

# INDYPENDENT READER

*toward building a new society on the vacant lots of the old . . .*

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## A Region from Below

### Issue:

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In the summer of 2008, a group of drifters traveled in search of the Midwest Radical Culture Corridor (MRCC). They looked for the region's counter narratives; they found evidence of small town organizing, prison resistance, and perma-cultural farming living right beside agribusiness, supermax prisons, empty factories, and Christian conservatism. They witnessed the reflections of cities, in the urban migrants seeking fairer futures on open land, in crop production that fuels and feeds the masses, and in the waste exported from cities. They met with urban and rural farmers, a citizen's group, a radical filmmaker, a dairy cooperative, historians, and stayed at an anarchist commune.

Cities don't act alone; they are bound to their regional outcroppings depending deeply on the land and people around them to survive. Areas outside the city are places where food is grown, energy is extracted, burned and transported, and trash is stored. In the Midwest, everything from water to coal moves to the city center, as prisoners, "culture" and waste flow out. The region's infrastructure is dependent on all its parts. And like cities, our region is a site of unevenly distributed resources, material and human flows. In this way, our cities cannot afford to ignore these sites of struggle. Out here, giant multinational corporations own acres upon acres of land, millions of tax dollars are funneled into caging men and women, and small communities fight tooth and nail against police tasers, toxic waste dumping, and machine politics. The struggle for autonomy, rights to dissent, and rights to public spaces, extends to all of the region.

The occasion of the City from Below conference gave us time to articulate how and why regions are neglected in both consciousness and material. We asked ourselves, what are the many barriers that keep us from connecting to the bio-social-economic mesh in, around and outside of our cities . There are many spatial and conceptual barriers that hinder our thinking in or about the region. We are deep within what we have been calling The Petroleum Space/Time Continuum (PS/TC), witnessed by the ultimate abstraction of our sense of connectedness to a place, which stands in contradistinction to the scale and time that is bodily, not calculated in nanoseconds, but by the beats of our hearts and the sounds of our foot steps. City, suburb, countryside, wilderness and region represent different scales and kinds of place, and yet a movement for social, spatial, ecological justice needs to resist the isolation imposed by their jurisdictional separation.

The notion of the bioregion has helped us temporarily suspend the disorienting effects of the

PS/TC, regional isolation and political boundaries at large. It has allowed us to pay attention to place, locale, and interconnected flows. The bioregion is an important conceptual method for re-imagining an area's wealth and its power as a whole that casts aside artificial political boundaries. Bioregionalism emerged in the early seventies as a way to re-imagine place, by examining how topography, zones of life, and particularly watersheds form ecological and also economic regions. The bioregional lens addresses social and political power as well as ecological systems. Internationally during the 70s, bioregional self-determination was an argument used by separatist groups such as the Basque, the Catalonians and even the Northern Californians.

In the US, an emergence of bioregional consciousness, part of a deepening of the environmental movement, was conceptually part of successful organizing against nuclear power plant construction. As affinity groups organized they chose names after local fauna, as part of seeing a place as more than its human inhabitants. Likewise, early 70's cooperative movements in some places rose from a bioregional consciousness, particularly where new work cooperatives formed to fill extremely local labor needs. These include the Marmot Collective in Seattle that contracted with the US Forest Service, and the cooperating food provision networks in Seattle, New England and the Northern Midwest.

In 1981, four people from this movement developed a bioregional quiz called "Where You At?" to encourage familiarity with the interconnected web of life that makes up a bioregion. The quiz tested knowledge of weather cycles, land systems, the life networks and cycles of other species, and the social reality and historic rights of those who lived on this land before them.<sup>1</sup>

We think the questions in this original quiz are useful in making a conceptual bridge between countryside and city, and that they should be broadened to encompass contemporary conditions under neo-liberalism and other complicated factors that impact a region.

We should learn about the watershed, but also the waste-sheds, land-shed, food-shed, labor-shed, migration-shed, and all the other kinds of sheds that might help us understand the over-determination of political boundaries, and also how power is produced between countryside, suburb and city, regions, and nations. These forms of information offer tools for us to rediscover the autonomous subjectivity and connectedness that neo-liberal capital takes from us, leading us to a place of cooperation and mobilization. And as we learn where we are, and where others are in relation to us, we can better understand the complexities of the outlying places. By breaking down the existing jurisdictional lines, and creating new pathways for communication and cooperation, we can, perhaps, together find new pleasurable, radical ways to mobilize across these constructed spaces.

(1) Leonard Charles, Jim Dodge, Lynn Milliman and Victoria Stockley. In *Coevolution Quarterly* 32 (Winter 1981): 1. <http://www.dlackey.org/weblog/docs/Where%20You%20At.htm> [3]

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