Introduction
This poster explores the proposed research design and theoretical implications of my ongoing research into Haudenosaunee toponymy in the Upstate New York area, with specific focus on the place names of bodies of water in the Oswego River/Finger Lakes Watershed. The aim of this project is to compile, map, and translate Haudenosaunee place names; in doing so, this project seeks to linguistically and conceptually analyze the ways these names work to define and create the landscape of the region. This proposed research works to acknowledge and support indigenous relationships with the land, as well as to resist colonizer forces of erasure and distortion as they are enacted on the place names of Haudenosaunee Confederacy territory.

The Six Nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy

The territory of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy is located within what is called Upstate New York. Before the loss of much of their ancestral territory to colonization, the Haudenosaunee lived on 40,284 square miles of land, from the Adirondack Mountains to Lake Erie and from the Susquehanna to the St. Regis River (Haudenosaunee Confederacy, 2017).

Although the Confederacy’s land holdings are much reduced, this research takes the Haudenosaunee into account, as it considers the Haudenosaunee to be the lawful title holders to their original territory and much of Upstate New York to be occupied land. Haudenosaunee place names exist across the entirety of this territory, although the names have often suffered historic and contemporary erasure and distortion at the hands of colonizer occupation. It is the violent distortion and erasure of language in the land that this research seeks to address.

Language Endangerment

This project by necessity navigates conditions of critical language endangerment. The six Haudenosaunee languages are temporally and spatially embedded in this region, and reflect a corresponding intimacy with particular landscape—in morphemic structure, meanings, and contextual uses. These languages originated in this North American landscape, and are thought to have evolved from the Proto-Lake Iroquoian languages, splitting into North and South Iroquoian languages 3,000 years ago (Lounsbury, 1964)—in contrast to the English that most occupants of New York State speak on an everyday basis, with origins in a Germanic linguistic corridor along the coast of the North Sea.

This research will examine the ways that the presence, absence, distortion and survival of place names affect and create the cultural and physical landscape. One of the goals of this research in navigating these conditions is to support the Haudenosaunee people through respectful alliances in assertion of their sovereignty.

Theoretical Underpinnings/ The Importance of Language to Study of Place

Scholarship and past work involving toponymy reflect the depth of possible meanings carried by place names. VI. Savage suggests that these knowledges are valuable, and may include “landscape histories, settlement origins and patterns, physical geographies of places, recent occupancies, ethnic and political changes, nationalistic sentiments, human activities, and cultural diffusion processes.” (Savage, 2009). Other scholars connect place names to memory; for example, anthropologist Nathan Wachtel writes that “the preservation of recollections roots on their anchorage in space” (Hochelder and Alderman, 2004). In this way place names allow a deep historicization or a density of landscape—both of broad ecological trends and particular ecology of place—which can powerfully inform efforts of conservation and restoration.

One of the premises of this research is that damage to place can then translate to damage to place itself, and that the accuracy and authenticity of our environmental language is compromised when colonizer language and place names are used rather than indigenous paradigms. In Haudenosaunee territory, as elsewhere, the remaining of geographies by occupiers has been part of imperialist expansion. Names that may exist unarchived in time and space (such as Susquehannock, Hecafa, Homer, and Virgil imposed on the Central New York landscape) do little to describe place itself; its ecology, its topography, or the available natural resources. These names detract from our ability to see our landscape authentically, representing what Mark Rifkin calls “the imposition of an alien set of orientations that have effects on everyday experience and regularities” (Rifkin, 2017).

This research examines the ways that Haudenosaunee place names are descriptive of memory, ecology and identity in this particular landscape. Haudenosaunee languages are temporally and spatially embedded in this region, and reflect a corresponding intimacy with particular landscape—in morphemic structure, meanings, and contextual uses. These languages originated in this North American landscape, and are thought to have evolved from the Proto-Lake Iroquoian languages, splitting into North and South Iroquoian languages 3,000 years ago (Lounsbury, 1964)—in contrast to the English that most occupants of New York State speak on an everyday basis, with origins in a Germanic linguistic corridor along the coast of the North Sea.

Methodology and Implementation

The methodology of the project will include four primary components:

- gathering of Haudenosaunee place names from various ethnographic sources
- linguistic analysis of place names
- mapping of place names in geographical space
- community implementation of findings through education and re-naming, perhaps in support of the adoption of Haudenosaunee place names into common use.

Place name data gathering: locating Haudenosaunee place names in their most accurate geographic and linguistic form. This involves archival research into available historical sources, including historic maps (i.e. those made by French Jesuits), journals (i.e. “A Journey into Mohawk and Oneida Country,” by Van den Bogaert, and other atlases or available compilations (i.e. Beauchamp’s “Indian Names in New York.”)

Future data collection will include interviews and oral histories with native speakers or other members of the Haudenosaunee Nations, dependent on the availability and interest of the speakers and language communities.

Linguistic analysis: the translation and closer analysis of the language of the Haudenosaunee place names, under the direction of linguist Percy Abrams. These six languages are almost identical in linguistic structure, but have orthographic differences. A standard translation of Haudenosaunee language documents Haudenosaunee words units into individual morphemes, and translates those morphemes both separately and in the context of the larger word. I use the ‘five line translation’ method, explained further below, taught by Percy Abrams; this method is thorough, visually accessible to non-Haudenosaunee speakers, and expressive of the internal mechanisms of the language.

Mapping the production of digital and physical maps that situate the place names and corresponding geographic features within the Haudenosaunee landscape. This component works to record and situate place name data, and describe the spatial dimension of place name relationship with land. The research works in parallel with and hopes to complement indigenous mapping projects such as the Creek in Place Names and Story Atlas; the Coming Home to Indigenous Place Names in Canada project; and the Decolonial Atlas.

Community implementation: sharing data and conclusions with communities of interest. This component will work to support efforts of decolonization through (re)selecting and (re)owning the landscape. The research is designed to incorporate indigenous goals into the project, and in its structure invites future collaboration. The methodology works in parallel with and hopes to complement indigenous language revitalization programs such as Percy Abrams’s Iroquois Linguistics program at Syracuse University; language classes at Kanien'kehaka Mohawk Community; and the immersion program at the Akwesasne Freedom School, among others. It is one of the underpinnings of the research that using oppressive languages enforces oppressive paradigms, and that a decolonization of landscape includes efforts towards a decolonization of language.