

Between Two Singapores: Imagined Geographies and Unsettling Settler Romances

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Along the shores of Lake Michigan, a town was founded with small resources and big ambitions: Singapore. Since its founding in 1836, the town was an unrelenting fever dream of foibles, scandals, and lies. Promotional maps depicted roads that were never built and plots of land that were never surveyed. Settlers recorded tales of Native Americans demanding to be converted and “civilized” before disappearing forever. The wildcat Bank of Singapore briefly issued a currency, the Singapore dollar, that outvalued the U.S. dollar before it was revealed to be backed by fraud, not gold. The town’s founders dreamed of unseating Chicago as the premier metropolis on the Great Lakes, but ironically, Chicago caused Singapore’s fall: after the Great Chicago Fire, the timbering town of Singapore rushed to fill the new demand for lumber, clear-cutting the surrounding white pine forests. With the forests gone, the sand once kept in place beneath the roots began to move. Five years later, the town was buried. Today, nothing is visible but rolling hills of sand dotted by beachgrass.

Meanwhile, in its Southeast Asian namesake, the town of Singapore, Michigan, is experiencing a surge in popularity. In his inaugural National Day Rally speech, Singapore’s Prime Minister used the town as a moral tale for environmental resilience, declaring, “Singapore in Michigan didn’t last very long, but we hope this Singapore will be around for a very long time—the next 1,000 years or more” (Wong 2024). The absurd time horizon wasn’t lost on Singaporean commentators, given the island city-state’s battle against the rising seas, using sand to continuously expand the territory while producing environmental devastation regionally. Since August 2024, news outlets and content creators have created posts marveling at the town’s existence, and Singaporean artists have produced individual works and even entire gallery shows that meditate on the silences in the Singapore, Michigan, archive. The Pandemonium Theatre Company even premiered a play, “Singapore, Michigan,” in June 2025.

“Between Two Singapores” is a science communication and environmental storytelling project at the nexus of environmental humanities, environmental history, and environmental anthropology. It draws on methodologies in Indigenous, Black Feminist, and decolonial ecocriticism to track how diverse stakeholders between Western Michigan and Southeast Asia are imagining their romantic attachments to and desires for the ghost town of Singapore, Michigan, forming geographic stories about spaces, places, and land that they have not been—and likely never will be. During the fellowship term, I will draw on oral history interviews, participant observation, and archival research completed between 2020 and 2025 to prepare a series of publications and finalize a production schedule for a documentary podcast and book proposal based on the project.