to hear now. If we sit with them and listen.

Fifty years ago two evergreens in my maternal grandparent's backyard stood like behemoth sentinels at the edges of a backyard patio where in the summer our family gathered for special meals. I loved the trees' piney smell and sticky cones, but some relatives worried the tree roots might damage the concrete patio and foundation of the house. My grandpa did not. His cherry tree with its shiny reddish-brown bark grew peacefully just a few feet away from the giant evergreens. Its maroon-colored cherries were sour, not like grocery store fruit. His cherry tree lived in the backyard with vegetable and flower gardens and smaller, younger fruit trees. The bond between my grandfather and his cherry tree was literally severed by a lightning bolt the year before he died. When the tree split almost in two it was the only time I recall seeing him cry. I was twelve years old then, and imagined the tree reminded him of growing up in the Croatian fishing village surrounded by groves of olive, cherry and chestnut trees.



Figure 6: *Olive tree, Kvarner, Croatia, 2014* [detail] © Marie Scatena

<sup>9</sup>Kimmerer's love of the nature and her activism grew out of her Potowattami heritage. She is a member of the Citizen Potowatomi Nation. Her teaching combines creative writing, scientific study and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK).





Figure 7: Backyard Evergreen tree, Chicago area, 1967 © Marie Scatena

He often referred to this place as home. A couple of years ago I learned about a Croatian origin story my grandpa likely heard about in his childhood. The most powerful Slavic god is called Perun. He is the god of the living world, sky and earth, and typically depicted as an eagle living atop a sacred oak tree keeping watch over the world. He is also the god of lightning and thunder. Myth says that the irises carpeting Croatian mountainsides grew in places where Perun's lightning struck the earth. I wish I had known to ask him about this, but by the time I understood he was long gone from this world.

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