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## PRACTICE

# "Downstream Effects"

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This poem describes a riverine flood that occurred on Salt Creek (the Little Des Plaines River), Brookfield, Cook County, Illinois (4th congressional district), US, as part of extensive regional flooding in the Chicago area on April 18–19, 2013. Both case report and epic, this hyperlocal work is a post-postmodern (metamodern) baroque exploration of human systems and sense-making as revealed through natural disaster. An update is provided in the author note. Three illustrations accompany this poem.

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**Keywords:** alienation; Chicagoland; climate change; environmental justice; flooding; gerrymandering; housing; land use; natural disaster; poetry; river; suburb

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### Downstream Effects

Look around. We're all  
on a need- to- know basis  
Whenever I think of it,  
I swing by. Who knows what  
she'll say  
or do. Today, the creek  
is meek, easily cros-  
sed in a bound;  
the next, roiling; then, skit-  
tering  
or teeming; still placid,  
a nar-  
row, svelte s,  
dashed on canvas  
to sug-  
gest calmness,  
quietude, a peaceful life



protocols, deployments, deadlines— before finance,  
 mapmakers, surveyors, builders,  
 investors came and went through  
 this afterthought town,  
 perpetually up- and- coming  
 latecomer, after perspective was lost,  
 before experience could be pas-  
 sed along  
 or gained,  
 quickly funded, expediently developed in response  
 to demand spikes,  
 last trainline tract built quickly  
 among its neighbors,  
 an enclave, an outpost, a fringe  
 of renters, starters, and others  
 living where we can— discon-  
 nected from/  
 recon-  
 nected to the city in new  
 ways, by ger-  
 rymander— in a val-  
 ley,  
 cool, sheltered bot-  
 tomland, trap-  
 ping ter-  
 ritory,  
 subdivided into pel-  
 letized property, PEZ plots,  
 songbird- abundant pass- through land,  
 carefully skirted  
 in native set-  
 tlement maps  
 [this poem was composed on land  
 native tribes, including the Chippewa, Ottawa,  
 and Potawatomi, held in safekeeping until 1816],  
 bound by the earlier, wiser, wealthier, higher. Old  
 Mother gets big-  
 ger, looming  
 from within a hud-  
 dled, captive audience



being the original trickster  
 Each reflective surface presages another  
  
 At night, we can-  
 not see  
 the broody pud-  
 dles expand, the network advance  
 We guess, each with our own  
 mental gauges, fil-  
 ling in accord with the too- near  
 tap of rainfall, which sounds dif-  
 ferent, calibrated  
 individually within each home. No glint,  
 no glim-  
 mer, no shine in the shadows,  
 though the level rises steadily, in unison,  
 concealing earth's variability  
 with new  
 uncertain  
 depths  
  
 Morning  
 reveals glossy, uniform surfaces in one palette  
 where before were limitless textures,  
 shapes, colors of our personal interactions  
 with habit, space  
 Until now, with the water  
 in motion, we couldn't see  
 how the earth was worn, shaped  
 by her hands  
 Old Mother's desire paths grow,  
 leaving her mark:  
 a fur-  
 row between yards,  
 an imprint snaking  
 beneath fence lines,  
 slip-  
 ping into garages  
 and under siding, waterfal-  
 ling over

poured slabs—  
 tracing  
 the old route. Freshly,  
 the earth feels her hands  
 working the clay, compressing corners,  
 crafting edges, pounding, pressing deeper  
 all the sweet spots,  
 confidently heeling in further than before,  
 swollen, sodden, as clear runoff  
 is replaced  
 by a new opacity  
 After a time,  
 the creek may well  
 catch a toe at the bend of the bridge, spraying,  
 spilling, washing over mushrooms, soft  
 and sturdy, a fairy ring, that flexes,  
 sways in a pressure-burst-release  
 cascade of sun-sparkle and foam  
 Sometime later, she may hook a knee,  
 looping to a resting squat,  
 full of energy, before standing  
 at full height  
 in the steady swing that announces:  
 The Show Has Begun  
 Small fish greedily follow Old Mother's angled,  
 swirling trails. Occasionally,  
 panfish are stranded, orphaned  
 and pocketed, trying to make sense  
 of a partial story from a loving,  
 but forgetful, parent, gasping, gaping,  
 their mouths tangled in another lesson  
 son

Unsure who is more out of place, we  
 eye one other  
 on the perpendicular

Out of bounds. The water is out  
 of bounds. The creek jumps  
 the bank. Those closest begin moving things  
 (Just in case) to higher shelves, rol-  
 ling rugs,

carefully set-  
 ting valuables on the steps up, warning  
 others to be careful, laughing, reas-  
 suring  
 themselves against paranoia, trying not to alarm  
 those who are not alarmed,  
 considering whether more should be done,  
 not wanting panic

to invite destruction,  
 left alone

with self-recrimination  
 and the renewed resolutions  
 of someone who

knows bet-

ter— having eliminated then allowed  
 wood, textiles, paper, electronics  
 in this place that is ours but not ours, or  
 ours but only temporarily, or  
 ours on loan,  
 during dry weeks only

We do what we can, put-  
 ting roots  
 down to stretch out wherever pos-  
 sible  
 for this short life, dig-  
 ging in, holding  
 on with money from tomor-  
 row's pockets [as  
 determined by underwriters]. Abruptly, we attune  
 to the sadness  
 of those who slept





asking/ not asking  
 for all the coat  
 and purse chairs. Everyone makes way,  
 moving aside or leaving, maybe grudgingly, maybe  
 with more options or bet-  
 ter plans anyway  
 Some can or must adapt,  
 match and embrace the spirit,  
 staying on

The rain slows  
 or even stops. The sun peeks in. The dog  
 always needs walking. One man goes out  
 for his Bet-  
 ter- be- double- bag-  
 ged  
 newspaper. Another  
 opens a beer. A young couple wanders  
 their now clean deck barefoot, wine glas-  
 ses in hand,  
 deciding whether/ when to open a fresh bot-  
 tle  
 An older couple sends the kids  
 to the store. Others roam to expand  
 the information radius  
 by foot and by pad-  
 dle or oar  
 Tilted and tucked away for just this day,  
 leaf-covered watercraft  
 whisk out, push off, and glide  
 from all directions

This is before explosive violence,  
 external concus-  
 sion and a disar-  
 ray  
 that descends stairs before ascending them,  
 switching back, like a rid-  
 dle, a prank,





in spring sunshine— in addition  
 to objects that must  
 have required an accomplice, surely  
 a two- person job  
 Although, if pres-  
 sed,  
 Old Mother, who denies nothing  
 and makes no promises, may just  
 find her  
 way around to admit-  
 ting, nearly brag-  
 ging,  
 that she did it all herself! She sure  
 could use a nice bench, a six- pack,  
 a flowerpot— and why not take up  
 smoking again at this point?  
 What are you gonna do about it?  
 Go on. Although she may break you if she can,  
 can't help but love her,  
 but don't expect her  
 to thank you for it

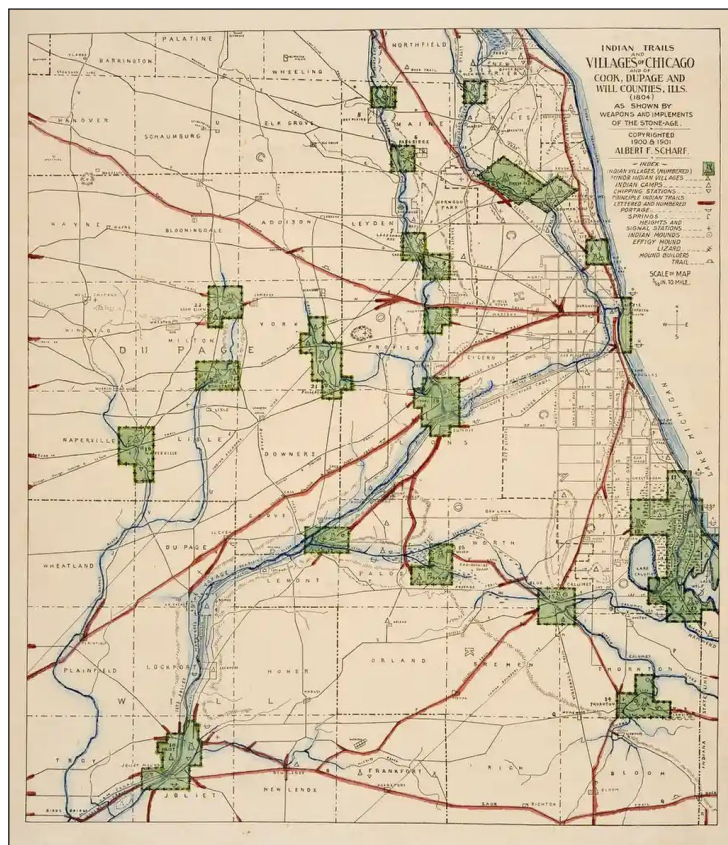
### Illustrations



April 19, 2013: Two green sunfish (*Lepomis cyanellus*) were found in the author's basement. Initially thought to be dead, they were safely and swiftly returned to the creek.



March 15, 2016: Brookfield (IL, US) Canoe Launch, Salt Creek Water Trails.



Scharf, A. F. (1900). *Indian Trails and Villages of Chicago and of Cook, DuPage and Will Counties, Ills. (1804): As Shown by Weapons and Implements of the Stone Age*. [https://news.wttw.com/sites/default/files/article/file-attachments/The\\_Scharf\\_Map.pdf](https://news.wttw.com/sites/default/files/article/file-attachments/The_Scharf_Map.pdf). Retrieved August 30, 2022.

## Author Notes

The Native American, Anishinaabeg (Nishnaabe, Neshnabé) tribes listed—the Council of Three Fires, representing the Ojibweg (Chippewa), Odawak (Odawa), and Bodéwadmik (Potawatomi)—and the date shown are from Kircher, M. G., ed. *Brookfield, Illinois: A History*,<sup>1</sup> in reference to the Treaty of St Louis (1816), 1 of 14 such treaties signed in the St Louis, Missouri, area.

The riverine flood described occurred on Salt Creek (the Little Des Plaines River), Brookfield, Cook County, IL (4th congressional district), US, as part of extensive regional flooding in the Chicago area on April 18–19, 2013, only a few years after the global financial crisis. Many local households that barely survived the manmade financial systems disaster were ruined by this natural disaster.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps surprisingly, the hero of the story in this case was business interests. The insurance companies that carry Federal Emergency Management Agency flood protection policies sued the municipality (along with many others) for illegally storing water in people's homes.<sup>3</sup> Although the lawsuit was dropped,<sup>4</sup> the willingness to act appeared to result in changes to federal flood mapping and improvements to the village's mitigation efforts,<sup>5</sup> despite inconsistent local cooperation in collaborative data-sharing and planning processes.<sup>6</sup>

Independent of community engagement and, relatedly, accurate property transfer disclosure data,<sup>7</sup> eventually the land tells us about itself. This poem addresses a personal reckoning of this kind—along with the concept and challenges of ownership amid ongoing displacements<sup>8</sup> that result from neglectful relationships toward nature and each other within larger, interconnected sets of often non-supportive human systems.

I believe this work will be of interest to others processing a flood experience, of which there are a great many within the United States<sup>9</sup> and, sadly, elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> It helps people to have our problems, experiences, and observations described when we are left wordless by climate trauma; we feel heard, understood, and better able to reclaim agency,<sup>11</sup> regardless of whether we feel or ultimately take the opportunity to join one another to 'rework ourselves' within a fuller understanding of place and human community.<sup>12</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Brookfield, IL: Brookfield History Book Committee, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Uphues, B. (2013). One for the record books. *Riverside-Brookfield Landmark*. April 23, 2013. Available at: <https://www.rblandmark.com/2013/04/23/one-for-the-record-books>. Retrieved August 30, 2022; Uphues, B. (2013). Brookfield offers help for flood control. *Riverside-Brookfield Landmark*. June 11, 2013. Available at: <https://www.rblandmark.com/2013/06/11/brookfield-offers-help-for-flood-control>. Retrieved September 12, 2022; Uphues, B. (2014). Brookfield's new building boom. *Riverside-Brookfield Landmark*. January 28, 2014. Available at: <https://www.rblandmark.com/2014/01/28/brookfields-new-building-boom>. Retrieved August 30, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Ziezulewicz, G. (2014). Insurance co. sues Will County, 12 towns over flood damage. *Chicago Tribune*. April 29, 2014. Available at: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/ct-xpm-2014-04-29-ct-flooding-lawsuit-bolingbrook-plainfield-tl-0501-20140429-story.html>. Retrieved August 31, 2022; Uphues, B. (2014). Insurance firm wants to recoup flood payouts. *Riverside-Brookfield Landmark*. April 29, 2014. Available at: <https://www.rblandmark.com/2014/04/29/insurance-firm-wants-to-recoup-flood-payouts>. Retrieved August 31, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Sabin Center for Climate Change Law at Columbia Law School. (2014). Illinois Farmers Insurance Co. v. Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago. U.S. Climate Change Litigation database. Available at: <http://climatecasechart.com/case/illinois-farmers-insurance-co-v-metropolitan-water-reclamation-district-of-greater-chicago>. Retrieved August 30, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Uphues, B. (201). Brookfield pump station a go for 2016. *Riverside-Brookfield Landmark*. February 2, 2016. Available at: <https://www.rblandmark.com/2016/02/02/brookfield-pump-station-a-go-for-2016>. Retrieved August 30, 2022; Uphues, B. (2021). Streets, basements flood after June 26

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- <sup>6</sup> Federal Emergency Management Agency. (2014). 3.3.19 Brookfield, Village of Summary (CID 170066). In *Flood Risk Report Des Plaines River Watershed, 07120004* (pp. 88–90). Available at: [https://map1.msc.fema.gov/data/FRP/FRR\\_07120004\\_20150115.pdf?LOC=3219173ee3df4b922844accfe8904d3d](https://map1.msc.fema.gov/data/FRP/FRR_07120004_20150115.pdf?LOC=3219173ee3df4b922844accfe8904d3d). Retrieved August 30, 2022; Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. (2018). *Lower Salt Creek Watershed-based Plan*. Available at: [https://www2.illinois.gov/epa/topics/water-quality/watershed-management/watershed-based-planning/Documents/LowerSaltCrk\\_WatshdPlan\\_Dec2018\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www2.illinois.gov/epa/topics/water-quality/watershed-management/watershed-based-planning/Documents/LowerSaltCrk_WatshdPlan_Dec2018_FINAL.pdf). Retrieved September 12, 2022; Cook County Department of Emergency Management and Regional Security. (2019). *Cook County Multijurisdictional Hazard Mitigation Plan*. Vol 2: *Municipal Annexes: Brookfield Annex*. Available at: <https://cookcountyemergencymanagement.org/sites/default/files/images/Brookfield%20Annex%202019.pdf>. Retrieved September 12, 2022.
- <sup>7</sup> Hersher, R. (2020). Living in harm's way: why most flood risk is not disclosed. *All Things Considered*; National Public Radio. October 20, 2020. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2020/10/20/921132721/living-in-harms-way-why-most-flood-risk-is-not-disclosed>. Retrieved September 13, 2022; Frank, T. (2021). Home sales need better disclosure of flood risk, experts say. *Scientific American*. February 2, 2021. Available at: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/home-sales-need-better-disclosure-of-flood-risk-experts-say>. Retrieved September 13, 2022; Natural Resources Defense Council. (2022). How states stack up on flood disclosure. Available at: <https://www.nrdc.org/flood-disclosure-map>. Retrieved September 13, 2022; Federal Emergency Management Agency. (2022). *Flood Risk Disclosure: Model State Requirements for Disclosing Flood Risk during Real Estate Transactions*. Available at: [https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema\\_state-flood-risk-disclosure-best-practices\\_07142022.pdf](https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_state-flood-risk-disclosure-best-practices_07142022.pdf). Retrieved September 13, 2022.
- <sup>8</sup> See note 2.
- <sup>9</sup> U.S. Geological Survey. (2022). Water resources of the United States: project alert postings. Available at: <https://water.usgs.gov/alerts/index.html>. Retrieved August 30, 2022.
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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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