

# RIVER REACH

Chicagoland, riverine reflections and settler harm-reduction poetry

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**ABSTRACT:** Both case report and epic, ‘River Reach’ is an exploratory anamnesis that presents a metamodern embodied reflection of systems entanglement – exposing attunements to and longings for a place-based riverine kinship capable of addressing a national heritage of displacements, immigrations, and enslavement. To improve state compliance with the US Clean Water Act, Graue Mill dam on Salt Creek at Fullersburg Woods (Oak Brook, IL) will be removed in coming months for creek restoration and re-alignment, creating a point of collision and potential among pasts and futures. ‘River Reach’ is a hyperlocal example of a practical, approachable step toward decolonial poetry and community – examining the insularities and permeabilities of whiteness while encouraging personal, deliberate engagement in the preparatory work required for recalibrating national identity cooperatively. As a centering poem for settler harm reduction and an adjunctive tool for collective action, the piece invites participants into a mimetic rehabilitation of relationship through nature. ‘River Reach’ may be performed collectively in collaboration with movement, audiovisual elements, and facilitated reader/audience participation.

**KEYWORDS:** Graue Mill dam, immigration, native-settler-slave triad, river, settler harm-reduction poetry



Figure 1 - John Baptiste Sweig, Jr (April 28, 1907-May 1976). Graue Mill, date unknown. Pastel, pencil, and acrylic on newsprint. 7x5.125 inches. Author's collection. (The artist is the brother-in-law of the author's beloved great uncle by marriage, Lloyd Irving Coveney.)

Graue Mill is at Fullersburg Woods (Sauganakka; Village No. 21; Brush Hill; Oak Brook, DuPage County, IL, US; GPS 41.8200° N, 87.9276° W). The 1852 mill is an Illinois Historic Mechanical Engineers Landmark (#64) in addition to being on the National Register of Historic Places (AD75002077; National Park Service, US Department of the Interior) as one of three established sites for the Underground Railroad in Illinois. Underground Railroad was a term initially used in the 19th century to describe the momentum and growing system of support that developed in response to the self-emancipation of enslaved African Americans. Prior to the end of the Civil War, the Underground Railroad had become an organized, international, and often water-adjacent network of Black liberation, solidarity, and collective action that supported resistance to and civil disobedience against enslavement.<sup>1</sup>

In 1934, the Civilian Conservation Corps built a low-head dam adjacent to Graue Mill. At the same time, Salt Creek was realigned – having been widely deemed “a mongrel as a body of water [that] wandered... helter skelter... like some vagrant, bound willy nilly for no place in particular” (anonymous text quoted in Figure 2). To improve state compliance with the 1972 Clean Water Act (33 USC §1251 et seq), the dam will be removed in coming months for creek restoration and re-alignment, creating a point of collision and potential among pasts and futures.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, readers are invited to read Ayasha Guerin's 2019 article 'Underground and at Sea: Oysters and Black Marine Entanglements in New York's Zone-A,' *Shima* 13(2), pp. 30-55.

## RIVER REACH

*Cura teneat, quamdiu vixerit*

[Through life, man is held fast by care]

– Gaius Julius Hyginus, 'Cura' (§220), *Fabulae*

America is a company town                      speculatively  
financed                      settled in debt      A learning  
laboratory for capital                      via Roman/                      medieval  
technologies                      An answer for everything  
Opportunistic, tenaciously flexible      restless, searching  
like bindweed      Total confidence      in emergent  
order      Readiness to negotiate      middle ground  
with local                      autochthonous      input and buy-in  
We conducted surveys, ran focus groups, developed  
influencer partnerships      Small scale, handmade  
labor-intensive, skilled work                      Home industry  
artisan craft                      Seriously innovative facial hair trends  
A style bundle                      motivationally rebranded  
though the export market as: colonial preindustrial tech  
More tortoise than hare                      Primarily wood and water  
Creek, stream, river, watershed                      tightly networked  
one stretch at a time, balancing bend and curve  
using higher ground to establish                      high-speed  
connections –                      a waterweb for industry  
and the jobs of tomorrow      We are educating kids  
for jobs that don't yet exist      ...jobs in which sawmill  
proceeds precede gristmill, icehouse, general store  
and a place where abandoned cars are tagged  
for removal                      where the dads can check the score  
trash talk, make a friendly bet, get a beer and a shot  
cash on the barrel                      and forget about it/  
say                      Fuck it      quieter the better      sudden sages, seers  
holy men                      Amen.      in through the nose/  
out through the mouth                      settling the head, clearing  
the spirit for                      maybe an hour      before they head  
back on home                      somehow still living like single men  
from a heap in the corner, a pile in the bathroom  
and a comfy chair, all worn-in, at the center of it all

America is a company town with a damming past –  
a siphoning and redirection                      continual  
realignment                      of energy                      power  
by put-your-back-into-it, pail-toting, heads-down  
immigrants                      stories of escape      packed with seeds  
of fear      date-stamped                      dimpled      industriously  
rustling in the breast pocket                      over the heart  
pledge placement      A flag exposed in an open field  
still makes its declaration curling in on itself      Just trying

to get through the day, from here to there, A to B  
mind your own business, don't notice, don't even look  
look the other way if you have to, above all  
don't look them in the eyes, keep out of it, task at hand  
watch where you're walking, one step at a time, one foot  
in front of the other, do what you have to do, don't speak  
until you're spoken to, keep your mouth shut, don't  
stand out... It's a chant of thrift, best intentions  
and keeping It drills in while you're piling  
and weaving brush, fitting logs and stone, setting crib  
and plank, or concrete to create firmer holds on the future  
fixing and pinning the earth in place ...shoulder  
to the wheel, nose to the grindstone, keeping the goal  
in sight until you can leave for the day satisfied  
with a That's-not-going-anywhere shake/ pat  
We don't need to worry about that Tomorrow, we can  
move on to other, bigger things: tasks duties  
problems pleasures We dust off our  
hands Mission accomplished So close to peace  
a deep silence and freedom from concern follow our  
shadows on the ground as we turn away already  
elsewhere ...hands on the wheel, eyes on the road  
wreathing a refrain anthem chorus a common  
sense earworm of self-talk we repeat  
to each other inserting, fortifying dams  
building new things embankments crossings –  
closing, removing other ways routes passages  
limiting optionality constructing, channeling  
relaying forward an interlocking raising/  
lowering series system a Rubik's Cube  
of discrete choice experiments path dependence  
that records itself in generational grooves  
as a charming and purposeful modesty earnestness  
neutrality that wisely assumes incomplete  
context and knowledge but unravels at last  
as an excruciating complicity and helpless remove  
settling into an unfocused dispersed resolve  
stalled out inert suspended self-  
contained in its better formulations as despair, fatalism  
(other acceptable forms: solemnity sadness quiet  
respect thoughts and prayers) a feeling  
that's sometimes visible almost touchable  
and moving into timelapse mode – cultured into viral  
hypocrisy then filed away in a safe place  
as information history trivia status quo  
It forms the grain a protected connection  
a private network an encrypted code a strong  
password a bookmark placeholder  
truth between us There, it makes its own dams  
barriers boundaries borders walls that may  
on the face of the person in front of you look

like distraction or deep thought but you may later  
through absence discover... the limitations  
of this study include missing data/ values attrition  
churn rates were reported as the disappeared  
disappearing ghosted limiting the conclusions  
that can be drawn Do your own homework  
emotional labor I do my own research ...you  
might later suspect was wordless shutdown  
that overflow of love between you cannot wash clean

America is a company town and sometimes  
history backs up on us Some say It's in  
the plumbing our DNA baked in  
hardwired buildup leaky pipelines crumbling  
infrastructure putting off much-needed repairs  
kicking the can down the road Others say  
There's just not enough oxygen going to the brain  
yearning to breathe free I Can't Breathe  
I Can't Breathe (repeat >20 times) I Can't Breathe  
and not enough blood shot through the heart  
so many dead zones and you're to blame  
With wide and certain feet, they walk a step ahead  
then walk on. Sometimes, with a strange anonymity  
they look back with glassy eyes, an archaic smile  
and swollen hands that somehow still steady my  
shoulders, making me ache for the love I've always had  
From the trail as you approach when the water  
level is high, you can hear the creek (as approved  
for General Use both primary and secondary contact  
per the 2004 Illinois EPA 305b report) in a stable  
boom, protesting Arriving at the dam is clear  
concise black and white a relief punctuation  
a conclusion reward summary climax  
crescendo Within its sometime abundance  
and seeming continuity, the creek in flow state  
either high deluge or low trickle updrafts  
ionizes nonselectively scatters the unspokens  
They sit with you quietly long as you like  
before stretching out their legs and getting up  
to go whether we come with or not  
following along walking around for a spell  
to see how to rise float surpass, consider  
new meanings shades different lights  
The water's kaleidoscopic spontaneous responsive  
shifts reconnect realign recharge us  
It runneth over letting us grasp at the slippery  
past and slippery future catch and release  
and we keep coming back to it On busy days  
the dam sets itself apart a place of public solitude  
reflection leisure resolutions antidote  
within the poison The spillway – its crest

and channel – blocks drowns out the seepage  
of voices in varied motion commotion Extending  
earshot, the creek refuses absolutely to get involved  
to absorb the details deflecting, transferring  
mirroring us at one another (We really can't  
see ourselves We ghost ourselves our best  
selves) ... The creek mirrors us with extremely  
poor lighting and distortion, funhouse-style  
Accurate faithful reporting echoing  
exaggerating the effects of relative time/  
space Across the water, it dutifully passes  
along whatever you say side to side up-/  
downstream transmitting accent emphasis  
tone speed intensity urgency age confusion  
riffles of laughter splinters of song It sets adrift  
(often one-sided) confidences arguments  
and intimacies Many responses are hidden  
submerged slipping by sighed away  
Of course, it is completely impassable for watercraft  
with impeded flow from special interests  
Riverine impoundments regurgitate wretched refuse  
litter, debris and accumulated sediment  
suppressing biodiversity in extravagant stagnation  
tailed by foaming frothing spongelike compounds  
that we regard but mention only rarely  
and with deep regret We have silting and also  
some mighty strange odors It could certainly  
be improved for recreational purposes Data  
suggest improvements across all environmental  
matrices (water, sediment, biota) after low-head  
run-of-river dam removal. Water quality quickly  
self-corrects through stream aeration increased  
dissolved oxygen levels and associated ameliorations  
in temperature regulation. Soil systems likewise adjust  
once legacy sediment accumulations and attached  
pollutants are addressed, allowing for floodplain  
and wetland restoration with stabilized sediment load  
distributions and transport continuity. We see rapid  
repair to river reach habitat through downstream  
migration and upstream drift, reducing homogeneity  
single-species dominance as well as steady realignments  
to lotic aquatic assemblages (periphytic diatoms  
benthic invertebrates, macrophytes, fish) Ongoing  
monitoring reveals functional gains within riparian  
communities and corresponding health measures observed  
through bioassessments of upland territories, fostering  
broader systems balances and long-term resiliencies



Figure 2 - Du Page County Forest Preserve District. River Remodel: Civilian Conservation Corps interpretive park signage. (Image provided courtesy of the Forest Preserve District of Du Page County and The Conservation Foundation.)

America is a company town      It is a damning  
 past      where workers displace and create  
 communities      where labor displaces and creates  
 civilizations      People find themselves here  
 and people lose themselves here;      others are told  
 to      Get lost The      first/      true people  
 youngest brother of the      Neshnabé      Keepers  
 of the Sacred Fire      the Bodéwadmik      (Potawatomi)  
 lived here at      Sauganacka      on  
 the Wewanippissee      The Pretty Little River  
 and made of one another      mere flesh  
 common clay      a stronghold/      sacred site  
 place      landscape      Later renamed      the Little  
 Des Plaines      River, the creek      (now described  
 as      a highly disturbed urban stream)  
 was renamed again for our hapless misadventures  
 a wagonload of salt having fallen into the water  
 (This poem was composed in a floodplain      a densely  
 settled      blue collar      inner-ring suburb  
 now gentrifying due to financial and climate-change  
 displacements and in response to a national housing  
 affordability crisis      - 10-mi downstream  
 [5 mi surface; GPS 41.8234° N 87.8409° W]  
 on land native tribes, including the Chippewa  
 Ottawa, and Potawatomi held in safekeeping until 1816.)

The Neshnabé also describe themselves as having been lowered here spontaneous beings and sometimes within the water’s pebbled undersongs alongside its lilting summons and ease, that’s really how it feels though Thrownness is Western philosophy’s (definitely German) term – and obviously we can now conduct highly accurate genetic analysis using proprietary datasets

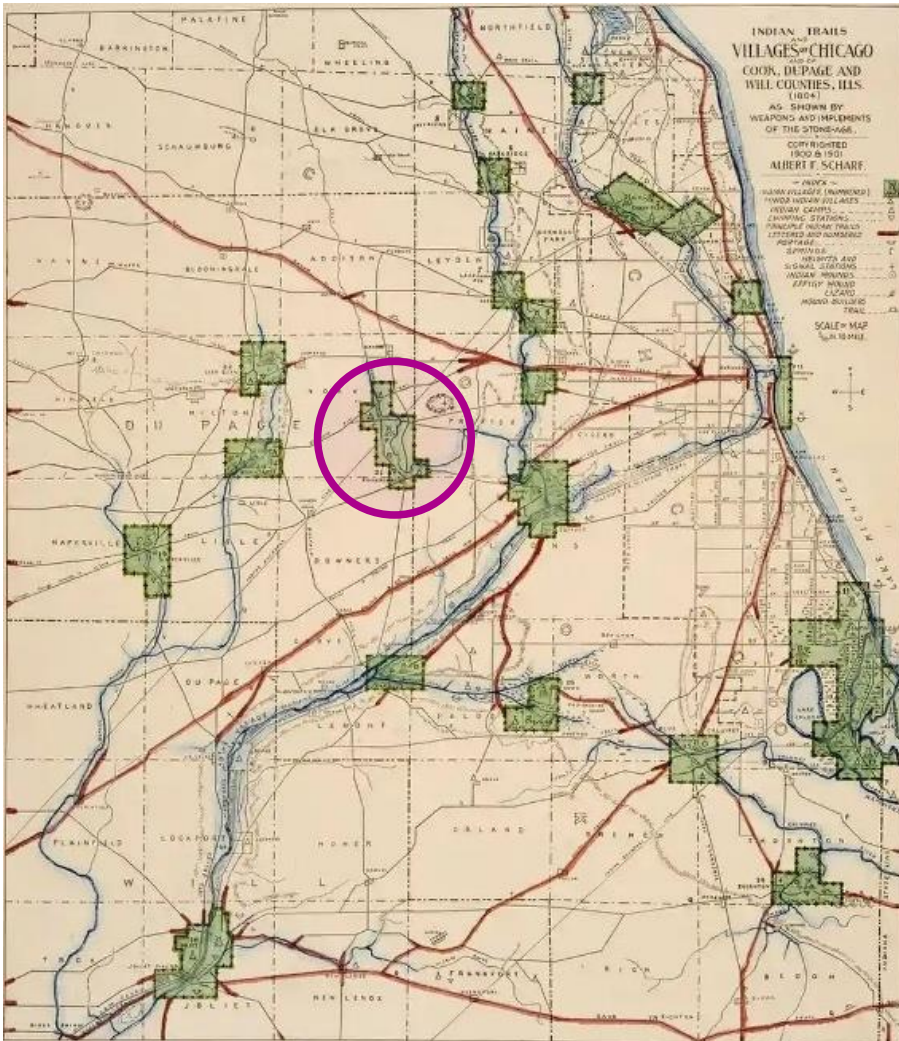


Figure 3 - Sauganacka (Village No. 21), shown circled. (Fullersburg. Scharf, A. F. [1900]. *Indian Trails and Villages of Chicago and of Cook, DuPage and Will Counties, Ills. (1804): As Shown by Weapons and Implements of the Stone Age.*)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> [https://news.wttw.com/sites/default/files/article/file-attachments/The\\_Scharf\\_Map.pdf](https://news.wttw.com/sites/default/files/article/file-attachments/The_Scharf_Map.pdf).



America is a company town. Almost everything  
we are proud of seems to fall away: one generation's  
conservation becomes another generation's problem  
one generation's icon hero is another's villain  
a complicated legacy fraught, contested, stained  
We crown, we dethrone making revisions  
transpositions, elisions, corrections routine  
interruptions disruptions supply chain  
bottlenecks turbulent, unprecedented times  
Please expect delays cancel culture content  
bans star-spangled banners There are  
consequences reasons excuses explanations  
qualifications stories narratives We know  
So many changes at the margins sometimes seem so  
meddlesome, tedious incremental insufficient  
Statues are erected then removed Plinths, pedestals  
fountain tierings stand bare dry, abrupt  
confrontational until the trees regroup, responding  
to changes in airflow and light recomposing leaves  
branches bud by bud life tugging forward  
an inadvertent blessing lending cover shade  
wholly disinterested grace filtering fluttering  
transitory The eye and memory adjust, the dust  
settles, the base is now the top a clean slate  
a platform stage soapbox altar The open  
invitation is accepted seized All are welcome  
here It's not/ can't be trespass if there's nothing  
there It's a free country world-wide welcome...  
Give me Welcome to the stranger Teens, to-go cups  
in hand, help one another no hesitation navigate  
barriers and climb mutual uplift  
the moment's victors allies circumnavigating  
broken bolts capped power stripped pipes  
lounging feet dangling, staking their claim  
swaying and sinewy in song sun kissed  
smiling the American smile (1-2-3 Cheese!)  
forming a shifting land of coffee, cocoa, tea, sugar, cream  
milk and honey Schools, streets, and parks are dedicated  
then renamed Amid the anonymous obstinacies  
of outfall pipes, submerged pumps hug the banks  
drawing off water for turfgrass and gardens Select one  
or more option(s): (a) Illegal (b) Legal (and really  
just very smart) <70 gpm (per 1983 Water Use Act  
[525 ILCS 45 §5.3; 96-0222 (2009)]) (c) Obscure  
permitting process available for any person  
or land occupier ≥70 gpm (d) all of the above  
(e) none of the above This is one of our  
recommended sites for family portraits and wedding  
photography. It is a local landmark and popular regional  
amenity. Some families come and sit every year  
drawn to and nestled in our rich history The recipe

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has been in our family forever; it is the most amazing  
 soup stew, roast melting pot Nothing  
 is so delicious, warming, comforting, and reassuring  
 as the taste of work labor investment  
 and energy expenditure over the long term  
 We're in it for the long haul average investors  
 market actors, workers, wage earners, smart shoppers  
 loyal customers, savvy consumers, stakeholders  
 discount club members We vote with our dollars  
 They love to capture the changing seasons in our  
 affluently beige Midwestern suburb Consider adding  
 pops of color in your outfits to contrast/ blend  
 with the imported spring bulbs that once  
 upended financial markets We are unsure when exactly  
 the dam will be removed and there are still active  
 challenges in court, so we are encouraging advance  
 bookings We will do our best to fit you in

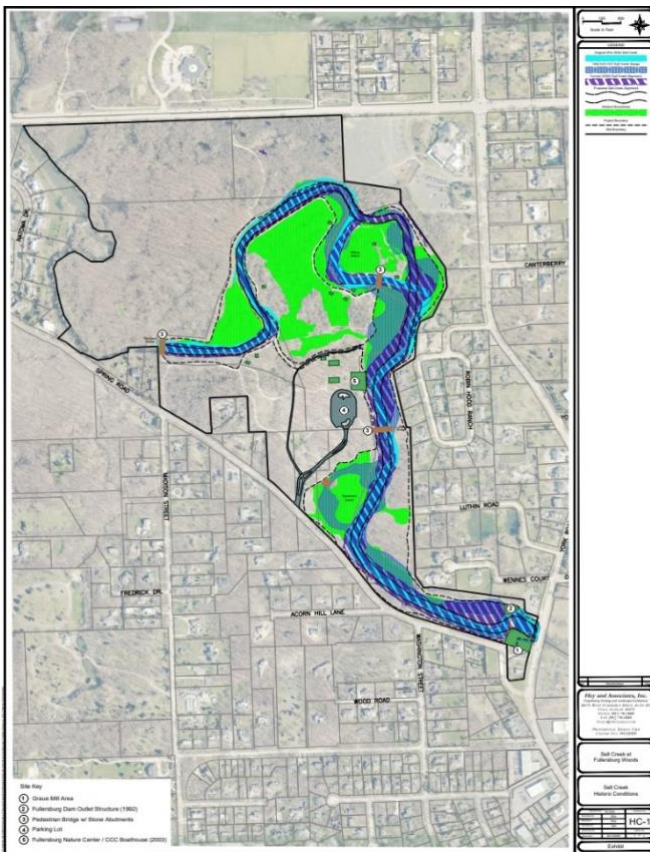


Figure 4 - Salt Creek at Fullersburg Woods (Historic Conditions). Oak Brook, DuPage County, Illinois. (Map provided courtesy of the Forest Preserve District of Du Page County and The Conservation Foundation.)

America is a company town                   and somehow  
the honest work of free men never did seem  
to be enough     inspiring insecurity, fear, suspicion  
by the sweat of the brow     Servants, women, indenture  
contracts, sponsorship arrangements, big-family child  
labor, also not enough     Humans fail, bodies give  
out, minds cannot be changed     willful     stubborn  
but that was a time of prototypes, long before robots  
mechanization, industrialization, automation, drones  
nondisclosure agreements, the gig economy, AI, chatbots

America is a company town                   made from  
an interconnected world for an interconnected world  
Global problems require global solutions     influx  
inflow     waves     floods     cascade     streams     confluence  
musical chairs     shirts and skins     We're managing  
a global economy with the benefits of dollar dominance  
unit of account     international reserve currency  
We used to privatize profit and socialize risk     derisking  
but that made people pretty angry     Now we're working  
through the secret sauce of scaling to minimize negative  
effects on local economies     (Researchers quietly gather  
data on moral hazard and incentives)     All aboard!  
Wade in the water                   of algorithmic thinking  
calculated risks     game theory     Think 007  
very James Bond     undercover     Slave narratives  
are available online only, free of charge     We do  
not sell them here to honor the aspirations of the pietist  
mill owners and because travelers on the Underground  
Railroad                   immersive experience     de-/  
remonetizing IP     consistently described themselves  
as     Freedom Seekers     We are developing our  
indigenous studies catalog     Our weekly bus tours  
to the casino and to celebrate Chicagoland's rich gospel  
heritage are leaving soon     Alleluia! Please consider  
singing (wink!) up for future tours as this week's buses  
are at capacity     Great question!     Blues events  
are generally in the evening, after park hours, so we  
could not receive legal clearance. Once our internationally  
acclaimed collection of contemporary literature, cultural  
studies, and history of the African diaspora is transitioned  
to the new Black Studies Cultural Center Foundation  
things may change                   Stay tuned!     The creek  
accepts indifferently the human body                   its mixings  
carrying                   cravings     At Salt Creek, here  
they moved carefully over scarp and slope     on clay-  
rich banks                   through fresh water     pool  
and basin                   The water sounds like nothing  
other than                   what it is                   like your mother's  
voice     or a first love's     drawing you forward  
into being                   becoming                   returning

**Fiala: River Reach – Chicagoland, riverine reflections and settler harm-reduction poetry**

From the creek's brushing, enfolding lips to its  
deepest deep thalweg (German again) silently  
they left the daytime shelter of the mill, turning  
a new corner each day on swivel Fluid  
intelligence merging at night with the riverbed's  
ruminations and reveries mists and minglings  
inhalations/ exhalations heartbeats  
sometimes so unlike our daily run-of-the-mill  
encounters in transit behind the wheel  
or emplaced entrenched tabled, countered  
bedesked screened enacting complexity  
theory decoding cataloging pattern-  
recognition tasks on parallel transects Occasionally  
encounters are more proactive sought  
a call/ response push-pull push-  
backs in expression, gesture, footfall Slow  
the roll poking prodding a daily process  
of evaluation assessment 360-degree  
contemporaneous review high-proof distillations  
diffusions dilutions of history  
pilot studies experimentation replication  
crisis skipping stones to plumb depths shoe  
on the other foot two left feet new bathymetric  
mapping through street shuffle generally  
an awkward, mismatched dance when we listen  
respond to different parts structures  
in the same old songs and so often meet our partner  
fellow traveler with a continuous, seemingly didactic  
remote wooden autopilot march through/  
past possibilities of delight brushing past/  
off playful, free spins of mutual relief  
pause, and laughter bright eyes and mischief  
bypassing spacious lavish meanders  
good trouble Plot twist! Conversations  
in variations remixes in stereo insisting instead  
on off-key/ -base visual stutters tripping  
A step ahead, a step behind can work for a time  
Rhythm and flow valve adjustments Check settings  
Check intake Check power source Chickity  
check yo self Shut down, unplug, restart dredging  
eye to eye with any passerby pushing at surface  
each glass and tain, impenetrable reflective  
brief raindrops on evening's window fleeing  
unknowing (Insert weather rock joke here)  
yet so like the whims, wills, renewals, contingencies  
of our nearest dearest, reminding us who they are  
how they want to be seen They were ahead of their time  
leading the way Afrofuturists on the original  
Soul Train Black STEM scholars star-guided  
moonlighting in the unravelling improvising  
against the grain machine breaking reverse

engineering      reverse flow      or extension  
 full elaboration    of momentum      from forced  
 migrations          global undertow    cliodynamics  
 over and out        salt water, boiling over    resetting  
 reclaiming          repurposing        the continent's  
 waterways          its circulatory/    respiratory systems  
 in a moment-by-moment    multigenerational  
 dynastic affirmation      of life and fullness of life  
 an inspiration      to so many who struggle    on our  
 small    blue      smudgy, fingerprint-filled planet

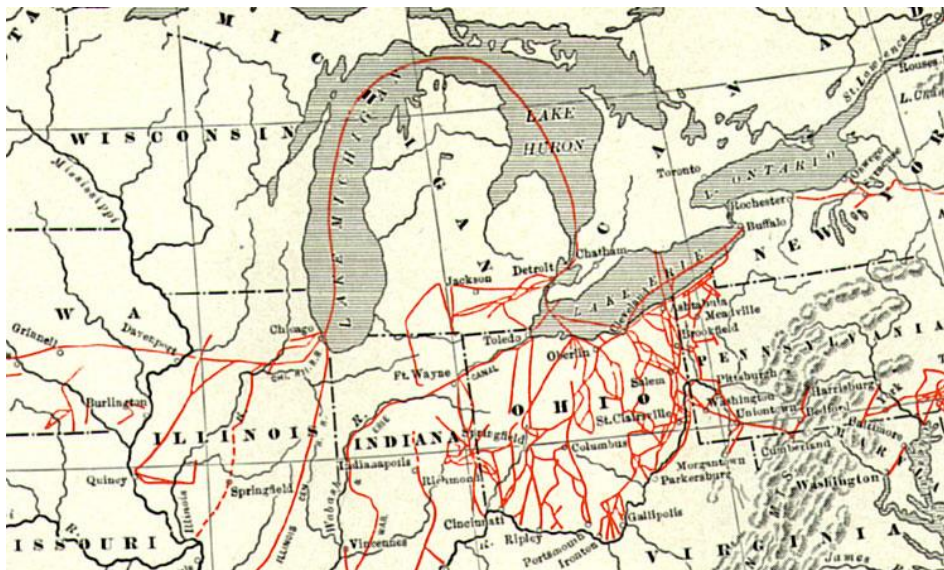


Figure 5 - Map of the underground railroad, 1898 (public domain). ('Who really ran the Underground Railroad?' September 12, 2013. *The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross*. Henry Louis Gates, Jr; Public Broadcasting Service (WNET)).<sup>3</sup>

America is a company town      Welcome back  
 Please be mindful of the    cognitive load      of long-  
 term struggle      careful of the seductions of shortcuts  
 and fast solutions    easy wins          Makeshift fixes  
 often start to shift for themselves    Temporary patches  
 stopgap measures can become permanent problems  
 a BAND-AID on bullet wounds      Not all wounds

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/who-really-ran-the-underground-railroad/attachment/undergroundrailroad/>. Readers are invited to view online 'In motion: the African-American migration experience: Maps by Michael Siegel' (2005) as part of the New York Public Library's Digital Collections at <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/in-motion-the-african-american-migration-experience-maps-by-michael-siegel/#?tab=about> and animated maps related to the Jacob Armstead Lawrence Migration Series from The Phillips Collection (Washington, DC) at: <https://lawrencemigration.phillipscollection.org/culture/migration-map>.

are visible            A focus on self-care is critical  
It's hard to know who to trust            what to Like  
Just sorting good from bad requires quick, life-or-death  
reflexes the skill of a surgeon            doctor    physician  
heal thyself            *Medice cura te ipsum*            iatrogenic  
racism    or police officer    blue wall of silence/  
nonresponse            officer-created jeopardy    Before  
disembarking, passengers should be aware of the potential  
for turbulence – as well as uncommon adverse effects  
such as heavy fatigue            in sorting pros and cons  
right from wrong, sheep from goats, friend from foe  
natives/ invasives/            exotics, frogs and toads, true  
and false, fact or fiction, imaginaries and realities, right/  
left brain            duck-duck-goose!            It may  
be safer    more efficient, always to assume the negative



Figure 6 - Lily Padula, illustration accompanying Grace Perry's article 'A two-minute guide to the Salt Creek Dam conflict', *Chicago* magazine, August 14th 2020, (image provided courtesy of the illustrator).<sup>4</sup>

America is a company town            We trade ideals  
utopias, revolutions            We trade in trade-offs  
and trade-ins            Carbon and cash    Water and oil  
We specialize in creative destruction  
with a side hustle of            boom and bust    planned  
obsolescence            capital flight            We trade  
displacements            We trade diversities            Hope  
promises            change    We trade sacrifices  
and survivals            We trade nostalgias and futures  
We build the plane as we fly it            We change tires  
on moving cars            We swap horses midstream  
Real horse traders We have good people doing good

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.chicagomag.com/chicago-magazine/september-2020/a-two-minute-guide-to-the-salt-creek-dam-conflict>.

**Fiala: River Reach – Chicagoland, riverine reflections and settler harm-reduction poetry**

work    We have personal family    pod  
neighborhood    community    regional  
national disputes about events: who did what  
to whom, when, why, and how –    as well as who  
was even there    Our only agreement is about where  
where being such a big place and still the ground  
the fork in the road    the junction, intersection  
union    the only place to stand    face one another  
wherever we still can    to meet    in thanksgiving  
to feast    fest    powwow    banquet get-  
together par-taay celebrate    BBQ    picnic  
dance    reunite    having used as    grist for the mill  
the burdens    we finally    take back, hold  
dear, occupy, and inhabit    America is a company town