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CAMDEN BURD AND JENNIFER KIRSTEN STINSON,
GUEST CO-EDITORS

Unearthing the Past

A Midwestern Environmental History Symposium

To the untrained eye—or to those not immersed in the region’s variety—the Midwestern landscape might appear dull. The region is often described as flat, uninteresting, mundane, and monotonous. It was David Foster Wallace who noted that many onlookers “distill the Midwest into blank flatness, black land and fields of green fronds or five o’clock stubble, gentle swells and declivities that make the topology a sadistic exercise in plotting quadrics, highway vistas so same and dead they drive motorists mad.” The danger in describing the Midwestern landscape this way is not that it necessarily misrepresents modern realities. The Midwest is, more so than other regions, quite flat. And due to modern agricultural practices, one can spend hours driving along a single highway seeing only one or two staple crops. But those observations—justified or not—risk essentializing the region or, like its landscape, risk flattening its history. A dull landscape, the logic goes, must have a dull history.¹

Such arguments lack historical imagination. In reality, the environmental history of the Midwest is complex, varied, and subject to tremendous conflict and contestation. That history can be hard to see in a region that has experienced significant environmental change over the past several centuries. In his *People of the Ecotone: Environment and Indigenous Power at the Center of Early America*, Robert Michael Morrissey demonstrates this very reality. By excavating the history of Illinois’s tall grass prairie—an ecological space virtually destroyed by subsequent histories of settler colonialism, agriculture, and industry—he notes that this portion of the Midwest, like much of the whole region, is “probably one of the most radically and thoroughly changed environments on the planet.” The recovery of Midwest-

ern environmental history requires a trained eye and the patience to look past the modern landscape to reimagine what might have existed before. This is especially difficult when compared to other regional environmental histories. As Morrisey notes, other regions still offer lingering clues of environmental change including “big dams, mines, irrigation, and other infrastructure.” But for parts of the Midwest, “much of what changed the environment in the past century is invisible. It is either gone, illegible, or . . . literally buried in the ground.” Though the landscape may look mundane at first glance, the region’s environmental history reveals a deep and complex history of humans and the natural world.² In order to recover the environmental history of the Midwest, historians must search for landscapes that have literally been cut down, plowed, drained, diverted, polluted, and processed. They must be willing to unearth the environments of the past and the stories of those who sought to shape it.

The pieces featured in this special issue dig deep to reach past flattened visions of Midwestern environments. They explore terrains including but extending beyond the Midwest’s iconic farm fields. The environments they plumb and plot are neither static nor dead nor even purely natural. Rather, they were—and still are—alive with diverse peoples’ re-makings and contestations; such occurred at local and regional levels but with national and international resonances. James T. Spartz’s essay on southeastern Minnesota’s Root River Valley encourages and aims to model place writing steeped in self-education and critical reflection. Tracing the deep, millennia-long ecocultural relations of the Midwestern places that matter most, he maintains, requires that settler-descendants keep Indigenous peoples’ homelands visible. The resulting writings can advance reciprocal justice efforts and yield pluralistic understandings of self-in-place. So can reconsideration of Midwestern settlers’ past writings. Karl Nycklemoe’s study of Mary Henderson Eastman’s 1849 ethnography, *Dahcotah*, analyzes her renditions of how landscapes look and sound as tools of settler colonialism. Highlighting the sensory elements of Euro-Americans’ belief in allegedly vanishing Indians, Nycklemoe argues that Eastman’s descriptions of land, water, and people helped to create the conception of wild space ready for settlement and transformation. Indigenous people themselves continue to imbue Midwestern environments with private and public meanings, to demonstrate dynamic resistance and resilience, and to place the region centerstage within U.S. and Indigenous national agendas. As Katrina M. Phillips shows, the early twenty-first-century creation of the

Frog Bay Tribal National Park by the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe in northern Wisconsin matters both for individual tribal members and within larger histories. The Ojibwe environmental advocacy it represents was neither a passive response to nor a rejection of conservation efforts; rather, and even as many aspects of Frog Bay entail traditional ecological knowledge, the park brings to life decades of treaty rights advocacy, tribal-centered conservation, and environmental sovereignty.

Euro-American Midwesterners, for their part, often disagreed about how the region's landscape should look, be used, or understood. Patrick Allan Pospisek tracks the Galena, Illinois, mining community's shifting views of the surrounding natural world. Concerned that the newly introduced railroad would remake the city's economic identity, Galenians demonstrated clear preferences for what they considered their community's real natural advantage—the Fever River. Pospisek demonstrates how these debates challenged the economic supremacy and industrial logic of railroad boosters in the nineteenth-century Midwest. Moving into the early twentieth century and considering the permanent agriculture movement, Elizabeth Cafer du Plessis's analysis of Laura Ingalls Wilder's and Cyril G. Hopkins's writings highlights key contests that shaped the Midwest's distinct agriculture. These writers' reckonings with soil-human relationships—*informed by local and scientific ideas, diverse landscapes, and visions of sustainability and frontier self-reliance*—comprised a dynamic accumulation and transformation of regional values and knowledge.

Two longer pieces follow the Midwest's environmental history further into the twentieth century. Brian James Leech combines food, technology, and labor history approaches to take Midwestern history global. "He weds agricultural and manufacturing histories to explore overlaps between the Rustbelt and breadbasket." Iowa's Clinton Corn Processing Company, which produced high fructose corn syrup, billed its endeavors as local and Midwestern, even as its outlook turned increasingly global and competitive and even as its relationship with the city of Clinton and unionized workers soured. Elizabeth Grennan Browning's work brings this issue's presentation of a Midwestern history that is rich in diverse environments, ideologies, activisms, and competing resource use agendas full-circle. She traces how American Electric Power Co., Inc. co-opted Midwestern producerist environmentalism, spotlighting the region's centrality to the national electrical grid. This centrality, Browning emphasizes, informed regional debates about definitions of environmentalism of the 1970s, as

linked to suburbanization and geopolitical instability. At the same time, AEP's greenwashing rhetoric and coal industry practices perpetuated long-standing settler colonialist ideologies and injustices against Native Americans.

Pushing against any notion that the region's history lacks environmental change, each author demonstrates how the Midwest has been the site of intense debate and contest. Ultimately, the works compiled here demonstrate the depth and potential of environmental history in continuing to shape future directions of Middle West studies.

And more should follow. For example, we hope to see more scholarship focused on the ways that different social groups interacted, experienced, and sought meaning in the Midwest. How did Latinx, Asian American, African Diasporic, European immigrant, and LGBTQIA+ Midwesterners shape, envision, and experience their environments through the lenses of race, ethnicity, or sexuality? Additionally, what does the environmental history of the region reveal about the identities, visions, disappointments, and experiences of those who have resided there? More fundamentally, what does an examination of the environment reveal about the origins and meanings of the region more broadly? We invite scholars to continue the conversation in future issues of *Middle West Review*.

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Camden Burd is an assistant professor of history at Eastern Illinois University where he teaches and researches on American environmental history. His work has appeared in *The Michigan Historical Review*, *IA: The Journal for the Society of Industrial Archaeology*, and several edited collections. His book project, *The Roots of Flower City: Nature, Empire, and the Plant Nurserymen of Rochester, New York*, under contract with Cornell University Press, explores how burgeoning American capitalism propelled broader ecological imperial projects that transformed the American landscape over the course of the nineteenth century. He is also co-host of *Heartland History*, the podcast of the Midwestern History Association.

Jennifer Kirsten Stinson is an associate professor of history at Saginaw Valley State University and associate editor at *Middle West Review*. Her articles, published in *Journal of Global Slavery*, *Slavery & Abolition*, and *Middle West Review*, explore environmental, social, and cultural histories of African American and African French lead mining in the Illinois-Wisconsin borderlands, as well as intersections between African Diasporic and Indigenous identities. Her book project, *"They All Mixed in Together, the White and the Colored": Race, Family, and Freedom in the Rural Upper Midwest, 1820–1920*, examines how members of the African Diaspora and people with complex Indigenous and other multiracial identities crafted concepts of race and struggled for freedom in work, social, and family arenas in farming, trading, mining, and small-town communities.

NOTES

1. David Foster Wallace, "Tennis, Trigonometry, Tornadoes: A Midwestern Boyhood," *Harper's Magazine* (Dec. 1991): 68.
2. Robert Michael Morrissey, *People of the Ecotone: Environment and Indigenous Power at the Center of Early America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2022), 3.