

By Tamara Jolly and Dennis Liu

## Activity Overview

You can work individually, in pairs, or small teams. Sharing findings and group discussion is important.

Select your town or: a neighborhood, river, lake, park, or other place and research how it got its name.

Read all or part of Chapter 6 of *Trace: Memory, History, Race, and the American Landscape* by *Lauret Edith Savoy*, provided.

Advocacy Extension: You can create a plan to advocate for local name change, or create interpretation signage or media to help notify residents about the history of a local place.

## You Can Learn

- How to solve a puzzle starting with questions, then research, drawing conclusions, and communicating your findings and ideas.
- Information can come from written accounts, interviews, and historical documents.
- Place names are clues about history, social issues, land use, and nature.
- Maps are valuable ways to show information, but they also have limits, and you should think about what important information might be missing from a map.

## Preparation

**You or your teacher will need to research the origin of your town's name for the warm-up.**

- *Date of founding*
- *Early economy such as farming, trade, factories, transportation, mining, forestry*
- *Natural environment, like water, hills, valleys, flat, mountain, forested, desert, prairie*
- *A famous resident in history*
- *A famous incident in history*

This activity can be an introduction to, or extension of, the [Mapping Design Challenge](#). The Appendix has additional reading passages from other authors.

### What's in a Name?

Have you ever wondered how a place got its name? We hardly notice a place name unless it seems highly unusual and challenging to pronounce. If you live in an area with newer and growing suburbs you've probably seen a lot of street names meant to sound appealing, like Buena Vista Court, Boogie Boulevard, or Budburst Lane. But the names of most towns, counties, states, as well as lakes, parks, forest reserves have a longer history. You might be surprised at what you can learn by exploring the origin of a place's name. It could change the way you think about the environment we live in.



**Placerville, CA was originally Hangtown and before that Dry Diggings. Hint: the gold rush.**

#### **A. Warm Up: How your town got its name (10 minutes)**

Whole class discussion:

A1: Where do you think your town's name came from? Does it sound like a nature name? Or the name of a person or family? Circle one: nature/ person / other

State your reasoning:

A2: Think about your town, what it looks like, favorite places, overall impression. Propose an alternative name you'd like to give your town.

### B. Ideas from Reading

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Author Lauret Savoy traveled across the country tracing her own diverse family history. As she explored her heritage, she examined the history and importance of place names.

Before reading:

B1. Who do you think should have the right to name a location?

B2. In your memory, what are most places named after?

Read the following excerpts from Lauret Savoy's book, *Trace*, and answer/discuss the questions.

Excerpt 1 - the author is reflecting on reading *Names on the Land* by George R. Stewart, an influential history of place names in the US.

*"The earliest encountered tribal peoples along North America's Atlantic Seaboard whose communities were disrupted longest—like the Wampanoag or Powhatan—didn't simply vanish. Fragmented, dispossessed of land, dislocated, perhaps ravaged by disease and violence, tribal peoples endured. Members reorganized or joined other groups. They migrated or they stayed in smaller communities. They continued to speak. Names on the Land carries a sympathetic tone regarding Native peoples, but it is the stories of "those who followed" from Europe that form its core. What troubles me is how some readers embrace these namings as America's history, "our" heritage, without asking if there might be other narratives, too. Stewart considers "the naming that was before history" in his first chapter, but not so much the importance of place-making in defining Indigenous traditions and identities in a storied land over time. And what of names and practices left by those from Africa and Asia who'd come to this continent? Perhaps readers assume they left no mark."*

Excerpt 2

*I was born in the homeland of the Ohlone, which Spain claimed as part of Alta California. My parents and I lived at first in a city by a bay named for Saint Francis of Assisi. We then moved south to another city, grown around a river now confined within a concrete channel. That settlement was called El Pueblo de la Reina de los Angeles de la Porciúncula... Then we crossed the continent to what had been part of the Piscataway chiefdom and claimed by Great Britain. We settled in a capital city named to honor the first president of the new American republic. Few of the official names of these places, east or west, arose from the land itself. I now live in New England, a half hour's drive from New Hampshire. On road trips south, I pass through New York and New Jersey. There are other "new" places. New Londons and New Bostons. New Brunswick and Nova Scotia... In the Chesapeake Bay area that became my paternal ancestors' home, names paid homage to monarchs whose patronage voyagers either enjoyed or sought. Virginia for a virgin queen Elizabeth. Jamestown and James, settlement and river, remembering a king. Terra Mariae (Maryland) acknowledging another*

*queen, Henrietta Maria, wife to Charles, son of James. Then there are the Syracuses, Troys, Athenses, Romes, Alexandrias, and Philadelphias scattered across American maps to recall an older Old World. Other names spread westward, too, with Anglo-American settlers after the Revolution. They left the land, as H. L. Mencken put it, “bespattered with Washingtons, Lafayettes, Jeffersons and Jacksons.” Columbuses, Columbias, Madisons, and, later, Lincolns joined them. Colonial tugs of war left remnants in name-clusters born of other languages. I hear Dutch echoes on every trip by New York City: Haarlem or Haerlem, Jonkheer’s (Yonkers), de Bouwerij (the Bowery). Streets named Breede Wegh (Broadway) and De Waal (Wall). Nassau, Flushing, Staten, the Bronx... Breukelen’s “broken land” a nod to Long Island’s glacial debris. I also hear lasting marks of Spain: California, Florida, Nueva México. Santa Fe, San Francisco, Trinidad, Santa Cruz, Los Angeles. Oasis meadows of Las Vegas. Sierra Nevada, the snowy range. Rio Grande del Norte, great river of the north. Colorado, mud-red river. Cañon, mesa, arroyo, playa—terms for dryland features that English didn’t know.*

Reading discussion questions:

B3. Write the sentence from either excerpt that you found most interesting or meaningful? Why?

B4. In a single sentence, summarize what the author is emphasizing in the first excerpt vs the second.

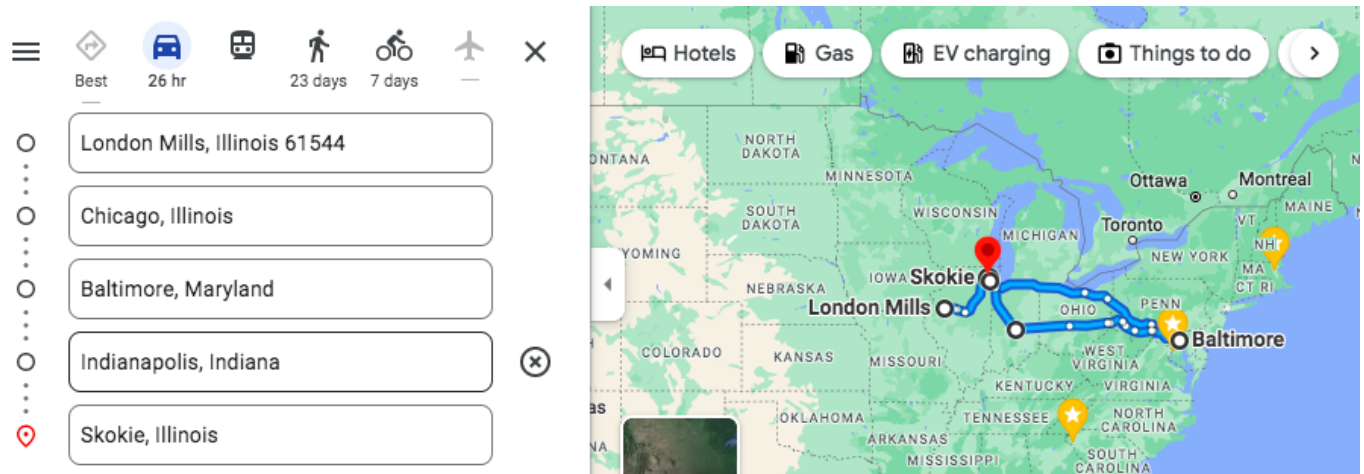
B5. In your own words, what do you think the author means in the last line of the first excerpt when she says, “Perhaps the readers assume they left no mark.”

B6. Who do you think should have the right to name a location?

B7. Do you think more names should honor the plants, animals, and nature that first occupied that area? Give an example of such a name.

## C. Road Trip!

Imagine you are planning a road trip like Lauret Savoy does for her book. Where would you go to trace your family history? What sites would you want to see along the way?



Sample of a Google Map showing the path of a girl born on a farm near London Mills, IL, who went to Chicago to work after high school, got married, moved with her husband to Baltimore, then settled and started a family in Skokie, IL. Indianapolis was added just to make a good route.

Story elements in this example:

- London Mills is a small farm town. Did it used to have a mill?
- Chicago is a big city with a long immigrant history. What does the mix of people in Chicago look like now? What's the origin of Chicago's Native American derived name?
- Baltimore is named after a European aristocrat, why? What is Baltimore important for today?
- A lot of modern highways converge on Indianapolis, what's up with that?
- Skokie is known as a place where the descendants of many WWII holocaust survivors settled. How did that come about and why is the town name Native-American derived, like Chicago?

Create a Google Map, [maps.google.com/maps/about/#!/](https://maps.google.com/maps/about/#!/), best on computer rather than phone.

When you click on the blue TRY NOW button on the top right the map should pop up with your current location in your town.

Now use the numbered list below as a guide to add locations to your road trip map. You don't have to include all the places numbered below. You should add places that are important or interesting to you. You just need to write down why you've included that place. With Google Maps you can change the order of the travel sequence to your liking, to minimize travel distance, or for historical order. For example, you could order places by generation, like where your grandparents lived, then parents, then you. Take a screenshot of your finished map, to share and incorporate into a presentation. You can also save the link to your map.

### Places for your map

1. Enter where you currently live on your google map.
2. If you've lived somewhere else in the US, consider putting that place on your map
3. Add one or more places that you travel to sometimes, for vacation, or to visit relatives.
4. Do you have a favorite place to visit, close to home or farther away? Put it on your map
5. Think of a place that you really want to visit and put it on the map.
6. Add other places that your think are fun, interesting, important, especially if it makes your map route more of a circuit.



## What's in a Name? Nature, Culture, and Conservation

### **Turn your map into a story**

Imagine that you are actually visiting the places on your map. Make a bullet list, or write a paragraph about the trip. It can be as simple as starting out, “My road trip started where I live now, and on the first day, we headed to where my Dad was born...” You can add bits on places you might pass along the way, such as a waterpark, or even a place you stopped to eat. Use your imagination to make the trip sound real. Look at the Illinois Farm Girl example above for some ideas on what you might include.

To add interest to your map story, you might research the history of some of the place names. Look at the Native Lands map, [native-land.ca/](http://native-land.ca/), to see the native people who lived there before and during colonization. You might research and write a short Land Acknowledgement. To include some of the animals and plants that live in places along your route, you can use the Half-Earth Map, [map.half-earthproject.org](http://map.half-earthproject.org) to look at where animals live and where there are protected places for nature. At this page, [bit.ly/3Vx3QAO](http://bit.ly/3Vx3QAO), click on Analyze Area, then you can enter a state name to see what lives there.

### **My map story:**


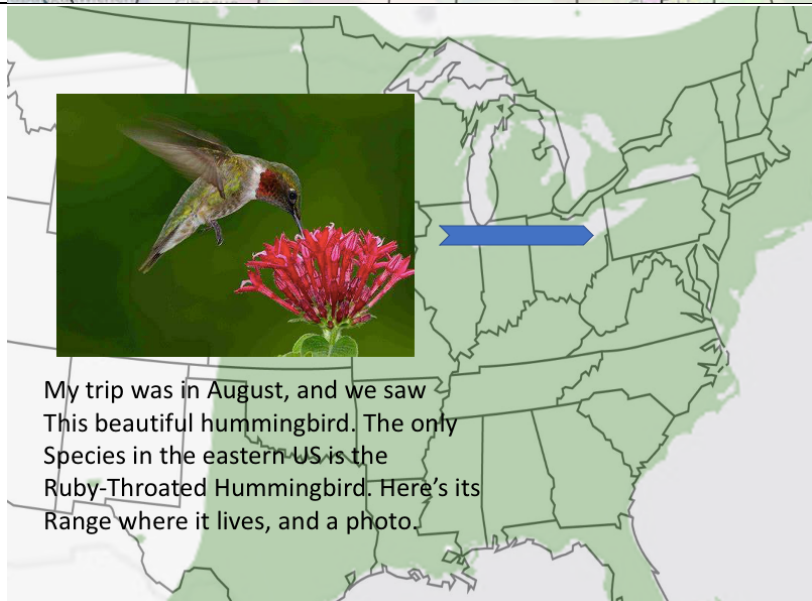
## D. Turn Your Map into Art

Pick a place from your map and map story. Use the blank US states map on the next page to make a strong visual point about historical, cultural, and natural features. You can add Hawaii, Alaska, or other places if you need to.

Use **color and creativity** to draw in the viewer to see your point.

**Your map could include:** Native lands, protected lands, geographic features such as lakes, rivers, or mountains, and any other interesting nearby features you wish to include.

Sample maps (you can do much better!). You can do your own drawings, or paste photos.

<p>To make the map the right, the Native Lands Map was laid on top of the state outline map and made slightly transparent. A photo of the Crazy Horse Monument, an arrow and some text were added. Maybe you passed this place on your road trip.</p>	 <p>The Crazy Horse monument is being built in the state of South Dakota, originally part of a large area (magenta) where the language spoken was Lakota.</p>
<p>The map to the right was made by laying a Ruby-Throated Hummingbird range map on top of the state outlines.</p> <p>You could have a campaign to make the Ruby-Throated Hummingbird the National Bird of the US. How might people in the western US feel about that?</p>	 <p>My trip was in August, and we saw This beautiful hummingbird. The only Species in the eastern US is the Ruby-Throated Hummingbird. Here's its Range where it lives, and a photo.</p>



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## D. Share Your Findings: Story Map

A [story map](#) is a polished way to present text, photos, video, and other elements to support your map-based story. Check out this Half-Earth Story Map Example about hummingbirds: [Hummingbirds](#).

For your story map:

- Organize all the research you did on your road trip place, so that you can add text, picture, and videos to your storymap.
- Try to represent your entire road trip
- History elements are important, but don't forget to include your personal connections.
- Consider making a particular point about the species and nature that share all your map places

[Getting started with ArcGIS StoryMaps](#)

## Story Map Planning

[Planning and Outlining Your Story: How to Set Yourself Up for Success](#)

Planning Steps	Answers
<p><b>Identifying Your Target Audience</b>  <i>Who do you hope will read your story?</i></p>	
<p><b>Defining Your Key Takeaways</b>  <i>What do you hope people will learn about you as they engage with your story?</i></p>	
<p><b>Creating A Content Inventory</b>  <i>What events or facts do you feel are most important to include in your story?</i></p>	
<p><b>Drafting An Outline</b>  <i>How will you tell your story?            Create an outline for your story map.</i></p>	

## Supporting Online Resources

- Native Land Digital Map - [Native-land.ca](http://Native-land.ca)
- Gannet, Origin of US Place Names - [pubs.usgs.gov/bul/0258/report.pdf](http://pubs.usgs.gov/bul/0258/report.pdf)
- Interactive Place Names map - [vividmaps.com/united-states-placename-etymology/](http://vividmaps.com/united-states-placename-etymology/)
- US State Names - [indianaffairs.gov/as-ia/opa/online-press-release/origin-names-us-states](http://indianaffairs.gov/as-ia/opa/online-press-release/origin-names-us-states)
- Canva- free brochure/poster maker [canva.com](http://canva.com)
- PicMonkey – for photo editing [picmonkey.com/home/enter/signup](http://picmonkey.com/home/enter/signup)
- Weebly – website design tools [weebly.com/website](http://weebly.com/website)

## Options and extensions

Explore the Half-Earth Map, [map.half-earthproject.org](http://map.half-earthproject.org)

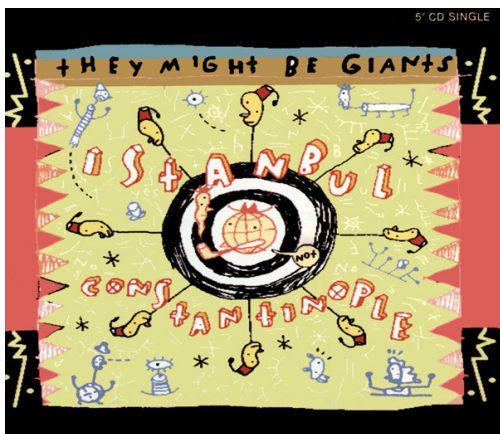
Visit the Half-Earth Map ([map.half-earthproject.org](http://map.half-earthproject.org)) to get a view of maps that emphasize, not place names, but how life on the planet is distributed, how people use the land (to live, grow food, extract resources like trees), and where protected natural areas are.

Do these maps give you a different feeling than typical road maps with towns and states? Do these maps give you ideas about how places should be named?

Focus in on your state

Go to this page of the Half-Earth Map, [bit.ly/3Vx3QAO](http://bit.ly/3Vx3QAO) and click on “Analyze Areas.” Enter a state name in the search bar.

Does what you find on the state page make you think differently about how we should name places? Should we consider naming places to recognize and honor the species that live there?



### Instructor Notes

An in-depth exploration of these important cross-curricular topics could easily take 5-7 class sessions, however most elements of the lesson can stand alone and be easily modified to be part of a single class period. Research and mapping likely require 2 class periods, as does story map creation.

> **Important note: You will need to research the origin of your town's name for the warm-up**  
**Consider making a summary slide (or assign students ahead of time) on your town with:**

- *Date of founding*
- *Early economy such as farming, trade, factories, transportation, mining, forestry*
- *Topography or environment, like water, hills, valleys, flat, mountain, forested, dessert, prairie*
- *Species that live there now or in the past*
- *A famous resident in history*
- *A famous incident in history*

Consider using this activity as an introduction to, or extension of, the [Mapping Design Challenge](#).

#### **General Learning Objectives:**

- Engage students in a deeper conversation about land use, land ownership, and historical events.
- Engage students in thinking about cultural connections to landscapes and how the biosphere and the built environment interact.
- Promote cross curricular learning to help connections for science, social studies, and history.
- Build awareness of local history and facilitate student advocacy projects.

### Appendix: Readings that complement *Trace* by Lauret Savoy

More readings can be found here, [half-earthproject.org/saving-species-one-chapter-at-a-time-great-readings-in-biodiversity/](http://half-earthproject.org/saving-species-one-chapter-at-a-time-great-readings-in-biodiversity/)

Aldo Leopold writes about his idea of a Land Ethic in his classic book *A Sand County Almanac*

“There is as yet no ethic dealing with man’s relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it. Land, like Odysseus’ slave-girls, is still property. The land-relation is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations. The extension of ethics to this third element in human environment is, if I read the evidence correctly, an evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessity. It is the third step in a sequence. The first two have already been taken. Individual thinkers since the days of Ezekiel and Isaiah have asserted that the despoliation of land is not only inexpedient but wrong. Society, however, has not yet affirmed their belief. I regard the present conservation movement as the embryo of such an affirmation. An ethic may be regarded as a mode of guidance for meeting ecological situations so new or intricate, or involving such deferred reactions, that the path of social expediency is not discernible to the average individual. Animal instincts are modes of guidance for the individual in meeting such situations. Ethics are possibly a kind of community instinct in-the-making.

The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land. This sounds simple: do we not already sing our love for and obligation to the land of the free and the home of the brave? Yes, but just what and whom do we love? Certainly not the soil, which we are sending helter-skelter downriver. Certainly not the waters, which we assume have no function except to turn turbines, float barges, and carry off sewage. Certainly not the plants, of which we exterminate whole communities without batting an eye. Certainly not the animals, of which we have already extirpated many of the largest and most beautiful species. A land ethic of course cannot prevent the alteration, management, and use of these ‘resources,’ but it does affirm their right to continued existence, and, at least in spots, their continued existence in a natural state.”

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Drew Lanham was inspired as a young man by Leopold’s vision of a land ethic, and it resonates in his powerful book about loving nature and being black in the US, *The Home Place*.

“I think about land a lot. In fact, I am possessed by it. I think about the lay of the land, how it came to be, what natural forces have changed it, what human forces have mangled it, how concrete and asphalt doom it. I think about the promise it holds for the future and what history it preserves from the past. I think about how it rises and runs, lifts and falls. I think about hills and hollows. I think about great rifts and grand canyons. I think about mountains and monadnocks. I think about swamps and sandhills. I think about draws and drains. I think about the rivers running through land, the animals burrowing under it, and the birds flying over it. I think about the sounds that come from the land: the whining of katydids and crickets on steamy summer nights, the incessant serenading of red-eyed vireos on newborn spring days, and the chattering of squirrels hiding acorns on chill-crisped autumn mornings. I think about clapper rails applauding at the edge of a salt marsh stage and the teletyping dictations of pinewoods tree frogs in a rain-soaked longleaf savannah. I think about the solace of winter whispered on a northwest wind and the mournful groaning of the bare-boned trees. I think about the soil underneath it all: its

shifting sandiness, rough rockiness, rich loaminess, and sticky clayeyness. I think about the perfume of place: the pleasant mustiness of decaying leaves on a Blue Ridge forest floor, the sulfur stink of a Beaufort mudflat at low tide, the drunken sweetness of an orchard in October.”

“Before I got too deep into the woods, I might take a few minutes to lie in the pasture lane, enticing the “buzzards” to investigate. I lay as still as I could and did my best imitation of something stinking and dead...I felt closer to flight by bringing the birds nearer to my earthbound existence...I launched myself from trees, roofs, and haystacks. No matter how hard I tried, though, I couldn't fly. Mary Poppins and Wile E. Coyote had lied to me. Umbrellas didn't float me gently to the ground and no matter how vigorously I flapped my cardboard wings, my husky weight fell back to earth...I was a caramel-colored Icarus with a hard head, persisting in the fantasy that flying was something I was meant to do.”

“I can take pride, however, in knowing I'm not the first black man to set foot on this arid soil. So many of the far-flung, bird-rich locations I travel to grabbed the attention of black soldiers first. The famed Buffalo Soldiers of the US Army's 9th and 10th Cavalry units and 24th and 25th Infantry units were there over a hundred years before me. They were sent to the far ends of the frontier to hold the line and press the manifest destiny of a growing nation, and endured the extremes of heat, cold, dust, mud, insects, and disease. But I like to think there were quiet times among the daily tasks of surviving racism, skirmishes with ill-treated American Indians, and incursions from Mexican desperados. Maybe on an evening watch, a black man in a blue woolen waistcoat looked skyward, his ears catching the trumpeting calls of thousands of sandhill cranes setting their wings against the falling sun. Perhaps the symphony soothed some of the angry edge sharpened by poor pay and even less respect. Perhaps a brown-faced horseman, the son of a slave, with knee boots dusty from the trail and a broad-brimmed hat slouched low over tired eyes, wondered aloud at the spectacle of a snipe twittering to the heavens one minute and spiraling to the ground the next.”

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Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* combines her perspectives as an indigenous woman and a trained scientist.

“In the Western tradition there is a recognized hierarchy of beings, with, of course, the human being on top—the pinnacle of evolution, the darling of Creation—and the plants at the bottom. But in Native ways of knowing, human people are often referred to as “the younger brothers of Creation.” We say that humans have the least experience with how to live and thus the most to learn—we must look to our teachers among the other species for guidance. Their wisdom is apparent in the way that they live. They teach us by example. They've been on the earth far longer than we have been, and have had time to figure things out. They live both above and below ground, joining Skyworld to the earth. Plants know how to make food and medicine from light and water, and then they give it away.

I like to imagine that when Skywoman scattered her handful of seeds across Turtle Island, she was sowing sustenance for the body and also for the mind, emotion, and spirit: she was leaving us teachers. The plants can tell us her story; we need to learn to listen.”

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“Now, two generations later, after removal, after allotment, after the boarding schools, after diaspora, my family returns to Oklahoma, to what is left of my grandfather's allotment. From the hilltop you can



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still see pecan groves along the river. At night we dance on the old powwow grounds. The ancient ceremonies greet the sunrise. The smell of corn soup and the sound of drums fill the air as the nine bands of Potawatomi, scattered across the country by this history of removal, come together again for a few days each year in a search for belonging. The Potawatomi Gathering of Nations reunites the people, an antidote to the divide-and-conquer strategy that was used to separate our people from each other and from our homelands. The synchrony of our Gathering is determined by our leaders, but more importantly, there is something like a mycorrhizal network that unites us, an unseen connection of history and family and responsibility to both our ancestors and our children. As a nation, we are beginning to follow the guidance of our elders the pecans by standing together for the benefit of all. We are remembering what they said, that all flourishing is mutual.”

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“Wild strawberries fit the definition of gift, but grocery store berries do not. It’s the relationship between producer and consumer that changes everything. As a gift-thinker, I would be deeply offended if I saw wild strawberries in the grocery store. I would want to kidnap them all. They were not meant to be sold, only to be given. Hyde reminds us that in a gift economy, one’s freely given gifts cannot be made into someone else’s capital. I can see the headline now: “Woman Arrested for Shoplifting Produce. Strawberry Liberation Front Claims Responsibility.”

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