

Common Tensions

SARAH KANOUSE, *Associate Professor*
Department of Art + Design
Northeastern University

NICHOLAS BROWN, *Associate Teaching Professor*
School of Architecture
Northeastern University

Based in the hilly, unglaciated Driftless Area of the upper Midwest of the United States, Common/Place is a self-organized, off-the-grid platform for ecological resilience, cultural inquiry, and land-based pedagogy. The rustic setting offers a space to examine how such rural spaces have been both produced by and mobilized within the linked projects of capitalist extraction and settler colonial extermination and to connect and grow the nodes of resistance always present within such systems. Our primary project up to this point has been a series of experimental seminars assembling artists, writers, and cultural workers to learn from and with naturalists, historians, farmers, citizens of the Indigenous Ho-Chunk Nation, and the land itself. This grounded creative research and pedagogy generates a network of informal relationships that connect the urban and rural to break through the present moment of political retrenchment and set the stage for social and ecological cooperation in the face of the climate chaos to come. This practice-based, epistolary essay reflects on the first four years of Common/Place, highlighting constitutive tensions and continued negotiations around property, relationships, ecology, and time—individual, generational, and geological—that can quickly become sedimented in infrastructure and no longer open to question.

“I’m not sure what makes this gathering something more than an interesting trip for your art friends.”

It takes courage to say something like that, to be the fly in the proverbial ointment. With the large group assembled around the first campfire of our self-organized mobile seminar, we asked people to reflect on their goals and motivations for joining us in this out-of-the-way clearing in rural

Wisconsin, one kilometer up a rutted, muddy path near the Kickapoo River. This response turned the question back on us, asking us to justify the actual contribution made by the gathering if we really hoped to build a land-based, place-based platform for practices of decolonizing, “commoning,” and resisting the politics of resentment, retrenchment, and the resurgent far right.¹

Our friend’s provocation asked us to contend with the actual difficulty of shaping a shared knowledge of place and directing it toward action. Even if, as literary and queer theorist Lauren Berlant writes, “the proclamation of ‘the common,’ its manifestic function, is always political and invested in counter-sovereignty, with performative aspirations to decolonize an actual and social space that has been inhabited by empire, capitalism, and land-right power” (Berlant, 2016, p. 397), the proclamation itself leads to no practical epiphanies. Using the word “common” as a verb rather than a noun recognizes the role of experimentation, iteration and accretion in making shared, democratic spaces of cultural and material sustenance. Such practices require honest assessment, constant recalibration, and careful attention to the ways that context conditions the meaning and effect of gestures of commoning. It is in this spirit that we undertake this essay, a practice-driven reflection on the first four years of building, organizing, and programming Common/Place. Our goal is to describe and evaluate our efforts to create a shared space of research, habitation, and community-building in the upper Midwestern United States that insistently foregrounds its own position within the structuring and enduring act of violence on which the country is founded: the expropriation and occupation of sovereign Indigenous land. We have found, perhaps unsurprisingly, that it is profoundly uncomfortable for many non-Indigenous people to center Indigeneity and to teach about settler colonialism—a concept that describes ongoing, evolving, and structural forms of colonization that seek not just to extract resources but to eliminate, erase, and replace Indigenous peoples and to seize land, water, and identities. Doing so changes not just

1 — Historian Peter Linebaugh has argued that the commons should be defined not as a thing but as a set of practices; we follow him in our use of common as a verb.



FIG. 1
Map of Wisconsin showing the location of Common/Place, the Kickapoo Valley Reserve, and Maa Wákačąk in relation to major cities and the Mississippi River.
Map: Sarah Kanouse

our understanding of the territory on which we live but also our right to common it—indeed, our liberal-individualist rights to, rather than responsibilities for, anything at all. Less an academic argument about the commons than an extended reflection on the problematics of enacting it, this essay makes a modest contribution to an archive of critical-creative practices of commoning in the arts-ecology sphere. Our understanding of the commons draws on the work of historian Peter Linebaugh and feminist

political philosopher Sylvia Federici, tempered by Indigenous critiques. Linebaugh coined the term “commoning” (as opposed to economist Elinor Ostrom’s “common pool resource”) to describe the varied and constantly expanding set of egalitarian practices by which people negotiate relationships with one another and their means of social reproduction.

Common/Place is an emergent project anchored on 160 acres of family land in the hilly, unglaciated Driftless Area of rural southwest Wisconsin in the Midwestern United States. The land was purchased by Nicholas Brown’s parents in 1979 but was never inhabited by the family who lived in the state capital of Madison, a 90-minute journey by car. For decades, the land remained a place of psychological attachment and recreation more than material engagement, aside from episodic and unsystematic tree planting and the occasional installation of boxes to house nesting bluebirds. Over the decades, the value of Wisconsin farmland soared, and the middle-class Brown family could afford to own such a large tract of recreational land only through the abatement of property taxes offered by Wisconsin’s Managed Forest Law. A mandatory timber harvest in 2016 netted enough money to build, by hand, the yurt, outhouse, and three-sided outdoor kitchen that provided the minimum basic infrastructure to sustain both longer visits and larger gatherings on the land.

Our desire, however, was never to maintain the rustic camp as a private family retreat. While the land remains owned solely by Nicholas’s mother, we have long envisioned it as a platform from which to undertake loosely related projects of creative inquiry, education, and ecological and social restoration. Given our long-term engagement with left-anarchist politics and artistic collectivism, we wanted this platform to embrace reciprocity and mutualism even though the land would continue to be privately owned for the foreseeable future. In 2017, we began to host the Kickapoo Conversations: annual gatherings of like-minded cultural workers, academics, and back-to-the-land neighbors to build a shared base of knowledge situating the land within a broader historical, political, and environmental context. These relationships resulted in an invitation to organize one of five “field stations” for research-creation in conjunction with the Haus der Kulturen der Welt’s *Mississippi: An Anthropocene River* in 2018–2019. This institutional framework offered a larger budget and

audience for our efforts, as well as an explicit charge to consider the questions of property, settler-colonial entanglements, and land restoration in the context of evolving and contesting discourses on the Anthropocene.²

This essay adopts an epistolary format to avoid flattening the authors' different priorities and perspectives into a single, unified voice. We use the first-person singular to highlight how our thoughts diverge, variegate, and evolve. The long development of this essay has unfolded as energies have shifted from building the minimal physical and affective infrastructures needed to sustain human habitation on the land, through group exploration and conversation establishing a framework, toward restoration projects and research-creation works. This stage involves ways of knowing and acting that are alternately bureaucratic and embodied, intellectual and relational: managing budgets spread across multiple institutional and personal accounts; learning to girdle a tree; editing a series of artists' books on relational land ethics; negotiating how friends, neighbors, and community groups might use the land. These divergent modes of thinking sometimes seem totally incompatible: the project threatens to spin apart or, alternately, grind to an impasse. It is precisely these tensions and incompatibilities that we seek to highlight in this text as a way of resisting the universalizing tendency of the "manifestic" commons and to ground our efforts in the actual difficulty of commoning (Berlant, 2016, p. 397). Berlant writes of her suspicion about "the prestige the commons concept has attained in the US and theory-cosmopolitan contexts" because it "threatens to cover over the very complexity...and interdependence it responds to" (Berlant, 2016, p. 395). This essay, like *Common/Place* itself, seeks to acknowledge and work within (not through) constitutive tensions and complexity. Rather than publicly perform our artistic and political successes, we write of the

2 — The Anthropocene is a proposed new geologic era defined by human dominance over planetary systems. Originating in the sciences, where it remains a controversial proposal, it has been rapidly adopted in the humanities as a framework for understanding the present eco-cultural condition. The periodization of the Anthropocene is hotly debated in both the humanities and natural sciences, as different start dates foreground or obscure the political dimensions of ecological transformation.

difficulties, frustrations, ruptures, and ambivalences that have emerged from this multi-year project, which has above all been a process of un-learning the taken-for-granted ways of being, collaborating, and belonging in the world.

The Politics of Place Attachment

NICHOLAS BROWN

I've been coming to this place since I was 4 years old. That is now more than 40 years. The white pine seedlings I planted as a kid with my dad have grown into big trees, over fifty feet tall in some cases.

Measured against my own lifetime, my connection to this place is as deep as it gets. Measured against the three, four, or even five generations of the prideful settler, my connection grows shallower. And measured against the hundreds of generations the Ho-Chunk and other indigenous peoples have called this place home, my connection dissipates to the point of nothingness.

I am constantly aware of the relativity of my attachment—of my permanent status as a newcomer and an outsider. But I keep coming back—even though I now live more than 1200 miles away.

Despite the inconvenience, I resist the temptation to exchange this piece of land for another one. I resist the fungibility of land as commodity, even if the distance often causes exasperation and complicates logistics. The relationships and obligations I feel are not transferable, nor are they things I can simply walk away from. Reflecting on the impossibility of detachment from settler colonial homelands, scholar-activist Shiri Pasternak writes: “my love for these places is constitutive of my identity, violence and all, and to disavow them is to choke off the attachments that give our lives their rich and challenging meanings and form the anchors that tether our responsibilities” (Pasternak, 2017, p. xxvi).

I am keenly aware of the complicity of my attachment—how my attachment is part of that “violence and all.”

Writer KT Thompson's query about love of place rings in my head, spurring other questions: “I wonder if when settlers write of their attachments to place, of the five generations that have lived and cultivated the

land, they express a form of love at the expense of another, where ‘love’ equals property and inheritance” (Thompson, n.d.). Is it possible, I ask myself, to honor these different and incommensurable scales of place attachment? To recognize the substantive depth of place-knowledge gleaned over thousands of years? To resist the impulse to become native to place? To resist seizing indigeneity, and focus instead on abolishing white possessiveness and relationality as a means of deepening settler place attachment?

SARAH KANOUSE

My engagement with the land is less thick. I was not present decades ago, as Nicholas (or Nick, as I call him) was, at the planting of the pine trees whose needles I now sweep to sprinkle on the composting toilet. Indeed, my relationship with the land depends entirely on my partnership with Nick which began back in graduate school on the basis of shared intellectual, political, and creative commitments to the politics of space and landscape. Influenced by critical geography, we began to collaborate and support each other’s creative and academic projects that excavated how specific places are constructed through spatialized, trans-local relationships that are structured by capital but can never be fully subsumed by it. The particular, the material, and the local present friction to the homogenizing and totalizing impulses of global capitalism, settler colonialism, and white supremacy, even as they also participate in those systems in ways that stretch across space and time. Through this lens, no place is purely affective, singular, or idiosyncratically local, nor can it be positioned in opposition to the empty abstraction of Cartesian space. Tracing the precise ways that distant places are linked through these processes and systems produces what feminist geographer Cindi Katz calls “countertopographies,” which maintain “the distinctness of a place while recognizing that it is connected analytically to other places” and “elucidate the intersections of these processes elsewhere and thereby inspire a different kind of politics, one in which crossing space and ‘jumping scale’ are obligatory rather than overlooked” (Katz, 2001, p. 1229 and 1231).

Over time, we began working with a loose network of other Midwestern artists and cultural workers who wanted to better understand how the post-industrial and agri-industrial landscapes of the region po-

sitioned within circuits of global capital, speculation, and labor flows. The corn and soy monocrops that surround every Midwestern city and town are the apotheosis of settler colonialism: the land cleared of both human and other-than-human beings in order to produce inedible commodities measured in capitalist terms of yield per acre. They also are quite literally killing the planet. Industrial agriculture contributes more than one fifth of global greenhouse gases while destroying biodiversity—including crucial pollinators—and washing away soils that took millennia to build. As the global far-right resurgence began to trickle up in Wisconsin with the election of Republican governor Scott Walker in 2010, we became especially interested in locating and cultivating relationships among radical ecological, anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and Indigenist initiatives that put to lie stereotypes of the region's conservatism and cultural backwardness, frequently expressed in derisive terms like “flyover country.”³

Our collective proposition was that there already exists a Midwest Radical Culture Corridor; it just needs to recognize itself. Calling ourselves Compass, we produced books, maps, and public events that oriented audiences to the political ecology of the global Midwest while locating and connecting with grassroots and broadly anti-capitalist, anti-racist cultural initiatives. We hoped to cultivate new possibilities for Midwestern identity by emphasizing how it was always already imbricated in settler colonialism and circuits of capital and connecting the many communities working in ways large and small to rework these relationships. As feminist geographer Doreen Massey observed: “Space can never be that completed simultaneity in which all interconnections have been established, and in which everywhere is already linked with everywhere else. A space, then, which is neither a container for always-already constituted identities, nor a completed closure of holism. This is a space of loose ends and missing

3 — “Flyover Country” is a derisive term sometimes used by people on the more affluent, urbanized, and liberal coasts of the United States to refer to the rural expanses of the Midwest and Great Plains. While reflecting the reality that large cities with hub airports are quite far apart in this area, the term indicates a tendency to homogenize and hold in contempt the remarkably varied non-urban communities that occupy a large portion of US territory.

White Earth Reservation, MN

Two organizations on the White Earth Ojibwe Reservation, *Honor the Earth* and the *White Earth Land Recovery Project*, recently erected a 75 kW wind turbine to power their offices in Callaway, Minnesota. A nearby reservation town installed a 20kW tower in 2002. In addition, ten houses on White Earth have Native-built and -installed solar air heaters from Lakota Solar Enterprises

on the Pine Ridge Reservation. These small-scale, cooperative efforts exemplify a thriving Native energy movement. The Department of Energy's Tribal Energy Program has funded 70 projects across the country. Many more have been initiated through grants, pooled funds, and the accumulated knowledge of other successful projects. Solar and wind generation aligns with traditional spiritual beliefs and provides jobs

across Indian Country. The lands and lifeways of native people have been disproportionately harmed by the waste and pollution of coal and nuclear power. Groups involved in Native energy projects see renewable energy as an extension of tribal sovereignty and part of achieving energy justice.

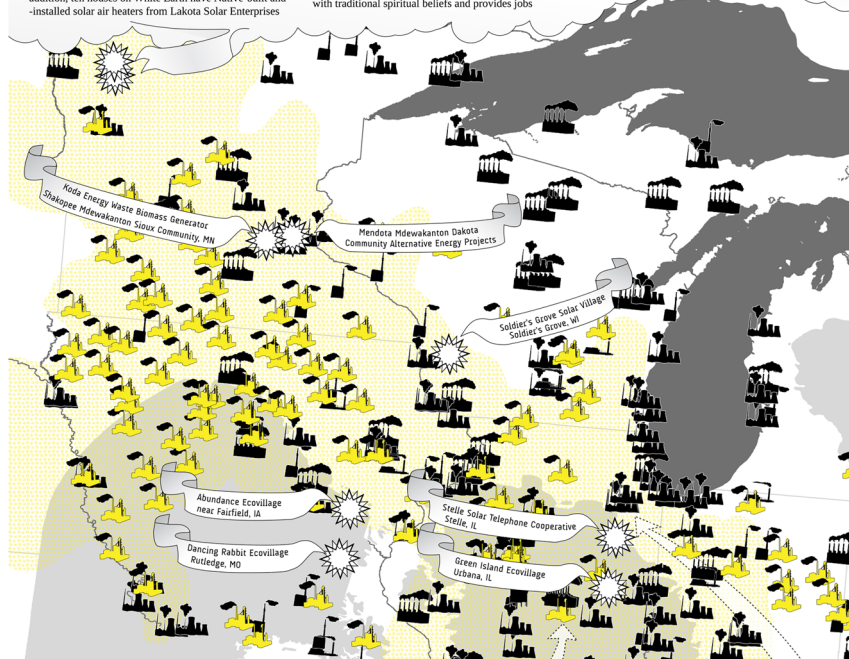


FIG 2

Detail from “Region From Below: Power Plants,” a 2009 map by Compass focusing on emergent solar infrastructures in the Midwest, an area dominated by coal and ethanol.

Photo: Ryan Griffis and Sarah Kanouse

links. For the future to be open, space must be open too” (Massey, 2005, pp. 11–12). Compass projects and gatherings sought to find the “loose ends” that could be opened up to cultivate new cultural and political alliances.

Grounded Spatial and Social Imaginaries

NICHOLAS BROWN

In many ways, *Common/Place* is an outgrowth of *Compass*. The two projects share interlocutors, methodologies, and fields of inquiry ranging from political ecologies to radical histories. To a certain extent both projects are also about infrastructure: building cultural infrastructure—the Midwest Radical Culture Corridor—in the case of *Compass*, dismantling colonial infrastructure in the case of *Common/Place*, and in understanding the ways in which our subjectivities and political horizons are implicated in “how ‘we’ build infrastructure, and it builds ‘us’” (Cowen, 2017).

However, the two projects differ dramatically in the spatiotemporal scale of engagement. Whereas *Compass* focused on connecting places dispersed throughout a region, through travel, events, and ephemeral projects, *Common/Place* emerges from a specific place within that region over an extended, indeterminate period of time. They also differ in how insistently they foreground incommensurable relationships with place produced by settler colonialism and white supremacy—and how much they demand settler-descended people to hold ourselves accountable. The rhetoric of ‘open spaces’ for cultural-political reinvention risks recapitulating colonial notions of the blank slate and *terra nullius*. *Common/Place* asks former collaborators and fellow travelers of *Compass* to literally ‘ground’ our collective experimentation with spatial imaginaries—and to do so in a place with histories and attachments that were anything but ‘open.’ To paraphrase Pasternak, the land serves as an anchor that tethers our responsibilities to one another and to the eco-social-political conditions that structure our relationship to that land. It imposes limitations—some desirable, others undesirable, but always generative.

The land challenges us to move more fluidly between the abstract and the concrete. We want to continue thinking expansively about the urban/rural continuum, but also to think concretely about very specific, local stories. These include, for example, the ongoing Ho-Chunk re-acquisition of a tribal land base in the area—a place they have occupied for more than 10,000 years—initiated when they successfully negotiated for land seized by the federal government for a dam that was never built. We also seek to recognize and support the efforts of activists to maintain connections between Milwaukee (Wisconsin’s largest city and site of radical Black organizing) and the Cheyenne Valley, the state’s largest rural African American settlement in the 19th century, which resulted from mass disobedience of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act and fractured 75 years later in the face of the terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan.⁴ The land forces us to deal with

4 — The Ku Klux Klan is a US domestic terrorist organization founded just after the American Civil War to resist Black political and economic equality. After racial equality was abandoned as a political goal in the 1870s, the Klan went into decline, only to be resuscitated in the early 20th century as an anti-Black

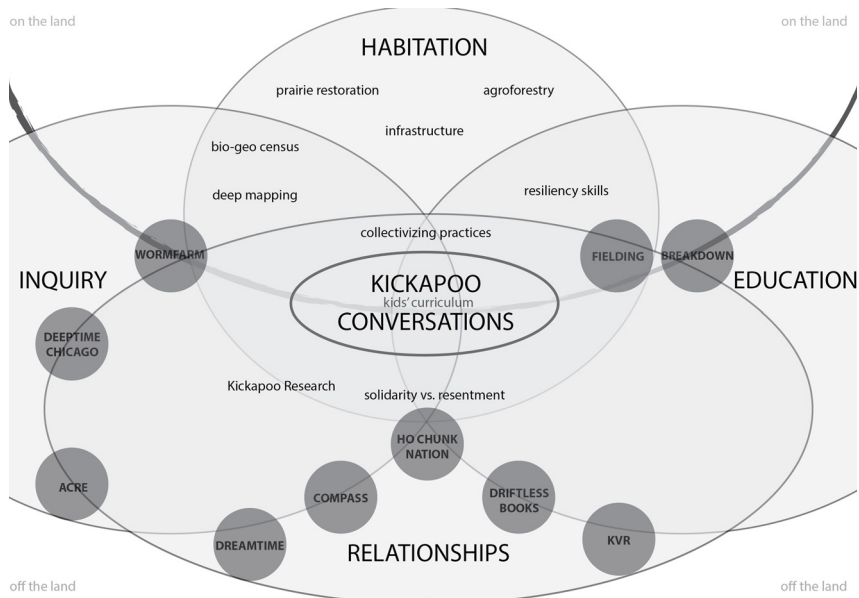


FIG. 3
 Concept map from 2018 showing relationships between the Kickapoo Conversations, other components of the Common/Place, collaborators' projects, and organizations and institutions in the region.
Photo: Sarah Kanouse

more mundane topics and labor-intensive tasks related to erosion, 500-year floods, liability insurance, Wisconsin's Managed Forest Law, loggers, excavators, forest succession, composting toilets, emerald ash borers, and Lyme disease. The land demands we think more deeply about grounding and belonging in a particular place, and at a particular time. Moreover, it challenges us to think and act through multiple and incommensurable forms of relationships to place and to grapple with the indirect lessons offered by ideas such as "grounded normativity" used by activist-scholar

and anti-migrant organization with a membership of four million at its peak in 1920. The Klan remains active and has been responsible for several major race riots, thousands of lynchings, and tens of thousands of other acts of white supremacist terrorism across the United States.

Glen Coulthard and writer, musician and activist Leanne Simpson to describe ethical frameworks based on “Indigenous land-based practices and associated forms of knowledge” (Coulthard and Simpson, 2016, p. 254).

In late spring 2017, we sent invitations to a network of intimate friends and collaborators for the inaugural Kickapoo Conversation that would lay the groundwork for Common/Place (although the initiative itself had yet to be named). We framed the first gathering as a space to imagine what we could collectively build in the region and on the land, both literally and figuratively, that would exceed the expectations, practices, and subjective attachments of the private property model. As an available expression of what Berlant calls “an orientation toward life and value unbound by concepts and divisions of property... [that] points to the world both as a finite resource that is running out and an inexhaustible fund of human consciousness or creativity,” the commons was certainly one inspiration for our invitation to assemble on this land (Berlant, 2016, p. 396). However, our engagement with the notion of a commons to which “all” were welcome was troubled from the start with a recognition of the settler privilege entailed in having land on which to ground such a proclamation at all. The invitation’s framing text took the form of a series of provocations, including two that both mobilized and critiqued the commons:

What can we do now to create a commons—in a Peter Linebaugh-y sense?

What can we do now to create a commons—in a J. Kehaulani Kauanui-y sense—that is not predicated on Indigenous dispossession?

What does it mean now—in a Wes Jackson-y sort of way—to become native to a place? What does it mean now—in an Eve Tuck-y sort of way—to become native to a native place? (Brown and Kanouse, 2017)

The ambivalence captured in these provocations springs from Indigenous critiques of the commons, particularly by Indigenous feminists such as J. Kehaulani Kauanui, Eve Tuck, Sandy Grande, Jessica Yee Danforth, and Joanne Barker, who remind us that the contemporary commons are always built on stolen land, and that calls to ‘reclaim’ the commons mobilize narratives of extinction and blank slate ideologies while perpetuating the violent erasure of Indigenous peoples. The most recent and forceful critiques of the commons were leveled against the Occupy Wall Street

movement. The land is already occupied, insisted Indigenous activists who called for a name change to Decolonize Wall Street, a demand taken up in specific sites from Oakland to Toronto. Sandy Grande argued that Occupy Wall Street remained a fundamentally liberal project that dissolved colonialism into capitalism and in so doing solidified settler colonialism. The call to decolonize Wall Street was also an indirect call to decolonize the commons. Joanne Barker observed that “Indigenous people pushed back against the discursive and ideological work of ‘occupation,’ ‘public lands,’ and ‘the commons’ to address the dispossession of Indigenous people on which such occupation and public/common lands are conditioned” (Barker, 2018, p. 22).

Invoking the commons in Wisconsin’s Kickapoo Valley risks, at worst, perpetuating this violent erasure, and, at best, oversimplifying Indigenous “modes of relationship” (Karuka, 2019, p. 20).

With these important critiques in mind, and following sociologist and activist Craig Fortier, we conceived of Common/Place as a project of re-imagining, not reclamation (Fortier, 2017). Although our carefully worded provocations took the form of questions, we weren’t necessarily seeking answers. With the provocation pairing Wes Jackson and Eve Tuck, for example, we weren’t trying to facilitate a conversation about how to become native to a Native place, so much as to stage a confrontation with the limits of this settler logic—a confrontation with the impossibility of becoming native to a place, and also becoming native to a Native place. The provocations were simply prompts to begin articulating a different language and practice of becoming and belonging—an alternative to seizing Indigeneity.

SARAH KANOUSE

The first two summer Conversations represented our initial attempt to articulate this language and practice. For each, we invited 20-odd adults and associated children to learn about the ecology, history and politics of the Driftless Area and its connections within the broader region. Each summer’s group was slightly different, consisting of long-term friends and collaborators to thinkers whose scholarship we admire, to environmental activists and educators whose commitments inspire us, to local organic

farmers and permaculturalists whose knowledge of working with the land vastly exceeds our own. With people entering and leaving the group at different times, presenters staying for dinner and sometimes overnight, and neighbors joining us around the campfire, distinctions between why and how people had originally been invited became more difficult to perceive. This porousness helped to dislodge the insider/outsider positions that can plague groups that begin within an intimate circle, allowing us to define a “we” with blurry edges that are non-exclusive, ever shifting, and open to question. Convening the group was also an exercise in the micropolitics of place attachment, which requires negotiating the uneven attachments and knowledge of participants. Some were intimately familiar with the Kickapoo Valley; for others it was a completely novel experience. This unevenness was both a challenge and an opportunity in terms of structuring the annual program.

The first summer gathering emphasized the Kickapoo River Valley immediately surrounding the land. While we prepared meals, gathered socially, and slept on the land, structured events and conversations took place at the Kickapoo Valley Reserve (KVR) and a used bookstore/community space in a nearby town. Although this choice pragmatically sheltered us from the blistering Midwestern sun, it also signaled our commitment to think with the institutions and communities already thriving in the area, rather than declaring the land a ‘blank slate’ or a commons somehow exempted from the power geometries in the area. The KVR itself exemplifies these power geometries. Created on what was most recently former farmland purchased through eminent domain by the US Army Corps of Engineers for a never-built flood control dam, the KVR is jointly managed by the state of Wisconsin and the Ho-Chunk Nation, a sovereign Indigenous nation that successfully negotiated the transfer of unused federal property to tribal control. This story represents a concrete example of decolonization as more than metaphor: the actual return of settled property to tribal control.

The first Conversation included a tour of Ho-Chunk territory in the KVR with Tribal Historic Preservation Officer Bill Quackenbush, who discussed Ho-Chunk efforts to restore native prairie not as idle land, left to a “natural state,” but as “a form of agriculture, a cultural space, co-created by



FIG. 4
Bill Quackenbush leads tour atop Black Hawk Rock during the 2017 Kickapoo Conversation.
Photo: Ryan Griffis

human and non-human inhabitants” (Griffis, 2018). A walk with non-Native naturalist Chuck Hatfield helped us understand the differentiated but allied ways in which Ho-Chunk and settler environmentalists interpreted the landscape. We visited with Native and non-Native activists organizing against the construction of a petroleum pipeline through Wisconsin and spoke with the organizers of rural art residencies to understand how our efforts might intersect with or diverge from their goals. The gathering concluded with a workshop generating ideas for using the land in the future—from an agroforestry cooperative with rotational grazing to an anti-colonial summer camp for settler-descended people. Ranging vastly in scale and required resources, these ideas represent a collective horizon of possibility against which we can measure our actions.

The 2018 Conversation foregrounded the relationality of regional geographies. Beginning in the de-industrialized city of Milwaukee with a tour of the Indian Community School, a thriving pan-Indigenous school established out of the occupation of a vacant coast guard facility in the early 1970s, we traveled leisurely to the Driftless Area over the course of two days. Our itinerary emphasized sites where Native and non-Native groups cooperate, such as in land management at the former Badger Army Ammunition Plant, the protection of Man Mound, and, again, at the KVR

itself.⁵ However, we sought to push beyond the narratives of reconciliation that often are mobilized at these sites. Though such narratives are well-intentioned responses to troubling legacies of violence, they usually foreground coexistence and mutuality within a kinder, gentler settler-colonial framework in which decolonization is merely a metaphor rather than a serious political project. Such a project, as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang note, demands what is nearly unthinkable in the present: “the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted” (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p. 7). It requires that settlers, like us, give something up.

NICHOLAS BROWN

Part of our interest in visiting places like the Kickapoo Valley Reserve and the former Badger Army Ammunition Plant is that these are places where settlers have lost their land and where Indigenous people, specifically the Ho-Chunk Nation, have ultimately gotten some of it back. In both cases, the federal government was the intermediary owner of the property, and white farmers were compensated (not always at market value) for their land. In both cases, the tribe co-operates more or less closely with non-Native entities in managing the land according to common principles, but the collaboration is loose enough to accommodate incommensurable difference rather than having or even understanding the same goals. For example, Bill Quackenbush’s insistence that the Ho-Chunk prairie restoration fulfills the Reserve’s management goal of promoting agriculture revealed the degree to which Indigenous practices of reciprocity with and responsibility to the multispecies relations making up the land challenge settled/settler concepts of restoration (to a prior ‘natural’ state), management (of resources) and agriculture (as domesticated crops). Similarly, at Maa Wákąçąk, the Ho-

5 — Both the Kickapoo Valley Reserve and the former Badger Army Ammunition Plant are examples of land acquired for government purposes eventually becoming conservation lands jointly managed with the Ho-Chunk Nation. Man Mound is a rare human-shaped ‘effigy’ mound of the prehistoric Woodland culture that was preserved by settler farmers through the establishment of a park operated by Sauk County, Wisconsin.

Chunk portion of the former Badger Site, a complex set of multispecies and community needs are held in dynamic, sometimes tense, balance: short-term white tenant farmers' use of RoundUp clears the soil of weed seed to permit future prairie planting; a lease to a Nevada-based rocket company funds restoration projects and tribal STEM education; an underground water storage tank is retrofitted to accommodate hibernating bats.⁶ These contemporary Ho-Chunk land management practices are powerful examples of grounded normativity—or the land-centered practices out of which emerge “respectful diplomatic relationships with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous nations with whom we might share territorial responsibilities” (Coulthard and Simpson, 2016, p. 254).

Grounded normativity is not for settlers, and certainly not about settlers, but settlers must learn to recognize it if ‘we’ are to develop different relationships with the land and forge place-based solidarities. The ability to work across incommensurable difference is accomplished neither by declaring a commons *ex nihilo*, nor in finding a “common interest” in the land that naturalizes our continued possession and control (Bosworth, 2018, p. 2).

SARAH KANOUSE

In 2018–2019, an invitation to organize a “Field Station” for *Mississippi: An Anthropocene River* afforded an opportunity to bring this work to a larger public.⁷ With funding from the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, the Max

6 — STEM stands for “Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.” Rarely spelled out, the acronym has been a buzzword in US education policy over the last 15 years in an attempt to address perceived deficits in preparation for a technology-intensive job market among American students (especially poor students of color), as well as the country’s generally lackluster performance on internationally-normed standardized achievement tests.

7 — *Mississippi: An Anthropocene River* is the latest iteration of the Anthropocene Curriculum project co-sponsored by the Haus der Kulturen der Welt and the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science. The Anthropocene Curriculum has brought together hundreds of scientists, humanists, and artists for regular international convenings into how anthropogenic nature shatters conventional divisions between disciplines and calls for new methods and greater social and ecological responsibility among researchers. See <https://anthropocene-curriculum.org/>.

Planck Institute, and the Goethe Institute and working largely with people who had participated in at least one of the Conversations, we chose to ground our program in recent sympathetic critiques of the Anthropocene that focus on its biogeochemical and political origins in colonialism and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Consistent with the Anthropocene project's overall framing to attend to both the scientific and sociopolitical aspects of human dominance over earth systems in specific places, we investigated the eco-political impacts of settler colonial agriculture from the Driftless Area, where our family's land is located, and along the Mississippi River Valley into western Illinois. Our aim was both to interrogate the role of settler agriculture in the colonial Anthropocene and to center Indigenous practices of resistance and resurgence through the land. Under the name Anthropocene Drift, we produced three projects: a series of artist-initiated 'field guides' into and beyond different aspects of the Anthropocene in this region; an artful, portable space for sited conversations and literature exchange; and a five-day mobile seminar that brought us into embodied relation with the specific locations and concepts we were examining.⁸

Although many of the themes, site visits, and interlocutors were shared with earlier summer Conversations, the more public-facing nature of the program demanded that we become much more explicit about the politics and stakes of the project. In the process, we learned a great deal about our own and others' continuing attachments to forms of subjectivity and ways of relating to land rooted in European liberal-universalist frameworks inextricable from settler colonialism, whiteness, and property, as scholars including C.B. Macpherson, Cheryl Harris, Margaret Davis, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, and Brenna Bhandar have all observed. One

8— The authors coordinated Field Station 2/Anthropocene Drift with Ryan Griffis, Associate Professor in the School of Art and Design at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Contributors who had participated in prior conversations include artist Corinne Teed, artist-activist Rozalinda Borcilă, Bill Quackenbush, Randy Poelma (project lead at Maa Wákačąk), and Invictus Voices, a Ho-Chunk catering collective. For an in-depth reflection on the seminar by Brown, Kanouse, and Griffis, see "Blackhawk Park Is Indigenous Land (Beyond Acknowledgment)," <https://www.anthropocene-curriculum.org/contribution/blackhawk-park-is-indigenous-land-beyond-acknowledgment>.



FIG. 5
Conversation in the Moraine/Terminal tent during the “Over the Levee,
Under the Plow” seminar organized by Anthropocene Drift for *Mississippi:*
An Anthropocene River, September 26, 2019.
Photo: Ryan Griffis

planned project was abandoned after a lengthy development period resulted in a proposal for a permanent installation at Common/Place that did not engage the broader geographical or social context, or the relational nature of decision-making about the property. Our invitation to pursue projects in and on the land-as-commons was interpreted through the lens of creative autonomy that we slowly recognized as incompatible with the model of grounded normativity we want to learn from. Our insistent centering of the coloniality of the Anthropocene was perceived by one longtime friend as polarizing, divisive, and even dangerous in the context of the climate emergency and escalating right-wing violence that demand those of us on the side of planetary survival work transversally across social groups. As the climate justice movement has forcefully demonstrated, the idea of environment as ur-commons accurately captures planetary interdepen-

dence but too easily obscures how responsibilities, benefits, and burdens are anything but equally shared. And we ourselves were uncomfortably confronted with the animosity and suspicion appropriate to the scale of violence that ‘we’ as settler-occupiers of this land perpetuate just by being there. Our confused discomfort is a measure of how much we continue to see ourselves in liberal-individualist terms, separable from the political-ecological contexts in which we live and which our living in—however reluctantly—sustains.

The fractures in our circle of friends and collaborators revealed by the increased scale and visibility of the Anthropocene River project have prompted us to rethink Common/Place itself. In asking what made the early conversations more than a gathering of art friends, our guest was provoking us to be more explicit about our goals and to align our rhetoric with action. In doing so, he also drew a line around his own engagement: ‘more than’ was not work he could do. Four years into the project, we can no longer wait for our friends to show up every summer and encourage them to pull invasive thistle between canoe trips and discussions of Leanne Simpson’s essay, “Land as Pedagogy.” We want to deepen our collaboration with people who are willing to stay uncomfortable—both politically and physically—and make commitments to ecological and publication projects using the land as a platform. Our next phase will involve much smaller, more focused gatherings to accomplish one specific ‘habitation’ project—building a well, managing the meadow, selectively cultivating native plants—and one specific research-creation project to be documented in a series of booklets distributed through arts networks.

Conclusion: On Difficulty, Pragmatism, and Utopia

One of our primary difficulties since the beginning has been sustaining the work during the long months that pass between our visits to the land. Boston is as far from the Kickapoo Valley as Stockholm from Paris; we can only make the trip a few times per year, and only for extended periods in summer. Nicholas usually arrives as soon as he can after the end of the academic year, and the first drive up the dirt road each spring is awash with anxiety. How many trees fell to winter snow and ice? How much erosion



FIG. 6
 Back covers of the five booklets published by Field Station 2 in the collection
 “Field Guides to the Anthropocene Drift” for *Mississippi: An Anthropocene
 River*.
 Photo: Ryan Griffis

did the thaw produce? Summer brings its own panic: the overgrowth of grasses, the thicket of invasive shrubs, and the sheer size of the property dwarf the time our urban, professional lives allow us to offer the land. Each autumn’s rains bring floods—the only question is how severe and whether they have compromised any structures. Between the distance and the accelerating reality of climate change, this is simply not a place where we can declare (let alone carry out) bold, modernist plans, even if we wanted to. The land itself demands an iterative, experimental, relational approach.

If we opened the first Kickapoo Conversation in 2017 with two things—some land and some open-ended questions—we have continued to work with what we’ve got, generate further questions, and operate in

ways at once pragmatic and utopian. We can and do experience a disjunction between the mundane and sometimes frustrating negotiations around, say, liability insurance and the condition of the access road, and the more exciting, uninhibited, and often frankly ungrounded conversations with friends around the campfire, and the tensions that arise when lofty ideas give way to fundamental disagreements. Henri Lefebvre reminds us that “the category (or concept) of the ‘real’ should not be permitted to obscure that of the possible. Rather, it is the possible that should serve as the theoretical instrument for exploring the real” (Lefebvre, 2001, p. 769). In this view, conversations about road grading and arguments over decolonial land relations are, along with countless others, integral parts of the larger, decades-long project.

This dialectic between the real and the possible also manifests in our commitment to the long-term stewardship of the land, which includes restoring other-than-human habitat, recognizing its position within myriad relational landscapes, and ultimately revisiting its status as private property. Land trusts and conservation easements represent one pragmatic and concrete response to the tensions inherent in commoning and decolonizing family-owned property. Land trusts—such as the Mississippi Valley Conservancy and Driftless Area Land Conservancy in the area, and especially the handful of Black and Native land trusts nationally, such as the Black Family Land Trust in North Carolina and the Native Land Conservancy in Massachusetts—can serve as models for our long-term goal of developing new legal infrastructures. These infrastructures can engage entangled histories of Black and Native land tenure in places like the Kickapoo Valley. It is likely that such a legal infrastructure will incorporate elements of ‘best practices’ for governing a commons, such as those developed by economist Elinor Ostrom, but we also know that our questions about how to respond to the land, its legacies of violence and its fragile, shifting futures can never be worked out once and for all.

“The better power of the commons,” Berlant argues, “is to point to a way to view what’s broken in sociality, the difficulty of convening a world conjointly, although it is inconvenient and hard, and to offer incitements to imagining a livable provisional life” (Berlant, 2016, p. 395). In other words, the commons is meaningful precisely in its difficulty, in the way its horizon

recedes on approach, in its demand for constant imagining, re-imagining, and practice. Common/Place has delivered plenty of difficulty: the inconvenience of sustaining a land-based project across great distance, the surfacing of political tensions between friends and collaborators, and now the challenges of writing about a still-emergent project in a way that is specific and grounded, yet also theorized enough to be of some value to readers on the other side of the world. We have had to negotiate internalized professional norms to represent the project as a success when we are still very much in the midst of it and its outcome is in no way clear. Alongside the infrastructure for habitation, we have sought to build the social infrastructures that hold us responsible to each other and to the land. These practices require an ongoing commitment to learning, unlearning, experimenting, making mistakes, and even episodes of failure—which, we trust, are still “not evidence that the project was in error” (Berlant, 2016, p. 414). *

LITERATURE

- Barker, Joanne: “Territory as Analytic: The Dispossession of Lenapehoking and the Subprime Crisis,” *Social Text*, vol. 36, no. 2, June 2018, pp. 19–39.
- Berlant, Lauren: “The Commons: Infrastructures for troubling times,” *Environment and Planning: Society and Space*, Vol. 34 No. 3, 2016, pp. 393–419.
- Bhandar, Brenna: *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2018.
- Bosworth, Kai: “‘They’re treating us like Indians!’: Political Ecologies of Property and Race in North American Pipeline Populism,” *Antipode*, 2018, pp. 1–21.
- Brown, Nicholas and Sarah Kanouse: unpublished invitation/poster for the 2017 Kickapoo Conversation, February 2017.
- Brown, Nicholas, Ryan Griffis, and Sarah Kanouse: “Blackhawk Park Is Indigenous Land (Beyond Acknowledgment),” *Anthropocene Curriculum*, June 3, 2020, <https://www.anthropocene-curriculum.org/contribution/blackhawk-park-is-indigenous-land-beyond-acknowledgment>, accessed June 12, 2020.
- Coulthard, Glen Sean: *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2014.
- Coulthard, Glen and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson: “Grounded Normativity/ Place-Based Solidarity,” *American Quarterly*, vol. 68, no. 2, 2016, pp. 249–255.
- Cowen, Deborah: “Infrastructures of Empire and Resistance,” *Verso Blog*, January 27, 2017, <http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3067-infrastructures-of-empire-and-resistance>, accessed December 10, 2018.
- Davies, Margaret: “The Proper: Discourses of Purity,” *Law and Critique*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1998, pp. 147–73.

- Davis, Heather and Zoe Todd: "On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene," *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2017, <https://acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/1539>, accessed November 1, 2019.
- Driftless Wisconsin: <https://driftlesswisconsin.com/explore/kickapoo-river-valley/>, accessed March 24, 2019.
- Fortier, Craig: *Unsettling the Commons: Social Movements Within, Against, and Beyond Settler Colonialism*, Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2017.
- Federici, Silvia: *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*, Oakland, PM Press, 2012.
- Gómez-Barris, Macarena: "The Colonial Anthropocene: Damage, Remapping, and Resurgent Resources," *Antipode*, March 19, 2019, <https://antipodeonline.org/2019/03/19/the-colonial-anthropocene/>, accessed November 1, 2019.
- Grande, Sandy: "Accumulation of the primitive: the limits of liberalism and the politics of Occupy Wall Street," *Settler Colonial Studies* vol. 3 no. 3-4, 2013, pp. 369-380.
- Grant, Sonia A. P.: "'Pervasive, yet Fractured': A Roundtable on Centering Indigenous Critiques and Teaching Settler Colonialism," *Cultural Anthropology*, August 20, 2019, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/pervasive-yet-fractured-centering-indigenous-critiques-a-roundtable-on-teaching-settler-colonialism>, accessed November 1, 2019.
- Griffis, Ryan: *A Great Green Desert: Into the Pit*, Chicago: Deep Time Chicago, 2018, <https://zenodo.org/record/1230691#.XA3tYBNKiHo>, accessed December 10, 2018.
- Hampden, Jane: "Settlement at Hillsboro, WI," Lake Effect, WUWM radio, June 11, 2009, <http://www.wuwm.com/post/settlement-hillsboro-wi>, accessed December 10, 2018.
- Haraway, Donna: "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin," *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 6, 2015, pp. 159-165.
- Harris, Cheryl I.: "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review*, vol. 106, 1993, pp. 1707-2039.
- Hoganson, Kristin: "Struggles for Place and Space: Kickapoo Traces from the Midwest to Mexico," in *Transnational Indians in the North American West*, edited by Clarissa Confer, Andrae Marak, Laura Tuennerman, College Station, Texas A&M University Press, 2015, pp. 210-225.
- Jackson, Wes: *Becoming Native to This Place*, Washington, D.C., Counterpoint, 1996.
- Karuka, Manu: *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2019.
- Katz, Cindi: "On the Grounds of Globalization: A Topography for Feminist Political Engagement," *Signs*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2001, pp. 1213-1234.
- Kling, George W. et al: "Confronting Climate Change in the Great Lakes Region: Impacts on our Communities and Ecosystems," Cambridge, MA: Union of

- Concerned Scientists and Washington, D.C.: Ecological Society of America, 2003, <https://www.ucsusa.org/greatlakes/glchallengereport.html>, accessed December 10, 2018.
- Kauanui, J. Kehaulani: “Nothing Common about ‘The Commons’: Settler Colonialism and the Indigenous Politics of Land Dispossession,” paper presented at Brown University, Providence, RI, October 9, 2013.
- Lefebvre, Henri: “Comments on a New State Form,” *Antipode*, vol. 33, no 5, 2001, pp. 769–782.
- Lewis, Simon L. and Mark A. Maslin: *The Human Planet: How We Created the Anthropocene*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2018.
- Linebaugh, Peter: *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for all*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2008.
- Macpherson, C. B.: *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1962.
- Massey, Doreen: *For Space*, London, Sage Publications, 2005.
- Middleton, Beth Rose: *Trust in the Land: New Directions in Tribal Conservation*, Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 2011.
- Moreton-Robinson, Aileen: *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2015.
- Nixon, Rob: “Navigating through the Driftless,” *New York Times*, September 10, 2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/09/10/travel/navigating-through-the-driftless.html>, accessed March 24, 2019.
- Ostrom, Elinor: *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, Cambridge University Press, UK, 1990.
- Pasternak, Shiri: *Grounded Authority: The Algonquins of Barriere Lake against the State*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2017.
- Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake: *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2017.
- Spice, Anne: “Processing Settler Toxicities: Part I,” *Footnotes*, June 16, 2018, <https://footnotesblog.com/2018/06/16/processing-settler-toxicities-part-i/>, accessed November 1, 2019.
- Stinson, Jennifer Kirsten: “Becoming Black, White, and Indian in Wisconsin Farm Country, 1850s–1910s,” *Middle West Review* vol. 2, no. 2, 2016, pp. 53–84.
- Thompson, KT: “Core sample, or where I come from,” no date, <http://k-thompson.com/research>, accessed December 10, 2018.
- Todd, Zoe: “Indigenizing the Anthropocene,” in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environment and Epistemology*, edited by Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, London, Open Humanities Press, 2015, pp. 241–254.
- Tuck, Eve, and Marcia McKenzie: *Place in Research: Theory, Methodology, and Methods*, New York, Routledge, 2015.
- Yusoff, Kathryn: *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2018.

