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Finding the River: Research Process Narrative

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Finding the River Research Process Narrative

Last spring, I wrote my final paper for Dr. Angela Tarango's Native American Religions class on Native American groups in San Antonio. Shortly into the research process, I realized that published materials on local Native American groups are few and far between. Most groups indigenous to the San Antonio area were assimilated into the Spanish Colonial Missions, at least as far as the "official" record is concerned. I did not want to write about the missions because that has been done many times over. I wanted to write about how the river flows from time past into time present and carries meaning for indigenous peoples of San Antonio who are still fighting for federal recognition, land rights, representation in school curricula, and religious freedom. In the Coates Library, I found a monograph by Karen Stothert about the River's headwaters that referenced the Coahuiltecan, along with a few other short archaeological pieces commissioned prior to construction projects. I also met with Sergio and Melinda, an archaeologist power couple who run the archives at American Indians of Texas (AIT). I used AIT's archives and citations in archaeological monographs like Stothert's to pinpoint T.N. Campbell and Frederick Ruecking as the only scholars predating Troike's linguistic studies who had done extensive work on Coahuiltecan bands in San Antonio. Their work is several decades old, but no other mainstream scholars have attempted to make sense of sparse data about the nomadic indigenous peoples of South Texas.

Sergio and Melinda made copies of Ruecking articles from the AIT archives for me, but I found most of my other sources in the San Antonio Central Library's Texana collection. I spent hours leafing through yellowed archaeology site reports and 18th, 19th, and 20th century accounts of the San Antonio River. The stories gripped me, especially the account of a doctor who took samples from Comanche bodies after a fight at the Council House in 1840 and, when he finished his experiments, dumped the human remains into the river. When I read about the 1849 water-born cholera outbreaks, I could not help but wonder if the river had taken its revenge. As I read and took notes, I found my approach was informed by Dr. Tahir Naqvi's "Anthropological Imagination" class. We had just finished a unit on ontological anthropology, an approach that acknowledges non-human entities as actors in the social world. The San Antonio River came alive for me.

I finished the research paper in May 2018 but never forgot about it. For my Intro to Anthropology course this semester, I visited the Blue Hole, the historic source of the San Antonio Springs. As I walked through the Heritage Trail at the Headwaters Sanctuary, I took pictures of the informational plaques and monuments. One QR code lead me to a page on the Edwards Aquifer website called "San Antonio Springs and Brackenridge Park." The anonymous author cited accounts from Spanish settlers, missionaries, Anglo explorers, and 19th-century city leaders.

A few days later, Professor Jennifer Browne gave my poetry class an assignment: write a documentary poem, pulling the language for your poem from some kind of non-poetic document.

Using the citations from the Edwards Aquifer website, I went back to the Texana section at the Central Library and tracked down the full text of the explorers' accounts, including Richard Everett's "Things in and about San Antonio Texas," published in the January 1859 issue of Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper and a reprint of Frederick Olmsted's 1822 *A Journey through Texas, Or, a Saddle-Trip on the Southwestern Frontier*. I used language from these accounts, along with quotes from the Edwards Aquifer website and the plaques at the Headwaters Sanctuary, to create a four-part poem about the San Antonio Springs. Each of the four sections correspond to a different part of the Springs' history, culminating in the present day.

For this submission, I include two versions of the poem: one with text only for ease of reading, and one with footnotes and a bibliography. As I immersed myself in problematic 19th-century descriptions of indigenous peoples to write this poem, I began to feel the weight of my city's complex history. When I walk down the Heritage Trail at the Headwaters Sanctuary now, I realize there are a hundred worlds behind every word on the plaques. History is something we create.

a history of the San Antonio springs

i. diary of the explorers

look please and enjoy this
it is beyond your possible conceptions
you cannot believe

San Antonio boils in a rocky basin
invaded by nymphs and naiads
they dress themselves in deerskins
(some go about naked)
they dance the whole river dances

occasionally they kill they eat
 spiders and the eggs of ants
 worms lizards salamanders
 snakes and vipers

they save the bones
beat them together
eat the powder

this spring is a historic spring
in a field of many springs

//

ii. council house fight, 30 comanche dead, march 1840

he saved the bones
stewed the bodies in a soap-boiler
emptied the cauldron into the river

the women shrieked and cried
they rolled up their eyes
in horror they vomited
they suffered miscarriage

occasionally they kill they eat
particles of indian in their fluid

//

iii. letters of george brackenridge

"this river is my child and it is dying and i cannot stay"

there was not enough water

(there was abundant water had they been able to spread out but
the hostile nymphs of the eighteenth century forced them to congregate
in desperate mutual defense)

"my child is dying by the sinking of many artesian wells"

no time for a natural birth he suffered miscarriage
he opened the womb laid piped veins at the torn orifice

"my child is dying they all say i have no remedy"

the whole river gushes up in one sparkling burst
even the delicate roots of the water lilies may be distinctly seen
it is beyond your possible conceptions of a spring

"this river is my child it
is dying by the sinking
of wells i cannot stay to
see they all say i have
no remedy i must go"

//

iv. blue hole at the headwaters sanctuary

found today:

two sisters of charity talking
 one boy and one girl kissing
 one white waterbird stalking

this spring is the mainspring
 in a field of many artesian springs
 there are thousands of small springs that seep
 during wet times and turn the ground green

found at the beginning:

several thousand arrowheads planted like seeds
 human remains and stone-chipping debris

nobody knows where the river begins
 there is a dam and a creek and three
 points of confluence and of course
 thousands of springs

this spring is the historic source spring
 (historic, adjective, famous or important in history)
 because the water has fled this spring
 because

he saw this spring he
 wrote about this spring he
 bought and sold this spring

because

the whole river gushes up in one sparkling burst
 from the earth you cannot believe this spring
 it is beyond your possible conceptions of a spring

this spring is a historic spring
 be still and know this spring

look please and enjoy it
 as generations have done before
 as generations yet to come

//

a history of the San Antonio springs (with sources cited)

i. diary of the explorers

look please and enjoy this¹
 “it is beyond your possible conceptions...
 ...you cannot believe”²

San Antonio “boils in...a rocky basin”³
 “invaded”⁴ by “nymphs and naiads”⁵
 “they dress themselves in...deerskins
 ...some go about naked”⁶
 they dance the whole river dances

“occasionally they kill...they eat
 spiders and the eggs of ants
 worms lizards salamanders
 snakes and vipers”⁷

“they save the bones...
 beat them together...
 eat the powder”⁸

this spring is a historic spring
 in a field of many springs⁹

//

¹ From plaque attached to the rim of the Blue Hole at the Headwaters Sanctuary

² Frederick Olmstead, *A Journey through Texas: Or, A Saddle-trip on the Southwestern Frontier* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1978), 156-7.

³ Richard Everett, “Things in and About San Antonio,” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* (New York, 1859).

⁴ Olmsted, 156-7.

⁵ Everett.

⁶ Fray San Antonio de Buenaventura, cited in “San Antonio Springs and Brackenridge Park,” Hydrogeology of the Edwards Aquifer (web), accessed December 4, 2018.

⁷ Journal of Alvaro Nunez Cabeza de Vaca, cited by Karen E. Stothert, *The Archaeology and Early History of the Head of the San Antonio River* (San Antonio, TX: Southern Texas Archaeological Association, 1989), 45.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁹ From plaque posted next to the Blue Hole at the Headwaters Sanctuary

ii. council house fight 30 comanche dead march 1840

he saved the bones

“stewed the bodies in a soap-boiler...
emptied the cauldron into the [river]”¹⁰

“the women shrieked and cried
they rolled up their eyes
in horror they vomited...
they suffered miscarriage”¹¹

“occasionally they kill...they eat”¹²
“particles of indian in their fluid”¹³

//

¹⁰ Mary Maverick’s interview of Willian Corner, cited by Mary Ann Noonan-Guerra, *The Story of the San Antonio River* (San Antonio, TX: San Antonio River Authority, 1978), 51.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Cabeza de Vaca cited in Stothert, 45.

¹³ Mary Maverick’s interview of Willian Corner cited by Guerra, 51.

iii. letters of george brackenridge

"this river is my child and it is dying and i cannot stay"¹⁴

there was not enough water

"there was abundant water...had they been able to spread out [but]...
the hostile...~~indians~~ [nymphs] of the eighteenth century...forced them to congregate
[in]...desperate mutual defense"¹⁵

"my child...is dying [by]...the sinking of many artesian wells"¹⁶

no time for a natural birth he suffered miscarriage
he opened the womb laid piped veins at the torn orifice

"my child...is dying they all say i have no remedy"

"the whole river gushes up in one sparkling burst"¹⁷
even the delicate roots of the water lilies may be distinctly seen¹⁸
"it is beyond your possible conceptions of a spring"¹⁹

"this river is my
child...it is dying
[by]...the sinking of...
wells...i cannot stay to
see...they all say i have
no remedy...i must
go"²⁰

//

¹⁴ Letter of George Brackenridge, cited by Charles R. Porter, *Spanish Water, Anglo Water: Early Development in San Antonio* (College Station: Texas A & M Univ Press, 2011), 123.

¹⁵ Charles R. Porter, *Spanish Water, Anglo Water: Early Development in San Antonio* (College Station: Texas A & M Univ Press, 2011), 79.

¹⁶ Letter of George Brackenridge, cited by Porter, 123.

¹⁷ Olmsted, 156-7.

¹⁸ Everett.

¹⁹ Olmsted, 156-7.

²⁰ Letter of George Brackenridge, cited by Porter, 123.

iv. blue hole at the headwaters sanctuary

found today:

two sisters of charity talking
 one boy and one girl kissing
 one white waterbird stalking

this spring “is the mainspring
 in a field of many artesian springs”²¹
 there are thousands of small springs that seep
 during wet times and turn the ground green²²

found at the beginning:
 several thousand arrowheads planted like seeds
 human remains and stone-chipping debris²³

nobody knows where the river begins
 there is a dam and a creek and three
 points of confluence and of course
 thousands of springs²⁴

this spring is the historic source spring²⁵
 “historic, adjective, famous or important in history”²⁶
 because the water has fled this spring
 because
 he saw this spring he
 wrote about this spring he
 bought and sold this spring
 because

“the whole river gushes up in one sparkling burst...
 from the earth...you cannot believe...this spring
 it is beyond your possible conceptions of a spring”²⁷

this spring is a historic spring
 “be still and know”²⁸ this spring

²¹ From plaque posted next to the Blue Hole at the Headwaters Sanctuary

²² “San Antonio Springs and Brackenridge Park”

²³ Stothert, 6-42.

²⁴ “San Antonio Springs and Brackenridge Park”

²⁵ From plaque attached to the rim of the Blue Hole at the Headwaters Sanctuary

²⁶ “Historic,” Merriam-Webster, web, accessed December 4, 2018.

²⁷ Olmsted, 156-7.

²⁸ Engraved on the bench next to the Blue Hole at the Headwaters Sanctuary

“look please and enjoy it
as generations have done before...
as generations yet to come”²⁹

²⁹ From plaque attached to the rim of the Blue Hole at the Headwaters Sanctuary

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Water Spirits in the Blue Hole: A Sacred Story of the San Antonio River

In a time before time, Blue Panther pursued Waterbird through the dark corridors of the underworld. Desperate to escape the hungry jaws of his hunter, Waterbird sprang up through a hole in the earth and spread his wings, scattering droplets of water across the land. The droplets became Coahuiltecan Indians, the first people. Yanaguana began to flow from Waterbird's hole, known by the first people as Potopatana.³⁰

Jesse, a member of the Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation, told me this story as we stood together by Potopatana, talking and fighting off mosquitos. Potopatana is a natural well supplied by spring that feeds Yanaguana, the San Antonio River. Most people today call Potopatana the Blue Hole because the limestone walls of the well tint the water blue. Once, the Blue Hole brimmed with crystal-clear water, but private wells have drained the hole so that it appears as little more than a trickle and a patch of mud eleven feet below ground. I met with Jesse because I wanted to understand the relationship that Native Americans in San Antonio have with the river. Jesse affirmed that Yanaguana was sacred, but only because all water is sacred.³¹ Although all water may be equally sacred, the Coahuiltecan people in San Antonio have depended on Yanaguana to anchor their past and present identity. Although much archival, archaeological, and ethnographic work remains to be done, I suggest that self-identified Coahuiltecan Indians in San Antonio conceive of Yanaguana as fixed in sacred space and so, rather than trying to control the river as Spanish and Anglo settlers have done, use it as a landmark to orient their own identities.

The Coahuiltecons

³⁰ Jesse Reyes in discussion with the author, April 5, 2018.

³¹ Ibid.

Before colonization by the Spanish, nomadic hunting and gathering tribes called the Coahuiltecan ranged from northern Mexico through south Texas. “Coahuiltecan” is a linguistic label, referring to the similar languages spoken by the nomadic tribes in *Tejas y Coahuila*.³² Some scholars list up to 112 different Coahuiltecan groups.³³ The Coahuiltecan were not alone in the region, as they bordered, crossed, and interacted with larger groups like the Tonkawa, Karankawa, Comanche, and Apache. Coahuiltecan formed alliances to protect themselves from the Apaches, as well as to trade items like flints, hides, and peyote.³⁴ Apparently multiple indigenous groups occupied the same encampments or *rancherías*, possibly to find strength in numbers against the Apache.³⁵

Unfortunately, most of the documentation about the Coahuiltecan comes from Spanish priests, officials, and soldiers, who described indigenous people and practices in great detail but often failed to distinguish between groups. Scholars like William Newcomb³⁶ and Frederick Ruecking³⁷ have attempted to write complete descriptions of Coahuiltecan culture and history but had to draw on disparate accounts from Mexican plains and mountains, Texas coastal areas, and the areas surrounding the Rio Grande, Frio, Medina, and San Antonio rivers. The scattered distribution of Coahuiltecan makes it difficult to find information specific to a single group.

³² Mardith K Schuetz-Miller, *The History and Archeology of Mission San Juan Capistrano, San Antonio, Texas; Description of the Artifacts and Ethno-history of the Coahuiltecan Indians* (Austin, TX: State Building Commission, Archeological Program, 1969), 78.

³³ William C. Foster, *Historic Native Peoples of Texas* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008), 128.

³⁴ Schuetz-Miller, 87-9.

³⁵ T.N. Campbell, *The Payaya Indians of Southern Texas* (San Antonio: Southern Texas Archaeological Association, 1975), 4.

³⁶ William W. Newcomb and Hal M. Story, *The Indians of Texas: From Prehistoric to Modern times*. (Austin: University of Texas Press), 1961.

³⁷ Frederick Ruecking, "The Social Organization of the Coahuiltecan Indians of Southern Texas and Northeastern Mexico," *Texas Journal of Science* 7, no. 4 (1955): 357-88.

Coahuiltecan lived off the land, harvesting whatever was in season. Travelling from Mexico through Texas, Cabeza de Vaca remarked that people would go three or four days without food if they could not find something to hunt or harvest.³⁸ Archaeological records suggest that Coahuiltecan movement followed “the seasonal availability of the productive plant foods.”³⁹ Some groups gravitated towards prickly pear plants in the summer and pecan trees in the fall, while others migrated to hunt fish or buffalo. Because plant, animal, and human life shares a common need for water, many groups camped along rivers. In 1691, French explorer Massanet encountered one such group in south-central Texas and penned a famous journal entry:

“We passed through some low hills covered with oaks and mesquites. The country is beautiful. We came on a plain which was easy for travel and continued on our easterly course. Before reaching the river there are more small hills and large oaks. The river is bordered by many trees: cottonwoods, oaks, cedars, mulberries and many vines. There are lots of fish, and prairie hens are numerous on the high ground. On this day there were such droves of buffalo, the horses stampeded. We found at this place the encampment of the Indians of the Payaya tribe. This is a very large tribe, and the country where they live is very fine. I named this place San Antonio de Padua because it was his day. In the language of the Indians it is called Yanaguana.”⁴⁰

“Yanaguana” is one of two preserved words from the language of the Payaya, a Coahuiltecan group whose territorial range included San Antonio.⁴¹ Yanaguana has been translated by some as “refreshing waters,”⁴² although present-day Coahuiltecan say the word means “water spirit.”⁴³ The word refers either to the river now known as the San Antonio River, or to Payaya encampments along the river. In her monograph for the Southern Texas Archaeological Association, Karen Stothert maps fifteen archaeological sites in the Olmos Basin

³⁸ Karen E. Stothert, *The Archaeology and Early History of the Head of the San Antonio River* (San Antonio, TX: Southern Texas Archaeological Association, 1989), 45-8.

³⁹ Thomas R. Hester, *Digging into South Texas Prehistory: A Guide for Amateur Archaeologists* (San Antonio, TX: Corona Pub., 1985), 45.

⁴⁰ Mary Ann Noonan-Guerra, *The Story of the San Antonio River* (San Antonio, TX: San Antonio River Authority, 1978), 5.

⁴¹ Campbell, 15.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Jesse Reyes in discussion with the author, April 5, 2018.

and Incarnate Word areas of the river alone.⁴⁴ These sites have yielded potsherds, arrowheads, shell ornaments, and even human remains, all evidence of encampments like the one Massanet encountered. San Antonio exists in a “Transitional Zone,” an ecological space that lies between two or more kinds of climates. San Antonio intersects oak-juniper-hickory woods, mesquite and dry brush country, the coastal plain, and the Rio Grande plain, so the area fosters diverse plant and animal life that qualifies San Antonio as a “biological hub.”⁴⁵ For hunting and gathering tribes who migrate to eat in-season food, such a fertile area meant abundant resources for life.

If one conceives of Coahuilteco-speaking people as at least a loosely affiliated collection of tribes and bands, Yanaguana lies at the center of their territory. A lead archaeologist at the Ranchería Grande site in central Texas described Yanaguana as the Coahuiltecan equivalent of Rome, the capital and center of their land.⁴⁶ Whether or not pre-colonial Coahuiltecan actually felt this way about the river is impossible to determine. Although Coahuiltecan existed as a diverse collection of tribes, they intersected each other at multiple times and places.

Archaeologists have found river crossings and trails ranging from Coahuila to San Antonio to East Texas, suggesting that Coahuiltecan travelled and traded with each other along set routes.⁴⁷ This organized interaction between Coahuiltecan suggests that the groups had some sense of shared territory, and that Yanaguana was at the geographic center of this space as an important site for both encampments and trade routes. Yanaguana nurtured life, but reducing the Coahuiltecan relationship with the river to a matter of biology would be a grave mistake.

Yanaguana in Sacred Space

⁴⁴ Stothert, 15.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

⁴⁶ Anonymous in discussion with the author, April 19, 2018.

⁴⁷ Foster, 108-9.

Coahuiltecs likely used Yanaguana not only to situate themselves geographically, but also to orient themselves in sacred space. At least in northern Mexico, for which documentation is more abundant than Texas, Coahuiltecan ceremonies related to events in tribal life, such as war dances to promote or celebrate victories, or singing and feasting ceremonies to celebrate a good harvest.⁴⁸ Usually shamans, who were also healers, presided over these ceremonies.⁴⁹ Coahuiltecs looked to nature for omens and ascribed spiritual power to mountains, winds, clouds and other features of the natural world.⁵⁰ When asked, one Coahuiltecan even said that when people die, they go to the other side of the *charco* or water-hole.⁵¹ While these accounts are not specific to Coahuiltecs in South Texas, Coahuiltecan groups did travel and mix with each other. South Texas Indians may have had similar practices, or were at least familiar with the ways of their Northern Mexican neighbors. Such religious activities are sacred because they bind the daily events of life on earth to the spiritual world, much as Potopatana links the present world with the world before creation. For Coahuiltecs, Yanaguana's physical and geographic centrality connects to its spiritual centrality, as events that source life, like abundant harvests and water, are also religious phenomena.

Government officials and scholars alike have tried to understand Yanaguana through binary categories like natural vs. unnatural, private vs. public, and real vs. unreal. For example, the river is natural, but irrigation ditches built to channel the river are unnatural. San Pedro Springs is public property because it flows through a city-owned park, but springs sourced from individually or corporately-owned property are private. Payaya stories that say the springs

⁴⁸ Frederick Ruecking, "Ceremonies of the Coahuiltecan Indians of Southern Texas and Northeastern Mexico," *Texas Journal of Science* 6, no. 3 (1954), 534-5.

⁴⁹ Ruecking (1955), 377-8.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 380.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 381.

created human life are unreal, but the fact that humans need water from the springs to live is real. For Coahuiltecan groups, these binaries cannot contain Yanaguana because the river occupies sacred space. I use the word “sacred” here in the way Thomas Maroukis uses it to describe peyote.⁵² Something sacred connects people with the material world and the spiritual world.

Ontologically, Yanaguana exists in both worlds, just like the Blue Hole exists as both a natural well and an opening into the world below. Because it occupies sacred space, the river exists unto itself, apart from human activity. Archaeologists investigating the area around Potopatana mark some regions as “disturbed,” meaning they have been impacted by previous construction, while areas without construction are undisturbed.⁵³ For indigenous groups, construction does not change Yanaguana’s nature because where there is water, there is life, and life makes places sacred. Jesse explains that “all of the water throughout the world is sacred because it makes us, and you can’t say a part of you isn’t worthy.”⁵⁴ Ancient Coahuiltecan also understood water as sacred. For Coahuiltecan, eating frogs and lizards was taboo because those creatures are associated with water.⁵⁵ Post-birth rituals included immediately bathing both the mother and the child in water, emphasizing water as the source of life.⁵⁶ Regardless of human interference in the environment, Yanaguana remains sacred as long as it holds water.

Because Yanaguana’s sacred status comes from its ability to give life, the essence of the river cannot be “disturbed” by human activities like construction. The label “disturbed” implies a one-way relationship, where humans alter the river and the river passively complies. On the

⁵² Thomas Constantine Maroukis, *The Peyote Road: Religious Freedom and the Native American Church* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 17-9, 70-1.

⁵³ Leonard Kemp, *Archaeological Survey Associated with the Proposed Stadium Field House and Bleachers at the University of the Incarnate Word, San Antonio, Bexar County, Texas* (San Antonio: Center for Archaeological Research, University of Texas at San Antonio), 2008.

⁵⁴ Jesse Reyes in discussion with the author, April 5, 2018.

⁵⁵ Schuetz-Miller, 86.

⁵⁶ Ruecking (1954), 362.

contrary, Yanaguana interferes with human existence. Unable to create or move a river, Spaniards settled in San Antonio because of the life-giving springs. A series of Spaniards traversed the river in the late 17th and early 18th centuries.⁵⁷ The explorers, priests, and officials wrote effusively about its “enticing” abundance, “luxuriance,” beauty, “pleasantness,” and suitability for settlement.⁵⁸ As the population of San Antonio grew, the Spaniards had to establish an irrigation system with dams and sluiceways to direct the water to the fields, because they could not grow food without it.⁵⁹ Without Yanaguana’s cooperation, humans could not survive, raising the question of who rules who in San Antonio’s ecology.

Buying and Selling the Water Spirit

As a sacred source of life, Yanaguana also defies the category of property, both public and private. The basic elements of a Spanish settlement were missions, *presidios*, and farms, and the Spaniards depended on Yanaguana for all three. Captain Menchaca created a Map of the Presidio of San Antonio de Bexar and the missions in 1764.⁶⁰ Every site on the map springs up along Yanaguana, alongside tiny ink-brushed trees. Menchaca shows how the San Antonio river flows from the Blue Hole in the north to its eventual confluence with the Medina River, fed along the way by San Pedro Springs southwest of the Presidio. Because the King of Spain ordered that Catholic missionaries lead the colonizing efforts in Texas, the *presidio* of San Antonio grew up around Mission San Antonio de Valero. At the advice of Captain Alarcón, the Spaniards built a total of five missions alongside the river so that settlers would be drawn by “lands, water rights, and wood rights.”⁶¹ Many different groups of Coahuiltecan Indians stayed at

⁵⁷ Stothert, 50-4.

⁵⁸ Charles R. Porter, *Spanish Water, Anglo Water: Early Development in San Antonio* (College Station: Texas A & M Univ Press, 2011), 7, 15-7.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

⁶⁰ Stothert, 56.

⁶¹ Guerra, 7-8.

the missions for the same reasons they camped together in *rancherías*: banding together provided protection from the aggressive Apaches.⁶² But Yanaguana also drew the Coahuiltecan.

Consciously or unconsciously, Spanish missionaries used the sacred nature of Yanaguana to advance their conversion agenda. *Acequias* brought water from the river directly to the missions, and missionary priests fought people who wanted to use the river to irrigate secular farmland.⁶³ Porter writes that the friars “wanted to control as much precious water as they could to sustain the missions and their Indian neophytes so as to convert the Indians to Christ.”⁶⁴ The abundance of water at the missions provided the basis for biological life, but the missionaries may also have used the river for spiritual contest. The ceiling of Mission Concepción includes a painting of a sun with lines running behind it to represent the river. Some think that Spaniards incorporated Yanaguana into their iconography because Indigenous peoples recognized the river as sacred. Bringing Yanaguana closer to the missions, both conceptually through art and physically through irrigation, could have increased indigenous receptiveness towards Christianity.⁶⁵

Although water in the river and the *acequias* legally belonged to the King of Spain, the king’s viceroy decreed that the rivers were for “public and common use,” so that everyone could use the river but no one could irrigate it without the King’s express permission.⁶⁶ A similar system continued under independent Mexican rule, when municipal public health ordinances required all community members to care for the river.⁶⁷ People fished, swam, and washed in the waters of Yanaguana,⁶⁸ but also had to participate in a spring river clean-up and pay fines for

⁶² Campbell, 2.

⁶³ Porter, 52-3.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁶⁵ Anonymous in discussion with the author, April 19, 2018.

⁶⁶ Porter, 58.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 76-7.

⁶⁸ Guerra, 28.

polluting its waters.⁶⁹ As the burgeoning population strained available water resources, drought and conflicts over water use proliferated.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, Mexico and then-independent Texas encouraged immigrants from the U.S. to settle in the area. When Texas joined the Union as the 28th state, settlers flooded in increasing numbers and soon, city council was controlled by Anglos.

Anglo settlers brought with them radical notions of private property. In 1852, city council auctioned off the headwaters to James R. Sweet for \$94.40 a year for a fifty-year lease. While the Spanish sold land deeds but kept the water as public property, the Anglos conceded the spring that sourced Yanaguana to Sweet as private property.⁷¹ In 1867, George Brackenridge acquired the headwater property from Sweet and worked with a city-contracted civil engineer to sell water access through a privately-owned waterworks company. Brackenridge's move to privatize the water supply sparked a frenzy of well-digging. These ground wells eventually dried up the springs, shifting the city's water supply to artisan wells and, eventually, to the aquifer and the San Antonio Water System.⁷²

Native groups refused to regard Yanaguana as property, even when offered some ownership of former mission lands. In the late eighteenth century, the five San Antonio missions were secularized, meaning they were transferred from the missionaries to the Diocesan clergy. All non-clerical goods, including farmlands and tools, were distributed to Native Americans and settlers via a lottery system. Few lots ended up in indigenous hands, although Native Americans predominated in the missions. Part of this unequal distribution is doubtlessly due to racism, but some historians suggest that the indigenous peoples themselves also declined to own property.

⁶⁹ Porter, 76-7.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 93-106, 120-1.

According to William Porter, “People in most native cultures were not attuned to individual ownership of specific tracts of earth, since all people walk on it, just as modern Texans would be confused if offered a piece of paper entitling us to ownership of delineated ‘lots’ of air.”⁷³ For the Coahuiltecans, buying and selling water made no practical sense, and likely no moral sense either. Jesse describes the bubbling springs that feed Yanaguana as the constantly moving water spirits. If Yanaguana exists in sacred space as an agential spirit, trying to buy and sell it is as immoral as enslaving a person and as foolish as grasping the wind.

Coahuiltecan Identities: Lost and Found

Many Coahuiltecan groups disappeared at the missions. The Payaya Indians are a case study in the impact of mission assimilation on Native American identities. The identifier Payaya first appeared in the diaries of Domingo Terán de los Rios and Father Massanet in 1688, when Massanet exclaimed over the impressive size of the Payaya nation.⁷⁴ After 1730, all the data on the Payaya comes not from Spanish encounters with Payaya encampments, but from mission documents. During the years of mission operations, 184 Payaya appear in the mission records. After 1789, the Payaya disappear from the roster. This does not necessarily mean that all the Payaya died, as mission records continue to document the birth, death, and marriages of *indios*, a generic Spanish word for indigenous people.⁷⁵ Either the Payaya assimilated through intermarriage with Spaniards and other tribes, or the missionaries lost interest in keeping track of specific ethnicities.

In recent years, Native American groups in the San Antonio area have been working to reconstruct their tribal identities. American Indians of Texas at the Spanish Colonial Missions

⁷³ Ibid., 66-7.

⁷⁴ Campbell, 7.

⁷⁵ Campbell, 12-3.

(AIT-SCM) is a San Antonio non-profit that works to preserve the culture of the Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation, a Native American group characterized by “historical roots in a multiethnic heritage and...a central goal of preserving a culture that is a unique product of this background.”⁷⁶ The Nation strives to bring together the numerous Coahuiltecan groups to preserve elements of their shared culture, much as Coahuiltecan once banded together for protection from Apaches. According to a current lead of the Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation, the Coahuiltecan were divided and oppressed by “English speaking Europeans” in the 19th century, until five Coahuiltecan families organized an alliance in 1921 that became the Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation.⁷⁷ Structurally based on these five founding families, the Nation consists of five clans with traditional names, including the Payaya. A male elder leads each clan, and the elders together form the tribal council.⁷⁸ The staff at AIT are part of the Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation, as well as members of the Native American Church (NAC).

Although the Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation claims the Coahuiltecan never died out but went underground to survive, research has yet to uncover individuals who can trace their Coahuiltecan descent to a specific tribe. Many members of the Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation identify themselves as “Mission Indians,” as many Coahuiltecan settled in San Antonio because of the missions. The tribal elders decide which clan each member of the Nation belongs to. Contemporary Coahuiltecan have constructed rituals and narratives to reestablish their identity as a group, many of which center on Yanaguana.

Coahuiltecan use the river as a sacred location to anchor and orient their identity. When the City of San Antonio opened San Pedro Springs Park, located at a site once frequented by

⁷⁶ Frank Mitchell. *The Language and Medicine Makes Us Strong: Coahuiltecan Identity in South San Antonio*, master’s thesis, The University of Texas at San Antonio.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Payaya encampments, the entire tribal council of the Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation attended the opening and a group of traditional singers blessed the park. The Nation also made its mark on San Antonio's most recent municipal development, the expansion of Hemisfar Park. Two sculptures rest on the bouncy rubber turf of the children's area, called Yanaguana Gardens. One is Blue Panther, with two peyote buttons for his eyes, and the other is Waterbird. When the City of San Antonio commissioned local artist Oscar Alvaredo to make the sculptures, Alvaredo consulted with members of the nation for inspiration.⁷⁹ They told him the story of Blue Panther and Waterbird, who sprang from Potopatana and spawned human life.⁸⁰ Although the Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation is not yet a federally recognized tribe, taking a leading role in municipal activities gives the Nation at least local visibility. The Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation also publicly identifies with Yanaguana, which runs like a rope from the pre-colonial past to the post-colonial present. Yanaguana binds contemporary Coahuiltecan to their ancient traditions, situating the tribe in a sacred space that cannot be touched by assimilation, conversion, construction, or privatization.

A Song in a Sacred Place

Walking from HEB to the Blue Hole, Jesse carried ceremonial items in a red duffle bag slung over his shoulder. One end of a rattle-gourd stuck out of the bag. At the Blue Hole, Jesse placed small piles of tobacco at the four corners of the well. He burned sage and cedar in an abalone shell and spread the sweet smoke with an eagle feather, all the while singing a song that combined the word "Potopatana" with vocables. He played a small drum while he sang. The

⁷⁹ White, Tyler, "Yanaguana Garden to Open Saturday at Hemisfair Park," San Antonio Express-News, October 02, 2015, Web.

⁸⁰ Jesse Reyes in discussion with the author, April 5, 2018.

song and the ritual Jesse performed celebrates Potopatana as the sacred birthplace of human life.

At the Blue Hole, Jesse points with pride to a plaque next to the Blue Hole. It reads:

“Known as Yanaguana, meaning Spirit Waters, this spring was once a gushing fountain spring pushed to the surface under tremendous artesian pressure. Today pumping from regional water wells has caused the springs to go dry. The springs flow only during very wet times of extended rainfall. Even so, the place is considered sacred ground, celebrated by many over thousands of years.”⁸¹

Ironically, the Blue Hole and the surrounding springs are owned by the University of the Incarnate Word, a Catholic university. The grounds are managed and maintained by the Sisters of Charity, an order of consecrated nuns. George Brackenridge donated the land to the Sisters in 1897, distraught because his efforts to manage the waters of San Antonio through private enterprise had dried up the once-effervescent springs.⁸² The Sisters of Charity have consulted with the Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation about how to represent the springs and recognize the Blue Hole as “sacred ground” for Native Americans, but the source of Yanaguana remains firmly in Catholic control.

The Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation fights not to own the property surrounding the Blue Hole or the missions, but only to influence how the land is used. Perhaps the Nation is setting realistic goals, given its limited political power. Alternatively, perhaps the Nation’s focus on ritual ownership is consistent with many Indians’ decision to not acquire land after the secularization of the missions. Yanaguana is sacred and life-giving, and it cannot be owned.

⁸¹ Sign posted outside the Blue Hole at the University of Incarnate Word, transcribed by author.

⁸² Porter, 123.

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