Rhetorical Drift
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Speaker and teacher of Anishinaabemowin Margaret Noodin prepared a series of invitational questions that launched a 2019 gathering at the site of the Bad Axe Massacre on the banks of the Mississippi.[1] They began: "Can you introduce yourself and include in your introduction the bodies of land and water that have given you life and are now protected and acknowledged by you?" This brief essay answers that question, and poses a consequent challenge. An answer insomuch as I point rhetorical new materialisms (RNM) towards the abiotic through a window onto the deep history and fluid present of a place that gives me life. And a challenge in leveraging that work to join a call for RNM scholars to consider how openness to a wider set of tributaries and the pull of abiotic relationality—"the bodies of land and water that have given you life"—might imply accountability—to the entities "now protected and acknowledged by you."[2]

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Driftless.

Absent of glacial drift. The name for a small area of southwestern Wisconsin and northwestern Illinois that, unlike everything around it, escaped the 100,000 years of glaciation that created the Midwest as we now know it. An anomaly of a landscape shaped not by glaciers, but by fluvial erosion. Stream-filled and naturally lake-less, with steep hillslopes and deeply incised valleys. A landscape less stereotypically Wisconsin, more Appalachia.

[1] "Over the Levee, Under the Plow," orchestrated by Sarah Kanouse, Nicholas Brown, and Ryan Griffis, traveled from southwest Wisconsin to central Illinois by car, bus, and canoe. It gathered participants, including me, to think together about "how the Anthropocene is to be survivable, and, crucially, for whom," with an emphasis on "strengthen[ing] relationships with Native people, between Indigenous groups, and among settler descendants out of which to build practices of survivability that foreground both difference and justice in the (colonial) Anthropocene" (Brown et al.).
[2] This work grows, in part, from a productive challenge posed by Kristin L. Arola to consider Indigenous scholars in discussions of rhetorical new materialisms (Sackey et al., 387). Jennifer Clary-Lemon has since offered a comprehensive roadmap for that work, and my essay is a contribution to imagining, as Clary-Lemon envisions, a "protocol [that] might inform new materialist work, might deepen substantive knowledge making, or promote new ways of being a scholar in this field," while heeding Arola's reminder that, "in indigenous thought, broadly speaking, relationality functions not as a way to flatten power relations, but as a way to acknowledge that no actor acts alone or without consequences" (397).

Driftless.

Aimless. Directionless. Purposeless. Like the Kickapoo River that winds through the heart of the Driftless Area. Kickapoo, an Algonquin word that translates roughly as “those who walk the earth” or “he who moves here and there,” an apt name for a river so windy it snakes 125 miles to cover only 65 as the crow flies. A fraught name, too, for the Kickapoo people, forced by white settlers and U.S. federal policymakers in 150 years time to move here and there, from the place now called Wisconsin to now Illinois and as far as now northern Mexico.

Native peoples moved into the Driftless 12,000 years ago, and the Kickapoo watershed was home to significant human populations—alongside its characteristic mosses, prairie forbs and grasses, brook trout, oaks, and firs—for over 8,000 years before it hosted me. The majority of the Ho-Chunk, Kickapoo, Sauk, and other Native peoples who composed these long-time residents were forcibly removed from the region in the mid-1800s by Euro-American settlers seeking lead, furs, timber, and agricultural land, though the Ho-Chunk—the People of the Sacred Voice—have always found ways to return.

European settlement—and its remaking of the landscape from prairie, oak savanna, and forest to cropland and pasture—prompted erosion, sedimentation, and flooding throughout the region, altering the geomorphology of these stream-floodplain ecosystems. Each large, sediment-filled flood created layers of post-settlement alluvium: the sediment transported via erosion from cropland, pastures, and gullies to valleys and streams during flood events.

In the Driftless, the home and heart of my community-based research, teaching, and advocacy, we spend a lot of time thinking about post-settlement alluvium. This trapped sediment blankets floodplains up to several meters and gives Kickapoo streams their characteristic sunken look. To stand in a small tributary is to stand in cold, fast, knee- to thigh-deep water, on a cobble streambed, gazing at the grassy bank above. These sunken streams are dangerously good at carrying floodwaters downstream; rather than dissipating out onto a wide floodplain, floods increase in speed and power as they roar through and explode out of these mini-canyons created by 150 years of settler agriculture. Post-settlement alluvium is the physical instantiation of violent processes of settlement. Sediment put into circulation by the combined force of the removal of Indigenous peoples, aggressive farming practices imported from flatter European and Midwestern landscapes, fluvial processes, and the more frequent and more intense precipitation blasting the region because of global climate change.

The common response to this increasingly urgent problem has largely been to exert control. Throughout the twentieth century, federal, state, and county funding supported the construction of small and large dams throughout the Kickapoo River watershed to control floodwaters, while restoration practices have continued to focus on 300-500 meters of stream at a time, armoring stream banks with rock riprap to hold them in place and protect valuable pastures, fields, farm buildings, and brown trout. Focused on a particular stream site, rather than a whole watershed, restoration in this context has become largely about stability: costly and increasingly frustrated efforts to lock streams in place and control their drift.

But a devastating flood in 2018—the third 50- or 100-year-magnitude flood in just a decade—forced Kickapoo River and Coon Creek residents and collaborators—myself included—to rethink our shared response. In 2019, people started coming together in structured and unstructured ways to listen to each other's flood stories and consider new ways to live well with floods. Without fully defined endpoints, this watershed approach accommodates drift: gathering U.S., Ho-Chunk, state, county, and village representatives, nonprofits, scientists, and community members to see where it takes us.

The settler ontology of Kickapoo stream management—in which I participate—has largely elided the settler violence that co-created this flood-prone landscape, but that ontology is becoming unsettled. The Kickapoo River offers an increasingly frequent and powerful reminder of agential force: absent of purpose; destroying farmland, barns, houses, towns; continually reconfiguring the landscape; and exceeding control. I see these watershed conversations as beginning to ask whether the river and the sediment it moves can be collaborators, as central as they are to setting the terms of life in the Valley. Without minimizing the human toll of these floods, there could be potential restorative agency in these abiotic fluvial processes. Each ten-year, 50-year, 100-year, 500-year flood that slams the region with accelerating frequency undermines its post-settlement alluvium, working to retrace wide, snaking pathways across Valley floors, shaping and reshaping the worlds of the humans and more-than-humans who trace a life there. These frequent floods offer a powerful reminder that rivers, relationships, ontologies must drift.

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The Driftless constant is change.

Where seasonal flooding once bent to the sun—the anticipation of spring flooding and summer drought—those patterns have been knocked out of frequency; the 2018

flooding that hammered the area came near the typical low-point of the hydrologic year. Flooding is no longer heliotropic, pointing sun-ward; its erratic patterning can't be anticipated. An hour's rain—any month of the year—now sees long-time residents losing sleep, obsessing over weather reports, driving for higher ground. The raw power of hydrologic persuasion.

Candice Rai and I have considered abiotic persuasion before, pointing to sea-running fish to argue: "Something we could call persuasion, and maybe rhetoric, is clearly at work in the complex assemblage of physiology, lunar high tides, rainfall, water temperature, memory, smell, chemistry, and more that combine to pull river herring—kairotically, right on cue—from their meanderings in the Atlantic Ocean back into the tiny ponds of their birth" (202-203). I later returned to fish migration in my "trophic rhetoric" article to amplify the point, insisting this complex biogeochemical assemblage offered "the apprehension of ecological migration as persuasive force. Migration as rhetoric. Literally."

I was responding there, in part, to Lynda Walsh's *RSQ* interview with Bruno Latour, where Latour argued that rhetoric is unable to, "proceed on smoothly into the nitrogen cycle and that sort of thing" and suggested, "We need a term that doesn't break down at the limit of consciousness" (417). I disagreed with Latour, precisely interested as I was in the connections between the nitrogen cycle and rhetoric: not in the fish so much as in the biogeochemical forces that persuaded them upstream and down.

In case that point was obscured by fishiness, here I push the point explicitly, in no uncertain terms, to consider a view of rhetoric that extends beyond the animal and the plant: *beyond the biotic*. My connection to the Driftless, my thousand-plus hours wading Kickapoo streams, collaborating with current and past residents, and engaging with the social and biogeochemical history, present, and future of these streams and this landscape and these people offers us this vision for RNM: a vision that extends beyond the heliotropic to the hydrotropic. Like John Muckelbauer, not to make "an argument for an even bigger sense of big rhetoric," but to consider that, "everything is necessarily immersed in (and constituted by) multiple persuasive (turning) forces. And as such, everything is... rhetorically" (40). We offer the hydrotropic as maybe even a better example of Muckelbauer's heliotropic argument because of its reciprocity. The sun isn't turned by the plant turning towards it. But in the hydrotropic, everything is turned.

We see the hydrotropic as itself a trope: naming forces already in play, not to subsume them under a totalizing label, but to gather together these vastly different currents to experience their shared force. As Nathaniel Rivers highlights, the hydrotropic pushes

rhetorical studies to resist purpose as defining rhetorical feature: accommodating and even emphasizing drift. And I hope it might also encourage us to consider accountability across relations. Where RNM has tended to emphasize the relationality of objects—as ambient rhetoric, actor network, rhizomatic assemblage—it has been critiqued for doing so at the expense of mutual accountability and place, with potentially violent consequences for movements towards rematriation of Indigenous lands and knowledges.[3] I want to join the small but growing chorus that sees a future for RNM that resists relationality as an abstract idea and opens itself to the possibilities of relationality *as accountability*.[4]

On this front, I take cues from Indigenous and settler rhetoricians including Kristin Arola, Jen Clary-Lemon, Gabriela Ríos, and Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyaq. I work, too, from Anishinaabe scholars outside rhetorical studies, including Noodin, Robin Wall Kimmerer, and Kyle Powys Whyte[5], while acknowledging that I am taking much of their work quite literally out of geographic and ontological context. The Great Lakes—what Noodin terms the "ten-thousand-year-old children born on three-billion-year-old bedrock"—at the center of Anishinaabe thinking is a watershed away from the Upper Mississippi River Basin that cradles the Kickapoo and the Driftless at large, but Noodin, Whyte, and Kimmerer have encouraged settlers like me to do the work to make sense of and acknowledge our own connections to land. My experiences being raised in the Anishinaabe lands and waters of the Potawatomi, Odawa, and Ojibwe shape both my current relations to the Ho-Chunk lands and waters of what is now called southwestern Wisconsin and my interest in visions for collaborative relationality that enlist accountability. Specifically, I want to consider how Whyte's framing of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) as "systems of responsibilities that arise from particular cosmological beliefs about the relationships between living beings and non-living things or humans and the natural world" (5) might push rhetorical new materialisms to consider its own cosmological beliefs, which seem too often unspoken or unconsidered. What "systems of responsibilities," in Whyte's words, might *necessarily* arise from those cosmologies? Heeding Whyte's warning that, "TEK cannot be readily transferred to different contexts unless the people in the new context also learn the systems of responsibilities and character traits" (5), I do not want to suggest that non-Indigenous RNM scholars appropriate cosmological systems that are not their own. Instead, like

[3] See Zoe Todd and Alison Ravenscroft for critiques of this move in new materialisms more broadly and to Sackey et al. and Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyaq and Breeanne Matheson, for instance, for critiques specific to rhetorical studies.
[4] As Robin Wall Kimmerer insists, "The philosophy of reciprocity is beautiful in the abstract, but the practical is harder" (238).
[5] Arola has identified as a mixed-race scholar of Ojibwe and settler origins, Clary-Lemon as a settler on indigenous lands, Ríos as an indigenous (Chicana) scholar, Itchuaqiyaq as a tribal member of the Noorvik Native Community in NW Alaska, Cushman as a Cherokee Nation citizen, Noodin as a descendant working to keep the Anishinaabemowin/Ojibwe language alive, and Kimmerer and Whyte as Citizen Potawatomi Nation.

Clary-Lemon's emphasis on protocol—"of moving in and out of ontological world-making with some deference to making mistakes, acknowledgment of errata on the first page, and with goodwill toward humans and nonhumans"—I want to urge non-Indigenous RNM scholars to consider what kinds of systems of accountability might emerge from the relationships between living and non-living beings that sit at the center of our work. To consider a kind of relationality with the potential to hold us accountable and to address what we might be accountable to. In my case, that's the streams, soils, and beings of the Kickapoo Valley who give me life.

I hope that RNM scholars heed Noodin's call to consider the bodies of land and water that have given and continue to give you life. And consider the agential relations so characteristic of RNM as relations that might make us accountable to what we are related to. Not in the abstract. But in the hard practical that necessitates goodwill, and mistake making, and messy coordination. A relational vision for RNM that involves not (only) the careful articulation of relational assemblages, but of opening yourself to be persuaded by those biotic and abiotic relations. To be carried along in the drift without knowing why or where it's taking you. But trusting relationality and constant rearticulation: the reorganization of post-settlement alluvium; the rearticulation of settler ontologies; the coming together of Indigenous and non-Indigenous watershed residents and university interlopers to reimagine and restore our relationships with waters and lands and each other.

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