

THE COMPLEX HISTORY OF PROTECTING A JEWEL: ORAL HISTORY
AND THE SAVE OUR SPRINGS MOVEMENT OF
LATE-TWENTIETH-CENTURY AUSTIN

by

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DEDICATION

To Jim, Charles, Heidi, and Kenny, for always making me laugh.

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I. INTRODUCTION

We would go in [the whirlpool], and...you had to hold your breath for so long, and you're twisting, you're going around, and then if you're not fighting it, you had to learn to enjoy it and embrace it, and just about that speed, it's something I really can't explain, but to have that water taking you and rolling you, sort of like rocking you, then you're just thrown out.... Within so many feet you had to get to the embankment on your left, because if you weren't able to get out of that water, it would take you (laughs).... Then...they had put a big tree with a rope, so...you could get on the rope and you're kind of on a slope, and you run and you get it, and then boom, you just let yourself go, and you were in the spring.¹

This childhood memory shared by environmental activist Susana Almanza about swimming at Barton Springs, a popular swimming hole in Austin, Texas, symbolizes much about environmentalism in Austin. Through its details and sensory imagery, it reveals the sheer joy of playing in the spring's notoriously cold waters and the meaning of the site to Almanza and generations of Austinites. Left unsaid, however, is that Almanza described the section of the springs just below the enclosed, for-pay pool, where the gushing waters cascade before they enter the Colorado River. This whirlpool section of Barton Springs did not (and does not) charge a fee, making it affordable for Almanza, who grew up poor in Austin's Mexican American community, and others whose families lacked the means to pay the entrance fee at the main gate. The natural setting and emerald waters of Barton Springs, while beloved to legions, thus reveal some of the different ways Austinites experienced, understood, and contested the environment and environmentalism in Austin.

The early 1990s campaign to codify protections to Barton Springs by the Save Our Springs Movement, or simply "SOS," arose in response to both ongoing processes and specific events in Austin's history. Throughout the 1980s, the vagaries of Austin's real estate market led to a series of development proposals for land over the Edwards Aquifer, a groundwater reservoir

¹ Susana Almanza, interview by author, Austin, TX, October 16, 2020, (Zoom).

that not only makes human habitation in South Central Texas possible but is also highly sensitive to pollution. Any water pollution makes its way through the aquifer's porous karst bedrock downstream to Barton Springs, which is fed by water from the aquifer.²

In 1988, events came to a head when a Louisiana-based oil exploration and mining company, Freeport-McMoRan, proposed a massive real estate development over the aquifer. The proposed 4,000-acre project comprised thousands of homes and apartments in addition to commercial space and three golf courses. The project's potential impact on downstream Barton Springs, coupled with Freeport-McMoRan's flamboyant and powerful CEO, Jim Bob Moffett, triggered a groundswell of grassroots opposition. This opposition culminated in a legendary all-night hearing before Austin City Council in June 1990, where hundreds of citizens testified to successfully persuade City Council to reject the proposed development. This was followed by an activist-driven petition drive in 1991 and 1992 to put a strengthened watershed ordinance, the SOS Ordinance, on a city ballot for Austin's residents to weigh in on the protection of Barton Springs. In August 1992, the SOS Ordinance was approved resoundingly at the polls, demonstrating Austinites' general support for strengthened water protection rules, particularly with respect to Barton Springs. The same election also saw the passage of bonds for an extensive wilderness preserve network.³

² "The Battle for the Springs: A Chronology," *Austin Chronicle*, August 9, 2002, accessed August 1, 2019, <https://www.austinchronicle.com/news/2002-08-09/99632/>. Barton Springs comprises four localized springs, including Barton Springs Pool, the most well-known of the four springs and what is commonly understood as "Barton Springs." See Gunnar Brune, *Springs of Texas*, Vol 1. (Fort Worth: Branch-Smith, 1981), 431-432. For more on the geology and geography of the Edwards Aquifer, see Gregg Eckhardt, "The Edwards Aquifer Website," accessed August 30, 2019, <https://www.edwardsaquifer.net/>. A definition of "karst," which was frequently used by my narrators, is as follows: "Karst is a type of landscape where the dissolving of the bedrock has created sinkholes, sinking streams, caves, springs, and other characteristic features. Karst is associated with soluble rock types such as limestone, marble, and gypsum. In general, a typical karst landscape forms when much of the water falling on the surface interacts with and enters the subsurface through cracks, fractures, and holes that have been dissolved into the bedrock. After traveling underground, sometimes for long distances, this water is then discharged from springs, many of which are cave entrances." "Karst Landscapes," National Park Service, last updated April 27, 2022, accessed January 30, 2023, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/caves/karst-landscapes.htm>.

³ "The Battle for the Springs."

SOS's highly visible opposition to the development has had a long-lasting effect on Austin's legacy and identity as an environmentally minded, progressive city. However, my thirty-two oral history interviews with environmentalists, political figures, developers, and adjacent actors (Appendix A) show that the legacy of this environmentalist victory is more complicated, with differing views of its impact that vary by neighborhood, race, and class.⁴ An analysis of interviews with six of the key players from the events, including three leaders of SOS, two Mexican American environmental activists, and one African American elected official, powerfully underscores these differences and shows how oral history can enrich the scholarship on environmental movements. The analysis also shows the theme of environmental justice as a thread throughout the interviews, underscoring that scholarship on SOS and other grassroots environmental movements is incomplete without a thorough investigation of environmental justice topics.⁵

Oral history-based scholarship on the environmental history of Central Texas during the period of my study often privileges countercultural elements (hippies, creatives, and agitators) over other themes. For example, J.B. Smallwood, Jr. (1987) prioritizes the colorful interviews of folklorist John Henry Faulk over his other three narrators when discussing two Texas water

⁴ See Geri Augusto, Wesley Hogan, and Danita Mason-Hogans, "Adapting Critical Oral History Methodology to Freedom Movement Studies," *Oral History Review* 49, no. 2 (August 2022): 251-282. Augusto, Hogan and Mason-Hogans define "adjacent actors," which I find useful for my study. They use the term "adjacent actors" to refer to opponents of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) activists in the Deep South in the 1960s, including White community groups, law enforcement, government, and journalists. The term is useful in the context of SOS because it captures the array of actors who opposed the movement, a group that went beyond real estate development interests to include politicians, journalists, and others.

⁵ For a definition of environmental justice, see Robert D. Bullard, "Environmental Justice for All," National Humanities Center TeacherServe, ca. 2000s, accessed November 22, 2022, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/nattrans/ntuseland/essays/envjust.htm>. Bullard defines environmental justice as "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies." For perhaps the earliest work on environmental justice that does not utilize oral histories, see Bullard's many publications as cited on <https://drrobertbullard.com/>.

projects from the 1960s and 1970s.⁶ Similarly, Karen Kocher's documentary (1993) on the political battles to protect Barton Springs emphasizes surreal scenes such as actors supportive of SOS costumed as rich developers and throwing cash to Barton Springs sunbathers.⁷ Turk Pipkin and Marshall Frech (1993) expand on Kocher in their publicly-directed pictorial history on Barton Springs, interviewing everyday visitors and opening new avenues of historical inquiry around segregation.⁸ This historiographic paradigm culminates in Joshua Long's *Weird City* (2010), which takes its title from "Keep Austin Weird," the "whimsical slogan intended to remind Austinites of their city's underlying sense of non-conforming quirkiness" that emerged around 2000 and was later co-opted for commercial purposes.⁹ Long shows that Austin's identity as "weird" transcends its environmental image while it concurrently influences how environmentalists frame themselves, demonstrating an awareness among environmentalists of the potency of this countercultural identity. These valuable contributions to the oral history-based scholarship demonstrate the important role of countercultural elements and actors in environmental movements and those actors' adoption of imagery and language to achieve

⁶ J. B. Smallwood, Jr., "Grassroots Oral History: Environmentalist Opposition in Two Texas Water Controversies," *Oral History Review* 15, no. 15 (Fall 1987): 97-114.

⁷ Karen Kocher, "Common Ground: The Battle for Barton Springs" (documentary), (master's thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1993), accessed September 11, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dkZqUqIe__0. To be fair, Kocher includes adjacent actors such as real estate professionals. In addition, Kocher's more recent scholarship investigates racial integration and the crucial role of women in protecting Austin's natural spaces. Karen Kocher et al., "Living Springs Presents Barton Creek Time Stream: The 50+ Year Struggle to Protect Our Creek," accessed August 29, 2022, <https://bartoncreektimestream.org/>. Karen Kocher et al., "Living Springs," accessed February 20, 2020, <https://livingspringsaustin.org/>. "Origins of a Green Identity," produced and written by Karen Kocher and Monica Flores, originally aired on PBS Austin, 2021, available on Living Springs Channel, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQNrdLTvIFc>. In other recent scholarship, Ed Crowell situates countercultural forces within the context of the water conservation versus development paradigm in the pictorial *Barton Creek*. Ed Crowell, *Barton Creek* (College Station, Texas A&M University Press, 2019), Texas State University.

⁸ Turk Pipkin and Marshall Frech, ed. *Barton Springs Eternal: The Soul of a City* (Austin, Texas: Softshoe Publishing), 1993. Likewise, see William Scott Swearingen, Jr, *Environmental City: People, Place, Politics, and the Meaning of Modern Austin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010). *Environmental City* describes Austin's sense of place as a "green" city, centering the political ascendance of the city's mainstream environmental activists, particularly women.

⁹ Joshua Long, *Weird City: Sense of Place and Creative Resistance in Austin, Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 16.

success. By transcending this countercultural lens, scholars might widen our understanding of environmentalism in Austin.

Oral history-reliant scholarship at the national level also illustrates how narratives attuned to countercultural self-identification can describe the complicated history of environmental movements.¹⁰ Adam Rome (2013) centers the grassroots passion and eventual careers in environmentalism of participants in the first Earth Day (1970). Rome occasionally alludes to alternative visions of environmental justice, but it is a minor topic of inquiry.¹¹ Frank Zelko (2013) centers countercultural factors, foregrounding Green Peace's highly visible campaigns and revealing the activists' awareness that a countercultural identity could in itself be an effective public relations strategy, not unlike Long's findings in *Weird City*.¹²

Oral historians began to focus on broader roots and branches of environmental justice activism in earnest in the 1990s. In her foundational work, Eileen Maura McGurty (1997) examines the collaboration of White landowners with African American civil rights leaders to oppose the construction of a hazardous landfill in North Carolina.¹³ Ramachandra Guha (2005) exhorts environmental scholars to move beyond their insider status within mainstream environmental movements and research topics such as the urban environment and the environmental degradation caused by consumerism. This reflects an awareness of what Guha calls the "insularity" of environmental movements that in turn influences scholarship written by

¹⁰ For other work on this topic that incorporates a small number of interviews, see Jennifer Thomson, "Surviving the 1970s: The Case of Friends of the Earth," *Environmental History* 22, no. 2 (April 2017); and Susan Zakin, *Coyotes and Town Dogs: Earth First! And the Environmental Movement*, 3rd ed. (New York: Viking, 2018).

¹¹ Adam Rome, *The Genius of Earth Day: How a 1970 Teach-In Unexpectedly Made the First Green Generation*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013).

¹² Frank Zelko, *Make It a Green Peace! The Rise of Countercultural Environmentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹³ McGurty, Eileen Maura, "From NIMBY to Civil Rights: The Origins of the Environmental Justice Movement," *Environmental History* 2, no. 3 (1997): 301-323.

environmentalists.¹⁴ Eliot Tretter's study (2016) of Austin's displacement of communities of color shows the perils of congratulatory environmentalist history. His discussion of the University of Texas's role as a gentrifying land developer calls into question the past and future costs of prioritizing powerful interests over community needs.¹⁵ This theme is echoed by scholars such as Katherine Leah Pace (2021), who shows how water resources have long divided and displaced Austinites of color.¹⁶ Furthermore, Leslie Kemp Poole (2015) discusses the topics of worker health and polluted groundwater through two oral history interviews with women, further demonstrating the value of oral history in documenting important, and until relatively recently, overlooked stories.¹⁷ These scholars show that oral history can reveal new topics for scholarly discussion and increase an awareness of the myriad ways that communities experience the environment. They also guide this study toward more fully appreciating the SOS movement, its victories, and its tradeoffs.

It is through this wider lens of environmental justice that I have conducted my study on SOS. I argue that, while SOS was a resounding success in many respects, Austinites remember its outcomes as less positive and even deleterious on communities whose role in SOS was secondary. The successes of SOS are widely acknowledged: improved environmental safeguards, belief in the power of democracy, the political ascendancy of environmentalists, and the

¹⁴ Ramachandra Guha, "Movement Scholarship," in "Anniversary Forum: What's Next for Environmental History?" *Environmental History* 10, no. 1 (January 2005): 40-41.

¹⁵ Eliot M. Tretter, *Shadows of a Sunbelt City: The Environment, Racism, and the Knowledge Economy in Austin* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016). While not oral history-reliant, Andrew M. Busch has done important work arguing that Austin's historical prioritization of the natural environment supported business interests at the expense of the city's minority communities, exacerbating environmental hazards and displacement from long-time neighborhoods. See Andrew M. Busch, "Entrepreneurial City: Race, the Environment, and Growth in Austin, Texas, 1945-2011," PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, and Busch's 2017 book *City in a Garden: Environmental Transformations and Racial Justice in Twentieth-Century Austin, Texas* (2017).

¹⁶ Katherine Leah Pace, "Forgetting Waller Creek: An Environmental History of Race, Parks, and Planning in Downtown Austin, Texas," *Journal of Southern History* 87, no. 4 (month 2021): 603-644.

¹⁷ Leslie Kemp Poole, *Saving Florida: Women's Fight for the Environment in the Twentieth Century*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015).

entrenchment of an environmental ethos within Austin's cultural identity. The downsides are less frequently discussed: neglect of issues central to an understanding of "the environment" in communities of color, prioritization of environmental protection in wealthy areas, gentrification and the resulting displacement in communities of color resulting from development restrictions, and a sense of betrayal felt by activists in those communities with respect to mainstream environmentalists. The interviews in my study investigate these topics and reveal how these factors are discussed and experienced by narrators and their communities. They underscore how oral history can challenge widely accepted narratives to enrich the historical record and theorize environmentalism through the voices of both prominent and everyday people who lived the movement.

My study builds on and departs from the existing methodology in several ways. With my focus on a specific point in time (1990-1992, the heyday of SOS) and its reverberations in the present, I center a discrete event and its present-day meaning to the narrators in my study. I am seeking answers to how, why, and with what impact my narrators experienced this inflection point and how they view it today, with the discussion pivoting around the foiled Freeport-McMoRan development. In addition, while other scholarship on Barton Springs often includes oral history interviews with the people I interviewed, those interviews took place in the more distant past. In this sense, my interviews provide a level of introspection that the participants have gained over time. Naturally, such after-the-fact interviews have the potential for compromised objectivity: after thirty years, memories have evolved and events are blurrier, a factor with which all oral historians contend.¹⁸

¹⁸ For a discussion on the problem of distortion in the memories of narrators in local oral history projects, see William L. Lang and Laurie K. Mercier, "Getting It Down Right: Oral History's Reliability in Local History Research," *The Oral History Review* 12, no. 12 (1984): 81-99. Lang and Mercer contend that "of importance here is

In addition to factors related to time and its passage, my method departs from previous scholarship through its content goals. My interviews are highly exploratory, so that the participants have the opportunity to share insights that can foster positive collaboration in the future.¹⁹ I believe this interview style reveals new insights that enhance our understanding of events. I also delve deeply into questions about the relationships between the mostly-White leaders of SOS and two Mexican American and one African American leader to highlight the ways that these dynamics influenced the sustainability of SOS in the long term. Such interviews shed light on how environmental and social movements of the future can succeed with an approach that incorporates the goals and values of all affected communities.

I present my findings in a three-pronged approach. Throughout, I provide background on narrators to demonstrate the varied ways they arrived at an appreciation of the environment and their motivations for engagement on environmental issues.

The first section discusses interviews with three prominent leaders in SOS, Brigid Shea, Bill Bunch, and Mark Yznaga, to demonstrate the leadership skills required in achieving its successes. I do this to tell the SOS story in a way that honors these leaders' talents, experience, and passion, and gives guidance to future environmental activists. Through this analysis, I also reveal some of the ways that White SOS leaders were aware of the importance of bringing non-White communities on board and how that unfolded; this analysis adds dimension to the established narrative of SOS and its outcomes on environmental protection.

what the narrator has experienced *since* the decades-old events took place, for what happened during the intervening years can affect how they present their memories.”

¹⁹ Long, *Weird City*, 5. Long also conducted exploratory interviews and relies on the definition by Margaret LeCompte and Stephan Schensul. See LeCompte, M.D., and J.J. Schensul, *Designing and Conducting Ethnographic Research*, vol. 1, *Ethnographer's Toolkit* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1999), 145-146. He writes that exploratory interviews “are relatively unstructured in advance, are designed to permit an open exchange between the researcher and participants in the study, allow the researcher to explore areas, cultural domains, or topic of interest in great depth without presupposing any specific response or conclusions, and are likely to reveal new points, directions, and ideas for further exploration.”

The second section discusses aspects of environmental justice with respect to SOS through the lens of interviews with two leaders in Austin's Mexican American community, Susana Almanza and Daniel Llanes. Almanza and Llanes shed light on the most pressing environmental concerns in Mexican American communities, such as industrial pollution, and the political coalitions that formed with SOS to address them. Their interviews also underscore the longstanding disconnect between SOS and the Mexican American community regarding what constitutes "the environment" and the importance of human beings within this definition.

The third section analyzes an interview with Jeff Travillion, president of Austin's branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the early 1990s, to understand the collaboration between his organization and SOS. His interview reveals the successes and contradictions of the relationship with SOS, expanding on the themes revealed by Almanza and Llanes to incorporate issues such as job creation that intersect with protection of the environment.

I conclude by summarizing the major themes and questions that my study has provoked. The interviews in my study show the power of oral history to uncover topics of relevance today while enriching the historical narrative and contributing to the scholarship on environmental movements.

II. SOS LEADERSHIP: THE STORIES AND INSIGHTS OF THREE KEY ACTORS

The story of the SOS environmental movement is a story of the people whose passion, talent, and persistence propelled its victories against environmental degradation. SOS's success depended on many roles and tasks, and the wide range of backgrounds and expertise within the ranks of its leadership reflects this. Oral history interviews point to how environmental movements accomplish their goals in the face of daunting obstacles. The three leaders who are the focus of this study include Brigid Shea, who was the public face of SOS, Bill Bunch, an activist and attorney who drafted key documents in the SOS battle, and Mark Yznaga, a political consultant whose skills propelled SOS's victories.

Interviews with these leaders also reveal an awareness of the movement's complicated interplay with issues of race, class, gender, and geography. The interviews show that the mostly White leadership of SOS acknowledged the importance of environmental problems in communities of color and engaged with non-White leaders to address them. However, this outreach was a relatively minor part of the events and goals of SOS. Further, there were fundamental differences in the very meaning of "the environment" to these different communities. Through an investigation of topics affecting non-White communities in interviews with three SOS leaders, this study heeds the advice of Guha, that scholars of environmental movements should investigate topics that are "neglected by the movement as a whole," including urban problems such as environmental hazards, gentrification, and displacement.²⁰

The primary spokesperson for SOS was Brigid Shea, a former reporter and press secretary for a national peace movement in Washington, D.C. Born in 1955, Shea grew up in North Dakota with a reverence for the environment. Her father once took the family on a

²⁰ Guha, "Movement Scholarship," 40.

vacation to retrace the steps of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, and Shea spent part of one summer with her sister in a tepee in the Colorado mountains. In 1988, Shea accepted a job in Austin with the advocacy organization Clean Water Action after reading an article on the greenhouse effect. “The front-page story in *The New York Times* was so alarming,” she said, “I literally dropped what I was doing and decided we all have to work on this issue or we can measure our coffins and get in.” With Clean Water Action, Shea organized communities in Texas that were fighting hazardous waste dumps and other environmental problems. The Barton Springs battle was “the talk of the town,” highlighted in a series of articles in the *Austin Chronicle*. Shea’s growing awareness of the issue drew her to the June 1990 all-night hearing on the Freeport McMoRan development over the Edwards Aquifer, where she spoke at 12:30 in the morning. She recalled,

There were businessmen with briefcases and young children and African Americans and Hispanics and people of all age range and income level and background, and I was really taken by how broad a popular uprising this appeared to be. I literally at that moment decided to make Austin my home....I just thought, ‘Any place that cares this passionately about protecting a natural spring is a place I want to call home.’²¹

Shea’s memories reveal an understanding of the ways that environmental priorities in Austin, as embodied in the all-night hearing, cut across racial, class, gender and age divides.

Two political consultants who were also leaders in SOS, Mark Yznaga and David Butts, recognized Shea’s talent and tapped her to lead the movement as it gained momentum after the all-night hearing. Said Butts, “I think we sat down and talked with her and basically concluded that she was the one, and we were right. (laughs)” Butts continued, “So she became a voice, and she had a speaking skill because she’d been a...reporter..., and so she could give as good as she got, you know, which was important, because this was going to be a storm and we knew it’d be a

²¹ Brigid Shea, interview by author, Austin, TX, August 23, 2019.

storm.”²² Butts remembered his and Yznaga’s political intuition in recognizing Shea’s abilities, as well as the skills and toughness required for her role.

Shea’s public persona came with a price. She recalled receiving harassing phone calls, having her car vandalized, enduring vitriol from radio shows, and being spied on through her phone and outside her home. She recounted a particularly troubling incident after allegations that she had violated FCC (Federal Communications Commission) law for tipping off the news media about a tape recording of two real estate developers scheming to delay the SOS vote. “And sure enough, the FBI called me and wanted to interview me about this. This knowledgeable legal person had recommended a really good lawyer, and he represented me for free, but it was terrifying.”²³ Said Bill Bunch, an attorney who was instrumental in drafting the SOS Ordinance approved by voters in 1992, “I think Brigid, as a newcomer and as a woman and as our main public face on the effort, ...she took the brunt of it.”²⁴ Bunch thus revealed the complicated gender dynamics within SOS. Many of its prominent participants were women, yet Brigid, as its public face, was also most susceptible to opponents’ attacks. Shea later reached political success through her election to Austin City Council in 1993 (when Austin had an at-large system) and election to the Travis County Commissioners Court in 2014 (Travis County encompasses much of the Austin metro area), showing the long-term impact that SOS leaders have had on the political landscape of Austin.²⁵

Bill Bunch, who was born in Texas in 1960, was almost as well-known to the public as Shea. Bunch developed an environmental ethos as a young teen spending time with a Boy

²² David Butts, interview by author, Austin, TX, June 26, 2020.

²³ Shea, interview by author.

²⁴ Bill Bunch, interview by author, Austin, TX, July 30, 2020, (Zoom).

²⁵ Travis County, “Commissioner, Brigid Shea: Precinct Two,” accessed April 17, 2023, <https://www.traviscountytexas.gov/commissioners-court/precinct-two#:~:text=Shea%20was%20elected%20to%20and,Environmental%20Excellence%20award%20in%202010.>

Scouting family who lived next door to his family in Arlington, Texas. “They were basically hippie environmentalist Scouters. I kind of, I guess, absorbed it there.” After Bunch earned a law degree at the University of California at Berkeley, he moved to Austin for its music scene and began working for a prominent environmental lawyer while volunteering with Earth First! and other environmental groups.²⁶

Prior to his involvement with SOS, Bunch worked on issues pertaining to endangered species such as the golden-cheeked warbler. That experience, coupled with his knowledge of California’s groundbreaking plan to preserve endangered species habitat while allocating land for development, showed Bunch a path to environmental protection in Austin. “We knew there was no way we could fight every single development one at a time, and that we really needed to kind of corral the effort into a larger planning exercise,” he said. “Since there were multiple species, that made it particularly suitable for that approach.”²⁷ The topic of land conservation reappeared several times in Bunch’s interview, demonstrating its important parallel role alongside the battle to protect Barton Springs and harkening back to the scholarship of Crowell, whose work highlighted the critical role of land conservation in environmental protection.²⁸

Bunch’s involvement with SOS began at a time when environmental groups in Austin were not a cohesive force. “Everybody was sort of in their silos,” he said. “Then Brigid moved to town and...was setting up the Clean Water Action shop. The Save Barton Creek people [a local environmental group] seemed very threatened by that, and there was definitely some turf battles here and there.” Developers played the groups off against each other, Bunch thought, and “it just became really obvious that we had to get everybody on the same page and stay together or we

²⁶ Bunch, interview by author.

²⁷ Bunch, interview by author.

²⁸ Ed Crowell, *Barton Creek*.

were just going to continue losing battles and the war.” Bunch and others helped organize the disparate groups, and Bunch was instrumental in drafting a position paper, the precursor to the 1992 SOS Ordinance, that most of the groups ultimately signed, signifying a united front.²⁹

Bunch spoke relatively early at the 1990 all-night hearing, at which hundreds of citizens spoke against the proposed McMoRan Barton Creek development, and he remembers the evening well. “There was a little cafe below the council chambers. It closed, I don’t know, at 10:00 or 9:00 or something, but they left the space open....I went down there and took a nap for a while, like 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning, so I did miss part of it. (laughs) But otherwise, I was there for the whole thing.” The outcome of the City Council vote was not guaranteed, and the political tides ebbed and flowed throughout the evening as the developer’s attorneys were in constant contact with City Council members on the dais.³⁰ Bunch’s memories speak to the dramatic nature of the hearing and highlight one of the major reasons why SOS acquired legendary meaning for those involved.

The outgrowth of the 1992 election approving the SOS Ordinance was but one step in larger environmental wars. Bunch and others knew that the Texas Legislature would challenge the SOS Ordinance. To provide a legal structure to address these attacks and advocate for other environmental issues, in 1992 the group incorporated as a tax-exempt entity, the Save Our Springs Legal Defense Fund. Later in the 1990s they changed the name to SOS Alliance, with its original board comprised of leaders from the SOS campaign. Today the SOS Alliance is an important player in environmental debates in the Austin area, demonstrating the enduring appeal of its mission of environmental protection.³¹

²⁹ Bunch, interview by author.

³⁰ Bunch, interview by author.

³¹ Bunch, interview by author.

Bunch saw the legacy of SOS as a multi-faceted story with both major victories and unintended consequences. For Bunch, who had long advocated for land conservation as a strategy to protect endangered species habitat, one of the biggest successes was the approval of bonds for the Balcones Canyonlands Conservation Plan at the same election as the 1992 SOS Ordinance election. Several times during the interview, he expressed regret that SOS activists and others had not taken the opportunity to raise funds for the purchase of additional acreage, reinforcing that the SOS Movement was not solely about Barton Springs, although that was the most resonant aspect of its momentum.³²

SOS also persuaded the business community that protecting the environment was good for the local economy, with unforeseen results. Bunch said, “So they [the business community] flipped and adopted it as an argument, not so much as an actual worldview. (laughs) So...they’ve sold Austin big time as being...clean, green, and friendly, and our development has exploded. You can attribute a huge part of that explosive growth, ironically, to the Save Our Springs Movement.” Bunch underscored the necessity of working with the business community while recognizing that this outreach contributed to the most pressing problem in Austin today, that of managing the city’s supercharged population growth.³³

The SOS Alliance later supported Smart Growth, a 1998 initiative that advocated for real estate development east and downstream of the Edwards Aquifer. Said Bunch, “As more development was pushed back out of the watershed and the Chamber [of Commerce] just kept selling Austin, to phenomenal success, that development pressure ended up in resulting in a lot of displacement in East Austin. So...there was downside, and there’s definitely been people pointing fingers at SOS as the cause of that....It played a role, there’s no doubt about that, but

³² Bunch, interview by author.

³³ Bunch, interview by author.

I'm not convinced that it would have happened too much differently otherwise.” The fact that the SOS Alliance received criticism for its support of Smart Growth speaks to the endurance of the SOS Movement as a motivating force in Austin’s legacy, a legacy that far outlasted the conservation fights of 1990 and 1992. Bunch remains ambivalent about the legacy of SOS. While he acknowledged that SOS may have factored in East Austin residents’ displacement, he hinted that development pressure would have occurred with or without the SOS Ordinance.³⁴

Mark Yznaga, a political organizer, was another key leader in the SOS campaign whose voice adds to the discussion about the missed opportunities and unintended consequences of SOS. Born in 1956, Yznaga absorbed a political mindset from family members. “My...older sister was very involved in a lot of politics in San Antonio....My father was in the Strategic Air Command, and so I learned geopolitics from him, politics of nuclear war and other things, as a child.” The family moved a dozen times because of his father’s career, returning at times to San Antonio, where members of Yznaga’s extended family lived. According to his memory, his father’s influence was profound. “He was extraordinary,” Yznaga remembered of his father. “But from him I think I learned strength and strategy.” In Yznaga’s self-narration, his pride in his family members’ careers was the basis of his own political engagement and the exceptional political insight he contributed to SOS.³⁵

Yznaga’s career during the heyday of SOS developed through his role as an aide to an Austin City Council member, Gus Garcia, whose 1991 runoff campaign Yznaga ran. Garcia was “a much-revered older Hispanic leader, and I was this youngish kid who had connections to some of the other parts of town and he really wanted both parts of town to come together more.” Perhaps referring to his ties to Austin’s White community and its communities of color, Yznaga

³⁴ Bunch, interview by author.

³⁵ Mark Yznaga, interview by author, Austin, TX, July 14, 2020, (Zoom).

prioritized collaboration across the different racial and ethnic communities in Austin; as a Hispanic man raised in a household where both parents had learned English in school, Yznaga was well positioned to assume his new role. Yznaga expressed pride in the independence and strength of the Basque community from which he hails, showing that he occupied a complicated ethnic category in the context of Austin, that of having a Spanish-speaking heritage that diverged from the local Mexican-American culture.³⁶

Yznaga also sympathized with the environmental community, among whom he counted friends. He wisely recognized the opportunity posed by the battle to protect Barton Springs. “If we did a [voter] initiative, even if the initiative didn’t succeed, the organizing effort alone would create a larger voter base...that would participate in elections and then further elections, and we could actually change the direction for the membership of the city councils in the long term.” This demonstrates Yznaga’s interest in issues that transcended mainstream environmentalism and his desire to effect long-term cultural change. Due to the contentious nature of battles at City Hall between developers and elected officials, and Yznaga’s position in the thick of it, he left his role with the City of Austin to take command of the fledgling SOS campaign.³⁷ Yznaga today receives much of the credit for successfully bringing together the fragmented environmental community as a coordinated political force that led to other changes, and his memories underscore this legacy and his ability to envision the galvanizing potential of SOS.³⁸

Yznaga also recalled his role during the heady, challenging first days of the SOS campaign, when many of the early activists lacked political training. “We had to both move this thing forward and then forge a group that would work together—a lot of these people were at

³⁶ Yznaga, interview by author.

³⁷ Yznaga, interview by author.

³⁸ “Memoirs of a Movement: Remembering the Campaign to Save Barton Springs,” *Austin Chronicle*, August 3, 2012, accessed August 1, 2019, <https://www.austinchronicle.com/news/2012-08-03/memoirs-of-a-movement/all/>.

odds and had really serious issues with each other—and then prepare for everything that came. It was a whirlwind over the years.” Not everyone stayed on board: “SOS, which was not an organization at all one year, it became the most prominent the next year, so it was a little hard for some of the other organizations and some of the other leaders, and some of them never recovered from that.” Yznaga’s skillset was ideal for the challenge; he once kicked several activists out of a meeting due to their arguing. Yznaga also saw that one way to increase membership was to encourage couples who were engaged in environmental activism to join the burgeoning organization, one of the more interesting aspects of SOS:

Putting together a group is pretty hard, because people don’t have time. They have to do things with their significant others, whatever. So I had this crazy idea that maybe we should have couples, and there were a number of them in the group, at least four couples, and the whole board [of the early SOS coalition] is what, twelve or something. So it was a strange way to start an organization, but it made it sustainable.³⁹

This strategy reflects the creative ways that Yznaga thought about the sustainability of SOS in the short and long term. The obstacles were extreme. There was a “relentless assault in money and Texas Public Policy Foundation and Legislature and lawyers and lawsuits, and then they had Karl Rove,” one of the most powerful actors in Texas politics who would go on to be President George W. Bush’s Deputy Chief of Staff. Through these memories, Yznaga underscored the political skill, determination, and creativity required for SOS to achieve its goals.⁴⁰

Similar political skill was required in SOS’s cross-community collaboration, which Yznaga described in his interview. “The Hispanic community has a lot of connection to the land, nature. And it always shows in polling. It’s always very clear the Hispanic community has more environmental sensitivity than much of the White community.” SOS struck a deal with the Mexican American community to support city funding for a new Mexican American Cultural

³⁹ Yznaga, interview by author.

⁴⁰ Yznaga, interview by author.

Center in return for their support; the Cultural Center ultimately won approval in 1998, but only after some angry back-and-forth about its initial failure. Yznaga thus revealed the political relationships that underpinned SOS's goals.⁴¹

Through his interview, Yznaga underscored the complexity of SOS's collaboration with the African American community. In discussing how the real estate development community pitted Black stakeholders against each other, he said,

There had been a concerted campaign by the development community to get the African American community to attack SOS. ... [The development community] created an organization and then funded it with tens of thousands of dollars. ... It was called SON, Save Our Neighborhoods. It was one of the various attacks that we got during the course of this, that 'They care more about salamanders than children,' and all those other things, which the irony of it for us was that we were fighting essentially an insurgency against the established order in Austin, and the established order were the ones that had established the rules forever to put down the African American community, and we didn't like that either.⁴²

Yznaga had important cross-cultural connections and wanted to leverage those connections for greater social change in Austin. In addition, Yznaga's personal background and political expertise reflected his knowledge of the importance of the environment to the Mexican American community. Had SOS emerged from a more diverse leadership team, would this outreach have been even greater, and thus would have some of the unintended consequences, such as gentrification and displacement, been mitigated to a greater extent? These remain crucial questions for our understanding of SOS's fight for a vision of the environment.

Yznaga reflected on the missed opportunities of the SOS campaign, which were related to the long-term cultural change he had sought. "Failures, failures. I came to understand there are two failures." The first dealt with the intensity required to win the SOS campaign:

Because it...took everything that we had to get it done, those blinders were on to get this task done, and...we saw too narrowly. We didn't see that all the other pieces of the

⁴¹ Yznaga, interview by author.

⁴² Yznaga, interview by author.

community that I think it's so hard to do, ...but we needed a broader campaign that had more social aspects to it, and that would have put us on a better footing for long-term. It would have reached out more to other communities, and it would have dealt with some of the basic inequities in the city. ... I've felt this way for almost twenty years now.⁴³

Yznaga's comment reveals his awareness of the missed opportunities of the SOS campaign as well as his personal regrets on the topic, underscoring how such meaningful revelations can enhance existing narratives.

In a continuation of this discussion, Yznaga touched on the second missed opportunity of SOS. This involved what he referred to as his (then) lack of understanding of political theory and a subsequent rift in SOS leadership. "We weren't able to sustain...the political side of the movement, and so that was a big mistake to not do that [find ways to sustain SOS]." The interview brought up these disappointments for Yznaga:

It may seem strange that I'm not stating environmental victories or losses as that, but those, to me, are embedded in the mistakes that didn't allow us to continue to have those, and it still had momentum, but wasn't as strong. So then new people, the council started changing, there was infighting again in the environmental community, and I think the environmental community in the middle of 2010 and everything else looked almost like the environmental community in 1990, which was going off a dozen different directions. So for me, that was deeply disappointing. So when you approached me, that disappointment sort of came up.⁴⁴

Through these reflections, Yznaga uncovered seldom-told aspects of SOS, which suggests that the dramatic events and victories of its legacy may overshadow other aspects of the historical record. Yznaga recognized the enormity of the environmental issues still facing Austin residents: "There's been so many victories and so many losses. The City of Austin has done a tremendous amount of environmental protection, but now we have to protect the eastern side of the city, which is the creeks out there, we need to think about our carbon. You know, there's so many

⁴³ Yznaga, interview by author.

⁴⁴ Yznaga, interview by author.

other issues.”⁴⁵ Yznaga’s longstanding awareness of the breadth of issues and the missed opportunities to address them through the SOS Movement points to ways that environmental movements of today can embrace the goals of stakeholders in all of the communities that are affected.

⁴⁵ Yznaga, interview by author.

III. SOS AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE: TWO VOICES OF AUSTIN'S MEXICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

Interviews with two leaders in Austin's Mexican American community shed light on the political collaboration between SOS and the leaders' constituencies that formed to address the most pressing environmental concerns in the Mexican American community. The first interviewee, Susana Almanza, highlighted water's sacredness to the Mexican American community and her early 1990s collaboration with SOS over shared concerns. The second narrator was Daniel Llanes, whose emotional interview accentuated both the longstanding sense of betrayal he felt regarding environmental topics, as well as his deep appreciation for the work of SOS activists. Though their interviews, the narrators showed the deep-rooted disconnect between SOS and the Mexican American community regarding the definition of the environment to include "humankind" in addition to nature, and the environmental goals that stem from this definition.⁴⁶

Susana Almanza, born in 1952, is a longtime social and environmental justice advocate for Austin's Mexican American community. Almanza grew up in a large, tight-knit family in an area of East Austin near what she remembers as the traditional dividing line with the African American community. "I grew up in poverty," Almanza said. "The only blessings we had was that the fire station was like a half a block from my house, so that was, like, the real big thing." Her parents did not have a formal education. "We taught my mom. Once we went to school, we got her up to about third-grade level, and we taught my dad how to write his name, finally, instead of putting an X."⁴⁷ Almanza's memories at the very outset of her interview thus paint a picture of her background and the challenges she faced enroute to her career as an activist.

⁴⁶ Almanza, interview by author.

⁴⁷ Almanza, interview by author.

Almanza credits her parents with instilling important values that guided her career as an activist. Her father taught her about respecting others, and her mother exemplified a love of the environment:

My mother was a healer—every summer we’d be working in the garden. I was like five years old and she would tell me that we had to massage the earth, and if we massaged the earth, that it would give us food. And at that time, I was thinking, ‘Well, is it true or is she just trying to get me to work in the garden?’ But when I saw the results, I went like, ‘Mom knows a whole lot of stuff.’⁴⁸

Almanza’s role as interpreter for her mother helped her develop her public voice: “I was always translating to adults and a lot of people in authority and stuff, and so I always say that they must have been preparing me (laughs) to have this voice and not to be afraid to speak out.” These examples fueled Almanza’s sense of justice. “Everything that they did, I felt like this was making sure that I stayed on the path of justice and that I saw things the way they really were and how things needed to be fixed for change.”⁴⁹ This early immersion in a semi-public role undoubtedly contributed to Almanza’s leadership on environmental issues.

Her childhood also reflected the complexity of growing up poor in Austin’s Mexican American community. “During the summer when there was no school, I think there wasn’t a creek that we didn’t explore...in the city and especially in East Austin, and we spent most of our time in swimming pools. And, you know, those are the really good things.” Racism was omnipresent, however: “I grew up in the town in times still when there was division [segregation] within the buses. Like I said, our streets were not paved, there wasn’t lighting, there wasn’t good drainage.... Even though the population in my elementary school was like ninety-eight percent Latinos, there was only one Mexican American teacher in that whole

⁴⁸ Almanza, interview by author.

⁴⁹ Almanza, interview by author.

school.”⁵⁰ Through her inclusion of these day-to-day challenges, Almanza revealed some of the many issues that affected her immediate environment, issues that were not priorities for SOS in its single-minded focus on Barton Springs.

Almanza became formally involved in social justice issues as a young woman, which engaged her early on with the range of issues affecting her community. This included membership in the Brown Berets, where Almanza and others began a free summer lunch program for children, advocated against police brutality, and spoke out on issues such as education and healthcare.⁵¹ The culture of the Brown Berets deeply influenced Almanza as she traveled the state organizing: “When we got to the communities, they would chip in; they would feed us.... The term back then was *carnalismo*, and that meant like brotherly love, sisterly love, family love, but being together, so people could travel all over the place, even though you didn’t have much money.”⁵² In this respect, Almanza’s experience echoes that of SOS activists, who spent countless hours in each other’s homes to meet the immediate needs of organizing.

Almanza’s environmental ethos was part of her cultural heritage and differs from what she saw as mainstream environmental values such as those espoused by SOS. “Through my family and through our Indigenous belief, we always recognized that the elements that were sacred were the air, the water, the earth, and the sun. So the environment, to me, had always been there, you know. It just had been shown or demonstrated to me on a whole different system than it was through the mainstream environmental group.” Influenced by the late-1980s national environmental justice movement, Almanza and other local activists formed the Southwest

⁵⁰ Almanza, interview by author.

⁵¹ For oral history-based descriptions of the activities of the Brown Berets in Texas, *Civil Rights in Black and Brown: Histories of Resistance and Struggle in Texas*, ed. Max Krochmal and J. Todd Moye, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021).

⁵² Almanza, interview by author.

Network for Environmental and Economic Justice to combat the environmental problems they saw in their communities. The network's goals reflected the lens of environmental justice:

It was the Environmental Justice Movement that redefined that the environment was not just about naturekind, but it was naturekind and humankind interwoven, interlocked, and you really couldn't separate it. So the environment was where you live, work, play, and pray. So our interpretation of the environment was now teaching and informing the mainstream environmental group that the environment was not just about nature, that it was about people too.⁵³

Through this description, Almanza highlighted the dissonance between environmentalists who focused solely on natural spaces, and thus by extension SOS, and those who included “humankind” in the definition.⁵⁴

The ability of SOS and activists such as Almanza to collaborate for mutual goals became clear as the SOS Movement unfolded between 1990 and 1992. In 1991, Almanza was a founding member of PODER, People Organized in Defense of Earth and Her Resources, which played a key role in East Austin environmental activism.⁵⁵ PODER was examining toxic wastes from local facilities, particularly those operated by high-tech companies with poor contamination records in other states.⁵⁶ Almanza learned of the issues around SOS at a meeting of the Peace and Justice Coalition, invited by activist Daniel Llanes.⁵⁷

Although not at the forefront of SOS, Almanza's group understood their role and offered support to SOS. The connection between SOS and activists such as Almanza hinged on solidarity over the issue of water, despite the potential downsides. SOS was “looking at the whole issue of water, and water was one of the most sacred elements and water was something we needed to protect. And I still tell people that even though some of the decisions that were made might have

⁵³ Almanza, interview by author.

⁵⁴ Almanza, interview by author.

⁵⁵ “Poder” is the Spanish verb “to be able to.”

⁵⁶ “Meet Our Team,” PODER, accessed February 11, 2023, <https://www.poderaustin.org/our-team>.

⁵⁷ Almanza, interview by author.

been detrimental to us, ...we have to protect water, no matter where it is at.”⁵⁸ PODER’s early 1990s decision to support SOS thus continues to be contentious in the narrative of SOS, especially given the effects of gentrification and displacement in Austin’s communities of color.

The dialogue between PODER and SOS over the environmental impact of the high-tech corridor in East Austin further underscored the complexity of their collaboration. For Almanza, SOS and Austin’s mainstream environmentalists failed to grasp the problems affecting East Austin. “The White population didn’t really see us as much as allies or that we had an environment over here. So I think that the mainstream were pretty much still focused just west of I-35, ...and that there wasn’t, like, they’re welcoming or this big issue to try and recruit people of color into that movement either.”⁵⁹ This recalls the interview by Yznaga, who understood that SOS could and should have done better outreach with Austin’s communities of color, which could have bolstered SOS’s impact and sustainability in the long run.

SOS, PODER, and the African American community did coalesce around opposition to the fossil fuel industry, demonstrating the mutuality of their relationship. This was epitomized in a successful fight in 1992 and 1993 to close down several oil storage facilities (“tank farms”) that were polluting East Austin neighborhoods. “And sort of like the big picture of the fossil fuels was more like what the mainstream group was looking at, and we’re looking more at the negative health impacts of our communities. And that’s why I said there’s always this way of how people are looking at particular issues, but there are ways that there’s commonalities that we can weave in.” According to Almanza, the African American community also joined the effort:

Because we were part of the Environmental Justice Movement, it was black and brown people working together and how did we need to continue to work together and not be fighting, because the city had traditionally had blacks and browns fighting against each other because they would say, ‘We’ve got so much money, and if they gave this amount

⁵⁸ Almanza, interview by author.

⁵⁹ Almanza, interview by author.

of money to the blacks, then the browns were all mad, and if the brown people got this money, the blacks were, instead of saying how do we work together to make sure we get an equitable amount of money.⁶⁰

The Mexican American and African American communities developed a “Toxic Tour” of the tank farms to showcase the problems. This proved to be a turning point in awareness because it brought in elected officials as well as community leaders. To Almanza, the collaboration around these issues was part of a broader movement of which SOS was a part, highlighting once again the benefits of mutual support on environmental concerns.⁶¹

Almanza also underscored Yznaga’s recollections of the ways that communities of color in Austin were manipulated against each other by more powerful forces, revealing the necessity of collaboration on issues that affect the community as a whole. Finding commonality ultimately led to the relocation of the polluting tank farms out of East Austin and the companies agreeing to remediate the site.⁶² The communities also coalesced around monitoring tax abatements for high-tech firms, fought to ensure that new hires were recruited from the affected communities, and highlighted the gendered labor in high tech; women filled the dirtiest jobs in the growing sector. These memories show the necessity of collaboration among all of Austin’s communities to effect important change.⁶³

However, the results of the successes of PODER and its support for SOS in the early 1990s had unintended consequences that some predicted at the time. An intern with PODER specifically warned the group that cleaning up East Austin would lead to gentrification. Almanza remembered the intern saying, ““Oh, you advocated, you organized, you did all of this stuff, and

⁶⁰ Almanza, interview by author.

⁶¹ For media coverage of the Toxic Tour, see “Living Waters: East Austin Watershed Tour (1993),” Austin History Center, City of Austin, accessed November 1, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UkJHvuhRWH0>.

⁶² “Struggles & Victories,” PODER, accessed February 14, 2023, <https://www.poderaustin.org/struggles-victories>.

⁶³ Almanza, interview by author.

you no longer want to live in these polluting states? Well, guess what. You don't get to keep the land either. You don't get to keep where you're at.”⁶⁴ Underlying this quote are the dual themes of racism and gentrification that have been constants in the battles to protect the environment in East Austin.

Regarding Barton Springs specifically, Almanza shared an outlook that differed from that of the mainstream environmentalists advocating for its protection. For Almanza, the “natural playground made of water” at Barton Springs was seen as a continuation of the Colorado River, not necessarily the discrete swimming pool that the public and the SOS community recognized. Her experience of Barton Springs reflected both her background and her outlook:

When you look at the springs and the rocks and there's a diving board, and then there's like a median where they say, 'Okay, this part is free.' This part is open to everybody. ... So that's kind of like the part that we most participated in. But the uniqueness was because the water would come and drip over that embankment, it created this kind of whirlpool...and then from that whirlpool the water...gushes down.⁶⁵

To Almanza, this free section of Barton Springs was the best part of Barton Springs, the section of its flow that she recalled so fondly for the way its whirlpool spun her before spitting her onto the bank. For Almanza, the demarcation between the for-pay section and the free area symbolized the divide between White and non-White communities, West Austin and East Austin, that SOS often failed to grasp.⁶⁶

Almanza's assessment of SOS was complex. On the one hand, she could say, “To me, I really appreciate the people who mobilized and honored water and looked at it from that perspective, because as they honor the water, they also made sure that a lot of the development wasn't happening that would impact the water.” However, this was tempered by her opinion that

⁶⁴ Almanza, interview by author.

⁶⁵ Almanza, interview by author.

⁶⁶ Almanza, interview by author.

the spiritual aspect of Barton Springs has been lost in the conversation about the natural environment. “I think that’s a part that they miss from Save Our Springs, is our connection is that we’re having to take off our shoes and our clothes. We’re basically unrobing ourself and we’re feeling the real earth with our feet, and we’re letting the water embrace us, because we’re basically water ourselves, so we’re reconnecting.” Recent years have seen an increasing recognition of the presence of Indigenous people at Barton Springs, which Almanza saw as welcome. “It’s part of that reconnection and acknowledging that there were other people, too, that worked on those issues and felt the springs to be very sacred.”⁶⁷ Given the important place of Indigenous people in Central Texas history and the importance to Almanza of their role at the site, acknowledging the history of the Indigenous people who thrived in the area around Barton Springs is an important aspect of the scholarship that deserves further exploration.

Mexican American community leader Daniel Llanes echoed Almanza in his interview, emphasizing the role of the Indigenous people who once lived at Barton Springs and expressing a definition of the environment that encompasses people as well as nature. Llanes was born into a large Mexican American family in 1949 and grew up in Texas and California. He credits his grandparents, who raised him, with encouraging his artistic abilities and instilling in him a positive outlook: “For me, it’s like a glass half empty/half full. I look at it as half full, always, and that comes from my grandparents. They were buoyant. I mean, shit, they suffered racism worse than me, worse than my mom, always had a great sense of humor.” Llanes began drawing when he was ten or eleven years old and took up dance at the encouragement of a friend, discovering connections between dance and his other artwork. He soon began training in modern dance in Denton, Texas, and in New York City. He then returned to Austin and began a twenty-

⁶⁷ Almanza, interview by author.

five-year career teaching art to children and developing his dance career, particularly in Mexican folkloric dance. Today he incorporates environmental justice topics into his artistic material.⁶⁸

Llanes's activism began in the early 1980s and arose in part from his career in the arts. A group of artists who were funded by the City of Austin approached Llanes, who was not city-funded and thus free to speak out, to spearhead a lawsuit challenging the city's poorly managed contract for an arts facility at a historic site in West Austin. After Llanes and two other plaintiffs formed the lawsuit, the city voided the contract and funded facilities for the Mexican American, African American, and Asian American communities. "So without even knowing or realizing that, that led to racial equity in the arts."⁶⁹ This early experience in activism reflected the importance of collaboration, determination, and the desire for good governance in seeking racial equity.

At around the same time, Llanes became involved in his neighborhood association, which increased his awareness of other issues in the city, including SOS. He also discovered the power of his voice:

In my thirties I was feeling like more and more discontented with the way things were going, and I thought, 'Well, what can I do here?' Then I thought, 'Well, I have the right to petition, the right to assemble,' ...so I started just like testifying at different things, environmental stuff, housing things, arts things, you know, at the city. And then at one point, apparently people liked what I was saying.⁷⁰

His abilities led to his role as chair of the Austin Peace and Justice Coalition, which Brigid Shea approached to request support for SOS. This was crucial, because it led to Llanes arranging a meeting between Shea and Susana Almanza of PODER. Llanes' recollection of Shea's outreach reflected aspects of his belief system that dovetailed with the leadership of both SOS and

⁶⁸ Daniel Llanes, interview by author, Austin, TX, October 12, 2022.

⁶⁹ Llanes, interview by author.

⁷⁰ Llanes, interview by author.

PODER: “So only in retrospect do I look back, because it was important for me to have male-female energy and it was important for me to have a variety of voices, and people welcomed that.” This recollection of Shea’s request also revealed the ways that SOS and other mainstream environmentalists failed to understand the issues facing East Austin: “That’s when Brigid Shea...asked for help with SOS. So when she said that, I said, ‘Are you familiar with PODER, who’s over here on the East Side?’ And they weren’t, of course. I said, ‘Well, you know, they’re an environmental group and they’re fighting the tank farms that are killing people left and right.’”⁷¹ Llanes’s memories of these early interactions with SOS highlighted the dissonance between environmentalists in West and East Austin, just as Almanza’s did, further underscoring the challenges faced by proponents of environmental justice in Austin’s communities of color.

Crucially, Llanes also recalled what he told members of the Peace and Justice Coalition prior to the Shea/Almanza meeting:

I said, ‘Look, ...if you support SOS as a group, ...you’re trying to save Barton Springs, which is Comanche Springs, first of all, you’re trying to save Barton Springs and you’re trying to save the watershed, that’s great, but PODER, as an environmental organization, includes human beings in the environmental formula,’ which very few people ever talk about, the human beings in the environment. We talk about the trees, the water, the animals, the wildlife. PODER focused on the human beings.⁷²

Llanes’s understanding of the environment aligned with Almanza’s definition, in which nature and humankind are interwoven. In another parallel to Almanza, Llanes underscored how the importance of Barton Springs differed for him and other members of his community through his calling it “Comanche Springs,” a reference to the Indigenous people who predated later settlers such as William Barton, who settled around Barton Springs in 1837 and for whom the site is

⁷¹ Llanes, interview by author.

⁷² Llanes, interview by author.

named.⁷³ The first formal meeting between SOS and PODER also revealed the differing meanings of “environment” to the factions: “There was discussion about what was happening for the aquifer and then there was discussion about...the environmental degradation that was happening on the East Side. Most people in West Austin had never heard of what was going on in the East Side, so it was a very eye-opening kind of thing.”⁷⁴ Through these stories, Llanes reiterated the resonance of this fundamental misunderstanding between mainstream environmentalists and communities of color, and he thus enriched the established narrative of SOS.

To Llanes, the ensuing collaboration between SOS and PODER, while beneficial in the short term, had detrimental consequences for East Austin in the long term:

So we on the East Side agreed to get out the vote for SOS. A lot of people went to that [1990] all-night meeting from the East Side who’d never been to a city council meeting at all. (laughs) Then SOS agreed to help us lobby to get rid of the tank farms, and they even helped with money and stuff. ... The result was that there was a moratorium on development over the aquifer, and East Austin was designated as a Preferred Development Zone, and that’s what started the gentrification and displacement of Black and Brown people on the East Side after the SOS thing.⁷⁵

Llanes recalled that, as a result of the Preferred Development Zone designation in East Austin, many residential renters in houses along East Cesar Chavez Street were displaced for businesses. Llanes, who testified at the legendary all-night hearing in June 1990, echoed Almanza in saying that the most urgent goal of East Austin activists was to clean up the hazardous sites to protect human health, in spite of warnings that doing so would lead to increased development.⁷⁶ This reflected the prioritization of human health as an environmental issue for Almanza and Llanes,

⁷³ Gunnar Brune, *Springs of Texas*, Vol 1. (Fort Worth: Branch-Smith, 1981), 430-431. Brune wrote that a Comanche trail passed Barton Springs at one time, and that the springs were a popular gathering place for various Indigenous peoples, including the Tonkawa, Apache, and Comanche, for thousands of years.

⁷⁴ Llanes, interview by author.

⁷⁵ Llanes, interview by author.

⁷⁶ Llanes, interview by author.

an issue that transcended concerns over preservation of the natural world to encompass the human, urban world. It also pointed toward other concerns, including displacement, that would affect communities of color going forward.

The interview by Llanes underscored the depth of emotion on the topic of displacement to which SOS contributed. He discussed an Earth Day panel that took place in the mid-2010s in which Almanza, still with PODER, and Shea, by then a county commissioner, participated:

When Susana started talking about that [development and displacement], I could see Brigid going, ‘Oh, my god.’ And she realized what the unintended consequence had been, and she literally, after Susana started talking, she took the microphone and she said, ‘I am so sorry. We never thought that this would happen.’ (cries with emotion) And we have great relations with Brigid. She’s our county commissioner, you know, and she is helping us with the Conservancy and all that. And we all have known each other for years and years, we all go back.⁷⁷

Through this quote, Llanes revealed several things. The first was the longstanding pain of Llanes and others regarding the displacement and gentrification that ensued in the years after the victorious SOS election in 1992. It also revealed that SOS, PODER, and other activist groups have reached a point where collaboration is now a given. This was further emphasized when Llanes discussed SOS’s support in having the Holly Power Plant, which was creating chemical and noise pollution in East Austin, closed in 2007.⁷⁸ The memories about the panel discussion thus show how the threads of the SOS battle and narrative continue to influence discussion of the environment today.

The interview by Llanes also underscored the different outlooks between Llanes and mainstream environmentalists with respect to natural spaces.

It’s just that when White people are talking to me about environmentalism and saving the water and saving the trees, I can’t forget that White people destroyed 90 percent of the forests in the Americas, and before White people came to Texas, the springs were the lifeblood. IH-35 from Laredo to Canada follows the springs. ... That was the trail that

⁷⁷ Llanes, interview by author.

⁷⁸ Llanes, interview by author.

Indigenous people—that’s why we have that kind of thing. So I have to, like, let go of those feelings. It’s not resentment; it’s just hurt. I don’t know how to say it.⁷⁹

The emotions expressed by Llanes highlight the potential in oral history interviews to unearth difficult memories; in this respect, the oral historian is privileged to be present in these moments.

The conversation led back to SOS and the role of Shea as its spokesman, with Llanes revealing the value of her apology over displacement of East Austin residents at the mid-2010s’ panel: “That’s what made Brigid’s apology so big, because twenty-five years, nobody ever said anything about it, you know.”⁸⁰ This conversation reveals the arc of the improved relationship between SOS and environmental justice advocates amidst the ongoing anger and frustration over the historical treatment of Indigenous people in the United States. One of the important questions this discussion provokes is whether someone with PODER, SOS, or any of the other involved organizations ultimately should or could have sounded a louder alarm about the possibility of gentrification. (Llanes noted the PODER intern’s warning about gentrification that Almanza recounted in her interview.) If they had, would it have outweighed some of the well-justified decisions that were made at the time?

For Llanes as with Almanza, Barton Springs represented a different place from that of mainstream environmentalists. He recalled the history of segregation at Barton Springs, telling of a former neighbor who was one of the Austin High School students who staged a “swim-in” to force its integration in the early 1960s.⁸¹ While the history of segregation at Barton Springs is becoming more well-known in recent years through the work of Kocher and others, for Llanes

⁷⁹ Llanes, interview by author.

⁸⁰ Llanes, interview by author.

⁸¹ Llanes, interview by author.

and his peers it was reality, not simply an update to the historical record.⁸²

For Llanes, while the environment in West Austin has continued to improve, environmental concerns in East Austin are being neglected in evolving ways. The area now is dominated by real estate development interests, which are putting pressure on the level of impervious cover allowed. This in turn contributes to flooding and increased heat levels. These factors harken back to the unintended consequences of restricting development over the watershed in West Austin as a result of the SOS Ordinance and cleaning up the environment in East Austin. For both reasons, East Austin now faces the human-centered environmental problems of displacement, flooding, disproportionate heat levels, and cemented-over creeks.⁸³ In this view, the legacy of SOS and its relationship with environmental justice advocates, while collaborative in many ways, is more complicated than ever.

⁸² Karen Kocher et. al., “Living Springs,” “Profiles: Joan Means Khabele,” accessed March 31, 2023, <https://livingspringsaustin.org/joan-means-khabele/>. Starting in 1960, African American students at Austin High School led swim-ins at Barton Springs when told they would not be allowed to attend their senior picnic, which was to take place at Barton Springs and nearby Zilker Park, due to official segregation. Barton Springs was officially desegregated in 1962. See also Fernanda Figueroa, “Austin honors civil rights activist Joan Means Khabele, who helped integrate Barton Springs Pool,” *Austin American-Statesman*, April 9, 2022, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://www.statesman.com/story/news/local/2022/04/09/austin-honors-joan-means-khabele-who-integrated-barton-springs-pool/9525834002/>. Scholarship on the extent to which Mexican Americans were denied access to Barton Springs due to segregation is difficult to find, which points the way to a possible area of research for future scholars.

⁸³ For a map of how heat affects different areas of Austin, see Patrick Bixler, “Austin Area Sustainability Indicators,” RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service, LJB School of Public Affairs, University of Texas at Austin, accessed March 21, 2023, <http://www.austinindicators.org/project/climate-and-community-resilience/>.

IV. SOS AND THE NAACP: AN INTERVIEW WITH JEFF TRAVILLION

This section discusses aspects of the relationship between SOS and the African American community through an interview with Jeff Travillion, president of the Austin branch of the NAACP during the heyday of SOS. The interview sheds light on the most pressing environmental concerns in Austin's African American community through his point of view. It also reveals the complex dynamics of the NAACP's relationship with SOS, including both collaborative efforts and disappointment.

Travillion was born in 1962 and grew up in Jackson, Mississippi, the son of two prominent educators in the local public schools. In 1970, the family moved to Boulder, Colorado, for his father to pursue a doctorate. Travillion's father was well-qualified to attend the University of Mississippi (known by many as Ole Miss), but apparently administrators in Mississippi strongly encouraged him to attend the University of Colorado and offered him full tuition to do so, they said, because their quota of African American students had already been met. "So the irony is," Travillion said, "it was something that probably was based on race and based on quotas, not wanting to have so many [Black] students at Ole Miss, but probably moving to Boulder, Colorado, was the best thing that ever could happen to a fifth-grader from Jackson, Mississippi." That was because of the natural beauty of the family's surroundings, where Travillion could walk from their on-campus housing to the university's on-campus school. "The walk to school [across a brook and up a hill] was like a nature path." Travillion, who was in Boy Scouts, spent countless hours outdoors, whether fishing, exploring the local foothills, or simply learning about his surroundings, experiences that shaped his appreciation for the natural world.⁸⁴ He brought that appreciation to Austin in the 1980s, where he worked in state government and

⁸⁴ Jeff Travillion, interview by author, August 19, 2020, Austin, TX, (Zoom).

eventually earned a master's in public administration at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin in 1989.⁸⁵

Travillion traced his leadership in Austin's African American community to the example of his parents. Of his mother's career, Travillion recalled,

You have to remember that the schools, particularly in the segregated system, were the only real governmental institution that the African American community had. It influenced me greatly because if Mom knew, as a homemaking teacher, who came to her classes hungry, she knew [the students] didn't get to have breakfast before they got there, so she would tell them that if they got to school thirty minutes early, she would teach them how to cook breakfast. Well, she knew that she was *giving* them breakfast by teaching them how to cook breakfast.⁸⁶

His father was equally dedicated to his students, especially the boys, encouraging their parents to keep their children in school as much as possible while accommodating their work schedules.

Through these stories, Travillion revealed both his early awareness of obstacles facing African Americans in the South as well as his parents' dedication to helping young people surmount those obstacles. Throughout his interview, Travillion touched on advocacy efforts within Austin to improve schools for the African American community; given that the stated interview theme was SOS and environmentalism, this suggests that, for Travillion, questions of racial equity are inextricably tied to any discussion of the environment.⁸⁷

These memories clearly revealed the importance of education to Travillion's family. "I understood that education was everything," he said. "Both of [my grandparents] were farmers, and what they wanted more than anything else was for their kids to go to college." His views on education were tempered by a realistic assessment of its benefits in a society in which racism has

⁸⁵ According to a campaign website, Travillion earned his bachelor's degree from Jackson State University and was chosen as an Alfred P. Sloan Fellow, which allowed him to study at Carnegie-Mellon University and Harvard University. Jeff Travillion campaign website, accessed March 21, 2023, <http://jeffTravillion.com/about>.

⁸⁶ Travillion, interview by author.

⁸⁷ Travillion, interview by author.

deep roots: “We like to think that education guarantees you success. Well, I’ll tell you, in a place where custom allows people to be overlooked, in a place where racial and ethnic relationships are strained, in a place where you’ve got to be told where your place is, that makes it difficult. I can guarantee you that it’s going to be difficult to be successful without an education. I cannot guarantee you that even the best education can guarantee you access to a great career.” While Travillion has forged a highly successful career in Austin (he currently serves as a Travis County Commissioner alongside Shea), he noted that many of his peers with similar backgrounds have left Austin for other cities, saying, “There is very little here which develops and encourages minorities, particularly African American, to be a part of the tapestry. That’s not our custom.”⁸⁸ The theme of ingrained Southern customs that denied opportunities for advancement to African Americans permeated Travillion’s interview, providing context for his subsequent discussion on the events of SOS and the priorities of the NAACP.

Travillion’s connection to SOS in the early 1990s stemmed from his role as president of the Austin chapter of the NAACP, which supported SOS under his tenure. For Travillion, working together hinged on creating jobs in East Austin while protecting the watershed in West Austin:

My interest in Save Our Springs, ironically, was that we wanted more light manufacturing and more development and more access to jobs in the eastern corridor of the city, so a lot of the companies that were coming in were coming in and building over the water table, which gave you beautiful topography, but if things were not built properly, it would also give you runoff and pollution.

My goal was to say, ‘We’ve got a lot of places that are not over the water table that need to be developed, and there are a lot of people out there that are willing and able to work. So what is the logic of potentially polluting a beautiful area when you have areas that don’t have the same environmental challenges and create as good an opportunity to

⁸⁸ Travillion, interview by author.

develop and help the people in that community work?’⁸⁹

Through this quote, Travillion underscored the complexity of the issues that non-White communities were attempting to address. For Travillion, economic growth represented jobs and opportunity. While Travillion acknowledged gentrification, he did so within the lens of the affected communities’ ability to work together to address the environmental hazard posed by a local landfill, not necessarily as one of the detrimental outcomes of SOS.⁹⁰

According to Travillion, the NAACP’s support for SOS contributed to a promising but disappointing collaboration. “Number one, it added the voice of a prominent civil rights organization to a movement that was based on humanistic issues,” Travillion said. “We’re talking about quality of life; we’re talking about contaminants in the water table. So it created another opportunity for a marriage between social and economic issues.” Travillion and others were hopeful that the NAACP and SOS would be able to collaborate on other social justice issues. However, their optimism was short-lived. When asked about the moment when Travillion realized further collaboration on social justice issues between the NAACP and SOS was going to be transitory, Travillion replied,

Unfortunately, very quickly. As we started talking about issues like development in the eastern corridor, ...single-member [City Council] districts, ...[and] educational equity, oftentimes...there was an acknowledgement that it really was an issue, but then there was no follow-up to demonstrate the type of support that we showed for the environmental issue, which historically had not been a minority issue.⁹¹

The lack of follow-through from SOS on social issues contributed to the long-term decline of the relationship, which affected issues Travillion considered important to his community:

Frankly, we were a little disappointed that after we endorsed them, they paid,

⁸⁹ Travillion, interview by author. In his interview, Travillion expressed support for Tesla, which has established operations in the eastern part of Travis County, creating thousands of jobs, many of them semi-skilled and/or not requiring a college degree.

⁹⁰ Travillion, interview by author.

⁹¹ Travillion, interview by author.

unfortunately, not much attention to the growth of the relationship over time. If there was one unfortunate thing, I think that really was it, that we did not take the opportunity to build a better understanding of each other, to empower each other.⁹²

This comment parallels Yznaga's reflections on the missed opportunities of SOS; had they nurtured the relationship between White communities and communities of color, there might have been progress on other social issues, including issues tied to environmental justice. The disappointing outcome with respect to SOS also affected Travillion's outlook in general, especially concerning his future interactions with friends and acquaintances: "And then there are people that you meet, and you have to have the hard conversation. 'I cannot allow you to use the...reputation of the organization when it benefits you and then when there's another issue of importance to the community then give you a pass on working on that issue.'" ⁹³ Through this insight, Travillion demonstrated his awareness that the NAACP's support was coveted by other groups, including SOS, whose follow-through on issues critical to his community was not always reliable. In this respect, Travillion, like Almanza and Llanes and the organizations they represented, was an outsider to the mostly-White SOS, whose support proved transitory or hindered by the "blindness" that Yznaga said were part of SOS's narrow focus.

Travillion also experienced the divisions unleashed on the African American community by the developers' faction, according to a joint interview with Shea and her husband John Umphress, who established the SOS contributor database. As a prelude to this aspect of the conversation, Shea said, "They [Black Austinites] aren't included anywhere in the documentaries [on SOS]. So this is an important part, a chance to tell that story." Shea recalled that an African American lobbyist hired by a prominent developer attempted to have Travillion removed from his role as NAACP president. The lobbyist approached another African American leader and told

⁹² Travillion, interview by author.

⁹³ Travillion, interview by author.

him, “I’ll make it worth your while if you switch sides and come on board with us...[against] SOS.” According to Shea, when the leader answered, “I don’t roll that way,” the lobbyist responded, “Then we will bury you.”⁹⁴ This shows the complex dynamics within and beyond the African American community and the challenges it faced vis-à-vis SOS. Further, Shea’s statement that this aspect of the SOS story has not been fully told bolsters the argument for research on this topic, for Shea, as one of the main participants in SOS and as someone who is still very active in Austin’s public affairs, may understand better than most how the narrative has been told.

Further challenging the narrative of SOS, Travillion offered a counterpoint to the mystique of SOS as a countercultural movement comprised of hippies, musicians, and others who operated outside of the mainstream culture. When prompted to reflect on how African Americans experienced the SOS story, he alluded to the trope of the Austin hippie musician when he said,

If you are African American and poor and a musician, you look in a completely different light than somebody that is White, even if they’re poor and a musician. There are groups—and SOS was one of those groups—that is pushing economically for places to live. I think that’s a good thing. They’re pushing economically for insurance. That’s a good thing. They’re pushing to make sure that they have access to the basic necessities of life. I would argue that they are still not the most poor people in the community, and the most poor people in the community do not have that type of advocacy.⁹⁵

Thus, while SOS has embraced some of the same issues that are important to Travillion and the African American community, the organization nonetheless represented an outlook limited by their lived experiences as members of the White environmental movement in Austin. This demonstrates that the counterculture is only one lens through which to study environmental movements, and that there are multiple dimensions to these stories that bear unearthing.

⁹⁴ John Umphress and Brigid Shea, interview by author, Austin, TX, August 23, 2019.

⁹⁵ Travillion, interview by author.

For Travillion, Barton Springs and the surrounding area represented part of the landscape of racial discrimination, which he discussed in an anecdote about an African American police captain who was denied indoor service at a nearby coffee shop. Through this sketch, Travillion highlighted how the meaning of Barton Springs to him differed vastly from that of SOS activists.⁹⁶ The fact that Barton Springs was not officially desegregated until 1962 adds further context to the memories of Travillion and underscores the importance of capturing diverse voices in the endeavor to understand SOS.⁹⁷

Despite challenges between the NAACP and SOS, Travillion revealed an unambiguous depiction of the relationship between the two organizations. When asked what the upshot of the relationship was, Travillion said, “I think it was an effective yet mostly one-sided relationship. ... I expected there to be advocacy in the schools. I expected there to be advocacy around landfill issues. And, now, there are a couple of notable exceptions. In the tank farm issue [of the early 1990s] I think the SOS community was quite involved, and I think that paid huge dividends when they did, but I think that that relationship needed to be nurtured continuously.” Again, Travillion revealed his prioritization of issues related to education and his disappointment that SOS had not supported them when those issues arose. Had SOS offered more support in this area and others, the relationship could have been more effective in the long term, much as Yznaga said. Today the groups do coalesce around issues affecting the environment, and Travillion noted his collaboration with Shea, as a fellow Travis County Commissioner, to prevent groundwater contamination underneath a landfill in East Austin.⁹⁸

Travillion emphasized the need for Austin’s communities to work together to tackle

⁹⁶ Travillion, interview by author.

⁹⁷ Karen Kocher et. al., “Living Springs,” “Profiles: Joan Means Khabele.”

⁹⁸ Travillion, interview by author.

environmental problems, again framing the issue within the context of larger social problems:

I think that in order to preserve the natural beauty of this community, we all have to work together. I think that all ethnic communities need to sit down at the table and talk about the legitimate things that need to be done in our environment, in our schools, the types of economic access that we have, that Tesla shouldn't be such a really big deal, that there should be other opportunities as well, and because we don't want to build over our water table, let's assess the land that we have now. Let's also focus on affordability.⁹⁹

For Travillion, protection of the natural environment is but one piece of other, equally pressing issues. In this respect, he echoed Llanes, Almanza, and Yznaga, who emphasized the missed opportunities and detrimental outcomes (gentrification and displacement) that were part of the legacy of SOS.

Travillion also shared an entirely new aspect of the environment when asked for other possible narrators to be interviewed, that of the sustainable food community and food deserts within the African American landscape: "That is the part of the community that is closest to the environment, raising fresh produce." This topic was also connected to the larger issues of affordability and displacement, as Travillion added: "I think you talk to [suggested narrator] about the availability of food in our food deserts, where our out-migration, where the people have been pushed out because of affordability."¹⁰⁰ This shows that, for Travillion, the environment is intimately connected to community sustainability and displacement. The subject of food deserts did not arise in the other five interviews, demonstrating the potential for entirely new avenues of scholarship on African American environmental priorities in Austin.

⁹⁹ Travillion, interview by author.

¹⁰⁰ Travillion, interview by author.

V. CONCLUSION

Susana Almanza's memories of swimming in the non-paid section of Barton Springs reflect the disparate understandings of SOS, and environmentalism generally, to the six narrators whose oral history interviews are discussed in this study. While the SOS campaign challenging Freeport-McMoRan has had a long-lasting effect on Austin's legacy as an environmentally minded city, interviews with SOS leaders and leaders from the Mexican American and African American communities show that the legacy of this victory is complicated, with differing views of its impact that vary by neighborhood, race, and class.

I have conducted my study on SOS through an ever-developing scholarly lens. Oral history-based scholarship of the late 1980s and early 1990s illustrates how narratives attuned to countercultural themes can describe the complicated history of environmental movements. When oral historians began to include environmental justice as a topic of discussion, the path was opened to new avenues of scholarly research and an increased awareness of the differing ways that communities relate to their environment. I contribute to this scholarship by arguing that, while SOS was a resounding success in many respects, its outcomes have been less positive, sometimes disappointing, and even detrimental to the organizations or communities with whom SOS partnered. The six interviews in this study investigate this dynamic and underscore how oral history can challenge widely accepted narratives to enrich the historical record and theorize environmentalism.

My study builds on and differs from the existing research in several ways. By focusing on the 1990-1992 heyday of SOS and the foiled Freeport-McMoRan development, I center the ways that my narrators experienced this discrete inflection point and its aftermath. As the interviews unfolded, I added questions in real time to obtain insights into how those experiences shaped the

environmental landscape for them into the present day. The interviews in my study also provide a level of introspection that the oft-interviewed participants have gained in the thirty years since the heyday of SOS. While such after-the-fact interviews may compromise objectivity for some, these interviews also uncover insights that only the opportunity for long-term reflection can provide. The interviews I conducted are highly exploratory, delving deeply into the collaboration between SOS and communities of color and thus shedding light on how environmental and social movements of the future can succeed with an approach that embraces non-White communities.

The challenges I faced in the course of my study demonstrate the overlap between conducting oral history interviews and translating those findings into a written product. The biggest dilemma I encountered was how to develop an argument from over thirty lengthy interviews. After several false starts, it became apparent that one of the most important themes hinged on the relationship between SOS and leaders from Austin's Mexican American and African American communities. That in itself posed a dilemma: Of the over thirty interviews I conducted, only four were with people of color, reflecting SOS's participant base as a White, mainstream environmental organization. (See Appendix B.) However, this provided an opportunity in that it narrowed my focus while highlighting the experience of an SOS leader, Mark Yznaga, whose background straddled both worlds. His interview provided fertile material for analysis. In this respect, my study is an attempt to follow the advice of Ramachandra Guha to extend the scope of environmental history scholarship beyond a mainstream environmentalist outlook.¹⁰¹

Challenges related to developing scholarly conclusions from my study also arose. I interviewed a number of leaders within SOS; while it was obvious to include Shea, Bunch, and

¹⁰¹ Guha, "Movement Scholarship," 40-41.

Yznaga, excluding other leaders meant that I was neglecting information that could add to my argument. Further, the interviews I included revealed that there are exceptions to every argument and situation. These factors underscore how oral history research can create challenging yet fertile problems, and how such research can lead to an almost unlimited number of avenues for further investigation.¹⁰²

The analysis of the six interviews in my study has led to several main conclusions. The first is that the narrators arrived at a point of environmental activism from different backgrounds and lived experiences. Shea, Bunch, and Travillion enjoyed a typical mainstream environmentalist upbringing that included activities such as camping, canoeing, fishing, and hiking. All three credited their outdoors-oriented backgrounds with instilling in them a love for nature. Yznaga deviated somewhat in this narrative because he did not express this type of experience to the same extent, even as a leader in the predominantly mainstream SOS. His goals were attuned to social justice issues, which dovetailed with mainstream environmental goals. Almanza and Llanes arrived at a love for the environment through ideals important to their Mexican American community, such as the sacredness of water and respect for the Indigenous people who once lived at the site of Barton Springs. Regardless of these different backgrounds, the six narrators brought important values and skills to the debate over protecting Barton Springs and to what extent to offer support to SOS.

In addition to uncovering the complexities of the relationship between SOS and the Mexican American and African American leaders I interviewed, I interrogate the very meaning of what constitutes the “environment” to them. This was not one of my initial goals, but it quickly became apparent that the meaning of the environment differs by class, race, and

¹⁰² Part of the process of completing this essay involved asking the six narrators in my study to review the sections devoted to their interviews in order to adhere to the highest standards of oral history.

geography within Austin. For Shea, Bunch, and Yznaga, the focus was on protecting the natural treasure that is Barton Springs. Their focus on this issue guided their actions as they rode the SOS Ordinance to electoral success in 1992. For Almanza and Llanes, their appreciation for the value of water and its connection to people motivated their support for SOS. The role of “humankind” in the equation was paramount. For Travillion in his role with the NAACP, protection of the watershed was important, but it was but one issue in many issues facing the community he represented at the time. In this respect, he echoed Almanza and Llanes in his prioritization of people in the debate. This varying definition of the environment thus had an important role in these three latter leaders’ decision to support SOS and to its eventual success at the ballot box.

There were missed opportunities that accompanied this success, however. Yznaga most eloquently discussed these topics, which included the failure to look beyond the immediate drive to win the SOS battle and the inability to maintain the environmental community as a cohesive force. Had SOS leadership made greater efforts to embrace social justice issues beyond the environmental concerns of SOS, its outcomes might have been more favorable to all of Austin – White and non-White – in the long term. That, coupled with a political strategy that supported greater cohesion of the environmental community in the long run, might have contributed to a more lasting impact than occurred.

In addition to the missed opportunities of SOS recounted by the narrators in my study, there were detrimental byproducts that disparately impacted non-White communities. These primarily included the gentrification and displacement that resulted from watershed protections in West Austin that subsequently drove real estate and business development into East Austin. While Almanza and Llanes alluded to the warnings they were given, hindsight endowed all of the

narrators in my study with the ability to see this unintended consequence quite clearly. All acknowledged this as an aspect of the human environment that severely affects non-White communities in Austin today. An additional missed opportunity involved the absence of a sustained relationship between SOS and the NAACP; had this relationship been nurtured to mutual advantage, there might have been greater collaboration on other important social issues.

The unintended consequences of SOS contributed to the underlying sense of regret and/or betrayal that several of the narrators expressed. Yznaga shared the fact that being approached for an interview for my study evoked regrets that SOS had not made greater outreach to non-White communities. Llanes was deeply emotional as he recounted the ways that SOS and mainstream environmentalists neglected the Mexican American community. Almanza described this paradigm to a less emotional extent, but her precise memories of the relationship between PODER and SOS confirm that this neglect was to her an important aspect of the SOS narrative. Travillion's blunt memories of the short-term nature of the NAACP's relationship with SOS further confirm that SOS sometimes failed, to everyone's detriment, to nurture relationships with and learn from non-White communities. Although the six narrators in my study expressed the effectiveness of their present-day working relationships with each other, my analysis shows that an ongoing assessment by the participants is critical, both to continue to heal old wounds and to ensure that all communities in Austin enjoy the benefits of environmental protection.

The legacy of SOS and its battle against moneyed forces will always be an important touchstone in the environmental history of Austin and Central Texas. As Yznaga said, "SOS is still kind of sacrosanct. It cannot be touched. A lot of voters still agree with that. So it's interesting. I'm actually fascinated by the fact that next year will be thirty years of the founding

of the group, and it's still—many people feel that way.”¹⁰³ Touching the history of SOS to uncover aspects of its legacy that have yet to be told will continue to be an important endeavor for historians of Central Texas.

¹⁰³ Yznaga, interview by author.

APPENDIX SECTION

APPENDIX A: Narrators

Name	Role at time of SOS
Aleshire, Bill	Politician
Almanza, Susana	Activist
Armstrong, Beau	Developer
Arnold, Mary	Activist
Ballew, Helen	Environmental non-profit sector
Bunch, Bill	Attorney/activist
Butts, David	Political consultant
Calabrese, Joe	City of Austin employee
Cofer, George	Attorney
Collier, Bill	Journalist
Cooksey, Frank	Attorney, former City of Austin Mayor
Duffy, Charles	Attorney
Fath, Shudde	Activist
Goodman, Jackie	Activist
Kitchen, Ann	Activist
Librach, Austan	City of Austin employee
Llanes, Daniel	Activist
Lorenz, Perry	Developer
Oliver, Bill	Entertainer
Nofziger, Max	Austin City Council
Reynolds, Ronney	Austin City Council
Rindy, Dean	Political consultant
Ross, Lauren	Scientist
Sedwick, Shannon	Entertainer
Shea, Brigid	Activist
Slade, Raymond	Scientist
Slusher, Daryl	Journalist
Smith, Craig	Political consultant
Swearingen, Scott	Activist
Travillion, Jeff	President of NAACP
Umphress, John	Activist
Yznaga, Mark	Political consultant

APPENDIX B: Identifying Characteristics of Narrators

Gender
Women: 9
Men: 23
White: 28
African American: 1
Mexican American or Hispanic: 3
Age Range
59-103

APPENDIX C: Notes on Methodology

My interest in studying SOS stems from several factors. When I moved to Austin in 1986, I quickly discovered Barton Springs as a wondrous place to unwind, people watch, and simply enjoy the feeling of its icy cold waters over my skin as I swam from one end to the other. I was not actively involved in SOS, but I supported it, and I quickly came to recognize the names of the main actors. Twenty-five years later, I followed a lifelong dream to do graduate work in history and entered the public history program at Texas State, where I took a course on oral history as part of my degree requirements. Enthused by the class, I happened to mention my interest in capturing the voices of the SOS Movement to my fellow PTA volunteer Brigid Shea, the face of SOS in its heyday. Shea put me in touch with many participants, and through a snowball process as one interview led to another, I developed a list that quickly exceeded fifty names. To date I have interviewed thirty-two people, with plans to conduct additional interviews in the coming years.

In many respects, I am the classic insider to the history of Barton Springs, a factor within my research topic. How does environmental historians' advocacy of environmental causes affect their methods and conclusions? In addition, it is not lost on me that I have the time and financial means to conduct the interviews and pay for their transcriptions, amplifying my status as a privileged insider. These factors bear in their own way on my research findings. My insider status notwithstanding, the process of conducting oral history interviews with SOS participants opened my eyes to the complexity of the movement and to the realization that its effects transcended the established narrative of its unmitigated success. I am so appreciative that I have had the opportunity to meet with people and gain an understanding of the many layers beneath

the stock photos and oft-told stories, and I hope that my interviews encourage others to similarly explore environmental movements.

My methodology for audio interviewing followed a simple life history approach. I developed a relatively standard list of questions beginning with childhood and extending into the present, and I conducted extensive background research on SOS role, general career, and current role on each narrator, primarily through newspaper reports and public records. From the outset, I sought to interview a wide range of people: activists, journalists, real estate developers, and politicians. When I began my research in August 2019, I was an inexperienced interviewer, but by the third or fourth interview, I had hit my stride, both in terms of logistics and the thematic questions I wanted to explore.

I conducted the interviews in homes, offices, and the occasional public venue such as a restaurant or library space. As soon as the COVID-19 pandemic struck in winter 2020, I pivoted to Zoom interviews; I quickly discovered that this option offered a silver lining through the increased availability of my narrators and the convenience of not having to establish a physical location. Concurrent with beginning my study, I secured archival support with the Texas State University Archives. I believe that this generous support helped establish my credibility as an oral historian, as it gave my project the imprimatur of a widely recognized and respected academic institution that I could cite when contacting potential narrators.

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