

The Next Eclipse

A Vision for Regional Autonomy

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An invitation and a challenge

The Next Eclipse is an invitation to shift our perspective on southern Illinois. Rather than seeing it as a dying region waiting for outside interests to save it, we propose that what makes it special is rooted in its status of being economically overlooked. A better future for this region will be built not by the wealthy or their politicians, and certainly not by more polluting industries, but by everyday people organizing ourselves to build a unique way of living and sustaining the life, history, and struggle of this region.

The Next Eclipse is a challenge to build the capacity for regional autonomy in this time between the eclipses. By “autonomy,” we mean the possibility of a life outside the existing economic and political relations, the possibility of a dignified, free, and equal life here in southern Illinois.

The Next Eclipse, finally, is a short book that has been passed hand to hand in southern Illinois, its intended audience, and shared over a far broader range. It has inspired others to think about their own regions in new ways, and there are rumors of similar projects in different places.

We are currently collecting stories from people who have lived and struggled in Little Egypt. We are interested in stories about a wide variety of topics: subsistence farming, labor struggles, struggles against racism; about fights for the forest; about what you cherish most about life in southern Illinois. If you would like to share your stories with us, please visit our contact page by clicking here. (<https://thenexteclipse.wordpress.com/contact/>)

vol. 1: The Next Eclipse

Preface

The following text was written in the weeks before a solar eclipse, the totality of which passed over southern Illinois on August 21th, 2017. In seven years, a second total solar eclipse will be visible from the same place. The two paths of these eclipses make an X across the so-called United States, intersecting in Makanda, IL.

The Next Eclipse is the beginning of a vision for regional autonomy, and a challenge to southern Illinois to build the infrastructure for such autonomy in the time between the eclipses. It is an attempt to allow these astronomical events, reduced by local governments and businesses to nothing more than opportunities for tourism, to have some deeper significance for the inhabitants of the region.

It has been a pleasant surprise to find that the text has resonated with people in other places as well. Reading groups have formed in a handful of places around the country. We hope that the text inspires the reflections of others in their own regions, as we have been inspired by movements for autonomy around the world.

The night before the 2017 eclipse, a march led by musicians took the main strip in Carbondale, IL. A hundred or so people clapped in time and sang “Negra luna [Black moon],” a song from a musical tradition rooted in resistance to colonization. A banner at the front of the march declared “THIS EMPIRE, TOO, WILL BE ECLIPSED.”

Since that eclipse, it has become more and more clear that certainties are scarce regarding even the near future. None of us know what seven years’ time will bring. On the short list of certainties, things around which a life can be build, three things stand out:

First, it is certain that at 1:59 pm on April 8th, 2024, for 4 minutes and 9 seconds, southern Illinois will fall into darkness in a shadow cast by the moon.

Second, it is certain that we owe nothing to the institutions that prolong this empire, and that we owe everything to each other, to those working to retrieve the world from the ecocidal and biocidal clutches of the economy and its government.

Finally, it is certain that in the course of time, this empire, like all the others before it, will be eclipsed.

Nothing can prepare you for a total solar eclipse. It is worth stopping whatever else you are doing. It is worth traveling great distances for. And it is worth allowing it to take on significance in your life – not merely the dumb movements of rocks and gases, but a moment that reveals, that inspires, that ignites.

For life and joy; for freedom, equality, and dignity; for a patient, deep, and sensitive rebellion.

Carbondale, IL, February 2018

1. What is an eclipse?

In ancient Greek, éklipses meant “the abandonment,” “the downfall,” “a failing or forsaking,” or “the darkening of a heavenly body.”

Two of the most pronounced differences of the natural world – day and night – find themselves momentarily confused, reshuffled, paradoxically intertwined.

In those moments, all the ranks, badges, and hierarchies that bind the powers of the earth, are revealed for what they are: the stupid games of humans, who have forgotten their place in the mortal order of things. The eclipse reminds us, contrary to the meticulously structured optical illusion of this social system, that it is the sun and not money that breaths life into the inhabitants of earth.

The fact that the eclipse has been viewed by the ruling class of the area as a momentary economic manna from heaven only underlines their idiocy, their disconnection from the world.

The fact that we tie our fate to them, that we allow them to decide the fate of this beautiful region, only underlines ours.

What is an eclipse?

an abandonment of those dependencies which prevent our lives from flourishing;

a downfall of those powers that destroy us;

an honest recognition of what has failed and forsaken us;

a darkening of those entities who seek to decide our fate as if from the heavens;

What is an eclipse?

Let’s allow the eclipse to be an invitation to be present, together, before the challenges we face.

Perhaps *to eclipse* is something we do. Perhaps an eclipse is something we become.

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This is a call. It is meant for those who hear it.

We’re not trying to argue. We are writing for those who have all the arguments and reasons they need. Consider this a flare shot into the momentary night of the totality:

for those who are looking,

for those who are sending out flares of their own,

for those who may have caught sight, through an accidental glance, and recognize a part of themselves in what they see.

For those who understand that we are living through the end of a civilization, and who want to build a new world within its empty shells, its ruins, its ashes, its wake.

For those who see that such a world will not come from the politicians or divine economic forces, but only from our own prolonged and committed efforts.

For those who have given up faith in all the mechanisms of “change,” and are ready to assume responsibility for their own future.

For those who understand that there is no hope on the horizon, unless we create it.

We offer no argument. We only want to state the obvious and point the direction that follows.

2. What is obvious?

We all know it is ending.

Trump is not an aberration. There will be no “return to normal.” The damage has been done. America is over.

For some of us, America – while flawed and incompletely realized – was inseparable from an inspiring vision of human progress. It is therefore not without some pain that we watch it become a parody of itself, its hallowed institutions transformed into reality television, its ideals turn into propaganda for the naïve, its most evil traditions of white supremacy, exploitation, and sexism once again resurgent.

For others of us, we say “good riddance” to a country whose founding values were inscribed in blood-red hypocrisy, and whose world-historical legacy is to have accelerated the genocidal and eco-cidal forces of capitalism.

But whether it is a moment of solemn acceptance or celebratory joy, the truth is obvious: America is over. The question now is whether we have the courage to go beyond it, or whether we will accept its zombie-like afterlife, marked by a blatant effort at total control over its population.

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At a more local level, we can see the writing on the wall: the economic fate of Carbondale is tied to the University, which is tied to state funding. State funding has revealed itself to be fundamentally unreliable. With Rauner, a process that has been underway for decades was merely accelerated to the point where it has become undeniably clear. The state cannot be depended on to care for the fate of this region.

To some, this has been clear for a long time. The university has been ravaged for decades by a rotating managerial class that has shown itself unable to chart a path that works for the university, let alone the region in which it is embedded.

A new Chancellor arrives, carefully projecting a gruffy masculinity designed to assure us that daddy is here, that someone is going to save the day, that he’s done it before. How many times will we fall for this? We know how these people operate: cut some things, build some things, send out applications to the next University. Progress on your C.V. is all that counts. The chaos of southern Illinois has been a ladder for too many administrative entrepreneurs.

The only plan that will ever count as “realistic” to that managerial class is to “streamline” the university. Liberal arts will be increasingly consolidated into fewer departments, and corporate money will be attracted to build the robots and drones that will displace workers, surveil everyday life, and wage war against anyone who challenges the power of corporations to turn the world into a giant open air prison. This is the only real growth industry of our time, hidden behind the innocuous banner of ‘tech.’ The university will be brought into the twenty-first century, a bit late, as a research&development extension of the powerful.

In this context, many are looking for a way to jump-ship, to leave town and find some stable employment elsewhere. But there’s not enough room in the world’s gated communities for everyone. Instability and precarity are the present and future of this world. You can desperately try to save your own hide, but the odds are stacked against you. Another path must be created for those of us who understand that stability at the expense of others is an illusion, always threatened by the fear of those excluded others. Another path must be made for those who want to

create the conditions for a good life – abundance, comradeship, virtue, compassion – here where we call home.

Such a path cannot be found on the existing political or economic map. It is off the boring charts of liberal and conservative and libertarian and socialist. It is a road that must be made by walking.

There are some, in their own places, who have taken steps in this direction. Small experiments in resurrecting a sense of collective life, a concern for the fate of a whole community. A town of 3000 people in the hills of Spain, Marinaleda, has created an agricultural co-operative that is owned by and employs the whole town. They deliberately chose labor-intensive crops to make sure they could give everyone work. If you help build your house, it's yours for 15 euro a month. There are no police, because there is no crime, because there is no poverty. The city is cleaned every few Sundays by its own people, who make a party of it. While the unemployment rate in Spain is approaching 50%, and while the foreclosure crisis displaced hundreds of thousands, Marinaleda remains insulated from these market forces because it has built material and political autonomy at the local level.

There are other examples, each a unique attempt to forge a different world. The ZAD, or Zone to Defend: an autonomous zone the size of Carbondale and Makanda, composed of occupied farms and blocking the construction of an airport in the north of France. Two dozen small, interlinked communes inhabit the zone, building on it a world that is inconsistent with the airport and the world that demands it. A few times a year, tens of thousands of people flock there to express their support and show their commitment to defend the zone from eviction.

Rojava: in northern Syria, the Kurds took the civil war as an opportunity to launch a revolutionary project in democratic autonomy against capitalism, patriarchy, and the state. They created a form of government that is answerable to neighborhood assemblies and have shown themselves the most effective combatants against ISIS.

On every inhabited continent there are tiny worlds breaking off from global capitalism, sometimes quietly, sometimes accompanied by a fight. People building the possibility of a world beyond this imploding civilization.

Meanwhile, in Southern Illinois, people are placing their bets on an eclipse to provide a wind-fall of cash... for what? So they can continue the same course for a few more years, against all the winds of history that are desperately trying to blow us in another direction. Why couldn't a dozen towns in Little Egypt go the direction of Marinaleda?

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There are some of us who feel ourselves to be inseparable from this region. Some others are scrambling to get out. In the latter group, many came for work, at the hospital, at the university. Some were raised here with the idea that their future is obviously elsewhere. No matter how many years we stay, many of us still think we are merely passing through. This is a local symptom of a wider phenomenon.

In the last few decades, the economy's imperative to go where the money is has uprooted people from their places on a scale that is historically only paralleled by wars and colonization efforts. With that uprooting, we are sucked out of our networks of family and childhood friends, transformed into isolated individuals or nuclear family units, whose sole responsibility is to care for our small bubble. Nothing is worth struggling for in any particular place; if things get too hard, just move.

Of course, not everyone can. And not everyone will, even if they can. Two types of people are emerging: those who feel so connected to a place that they refuse to uproot themselves without a fight, and those who refuse themselves that contact with reality. The latter surf on the waves of a turbulent economy, thinking their work is more important than the ground they stand on to do it. Life is a highway and places are pit-stops.

The relation to every place as somewhere one is merely passing through is what prevents the kinds of struggles that are needed from emerging. It is what makes every particular place expendable.

Creating a future requires allowing ourselves to develop and take seriously our connection to a place. To recognize its fate as our own.

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On April 8th, 2024, a second eclipse will pass through Little Egypt. We can let these two eclipses be nothing more than an astronomical coincidence. We can let the movements of planetary bodies remain separate from the movements of our hearts, let their migration have no effect on our social life apart from being two opportunities to scam the tourists. We can do that.

But why? Aren't we looking for something? Aren't we waiting for something to reorient us, to trigger the transformation of life that is necessary to survive, let alone to thrive?

Let the next eclipse be ours. Let the first eclipse be a period, a hard stop that brings relief to the long winded speech of those who have told us this is the only life on offer, there is no alternative, you'd tear yourselves apart without us, and on and on. Period. Thank you for your thoughts, but now its time for some of our own. What can be accomplished in seven serious years, here in Little Egypt?

Economic autonomy. The ability to meet the needs of Little Egypt through growing and producing in Little Egypt. With it, the confidence that, were the global economy to collapse, we'd be alright – better maybe?

A social safety-net from below. The ability to provide care for those whose health and well-being the state has abandoned, or is always a law or two away from abandoning.

Ecological restoration and defense. The ability to not merely beg those who call themselves our leaders to stop fracking, but to physically prevent such a disastrous industry from poisoning our region.

A sense of collective fate. Forms of celebrating the forgotten history of resistance, of feeling ourselves as we really are: fragile links in a human story of struggle.

How far can seven years take us? Seven years from now, will we have squandered our lives working to pay off debts and rents to those who we feel, deep down, that we owe nothing?

There are no maps for where we must go. There is a direction, and a path to make by walking.

3. Fragments of a Future

Every block has a garden and a tool library. Houses are fixed up and owned through use and care. Contracts are for people who hate each other, and they still get written up from time to time, but shelter is not something you deprive even someone you hate. In the garden, the neighborhood watch meets twice a week to practice de-escalation techniques and nonviolent communication, and trains for situations when those don't work. The strip is dotted with every variety of eatery,

collectively run with locally grown food and some specialty items acquired through autonomous trade routes. We always have enough, but we don't have everything all the time. The excitement around sharing something special returns to us.

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Its a shitty morning. Its the day of your twice-monthly shift for trash collection, because we still make trash for the time being. Your crew gets up early, because you all want it to be over by lunch time. As you roll up in the bio-diesel powered truck, someone gets the idea that turns the mood: death metal. You will blast death metal as you all toss cans of trash into the truck. Its perfect, as if the genre, invented decades ago, existed in a sort of limbo until it discovered its sole purpose as the soundtrack to a communal trash collection team. Those sleeping in along your route yell for you to turn it down, but whatever. When its their shift on trash duty, you promise yourself, you'll let them get through it however they need to.

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There's a bonfire again on the strip, this time for the Tomato Fertility Festival, which has moved out of clandestinity and into the open air of the town. The chant of TO-MA-TO echos throughout the neighborhoods, as marches start from various gardens led by children carrying baskets of the first tomato harvest. Gallons of the red fruit are poured into a cauldron over the fire and a sauce is cooked slowly amidst dancing, which is still more fun because its in the streets.

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You can't get out of bed. You can't stand the light. Nothing happened to you; there isn't any reason. You just can't see other people, hear their voices, feel their touch. All that you can do today is feel. And even though it feels like pain, you don't mind it. It has messages for you, which you can hear if you have the time to listen. And you do now. You're allowed to feel. No one judges you or shames you and you won't get fired since there are no jobs. There's always work to do, but work and life and fun and play are integrated, and none of those things are jobs. The work you are responsible for can wait, or someone else can pick up your slack for the time being. You are allowed to feel. You are encouraged to feel. You are free to feel. And there will be no penalties, no consequences for staying in bed all day, all night, and for however many days it takes for you to feel all the parts and moments of that feeling. When you emerge from the fog, you remember you were cared for, and your responsibilities were cared for, and you are refreshed.

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Hospitals are run as cooperatives. Specialist doctors and surgeons commit blocks of time toward patient care and participate in skill share, which trains other health care workers to the extent they can. Through the collective nurses have become household physicians, the family doctor. Cooperative Hospitals provide access to tests, medicine, and are hubs for emergency treatment when a nurse cannot be accessed. They serve the severely sick, those with ongoing, intense treatment plans, and are sterile environments for surgeries, but most ailments are treated

in the home. Babies are born where mothers want them to be – at home, at a house run by midwives, in the hospitals. Notably, with a large-scale diet shift from processed foods to regionally grown and raised, organic meat and produce, in combination with the shift from jobs to collective work forces which have reduced anxiety and depression, the health of the general public has increased dramatically. When people are terminally ill, they are placed with their families and loved ones, provided end of life care with a nurse (there’s usually one in every communal unit), and are allowed to die in peace, however they desire. While we once required the need for death doulas – emotionally mature individuals who could guide the unfeeling through trauma– we now are able to take the time we need to mourn, to feel, and to celebrate the life of those who leave.

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A group of kids and adults are repairing a broken node on the solar powered mesh network that keeps the internet running, free from the infrastructure of the big telecom companies who still dominate in some places. A few trucks are moving the day’s harvest to neighborhood food hubs, where young kids load bags of produce onto bicycle trailers. You’ve had the longest day, you think, as you sip peach brandy on your porch. What did it start with? Death metal, right. And then there was the Yemeni festival for lunch, then someone asked if you would help mediate a conflict they were having over in the Arbor district – a fight about someone sucking up all the block’s electricity, which admittedly tested your patience. Then there was that walk with that someone to that persimmon tree, the one with the candy-tasting fruit the size of tomatoes that you had kept secret til today. Then the hour of canning while the old woman read aloud from *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Then the cleaning out of the rainwater filter, a quick but messy job. Then the dinner you shared with the sunset. And now the brandy, and the sound of music growing down the block. But your friend is on their way over, and you plan to continue tonight the friendly debate you’ve been having for a decade, since even before life became the pleasant chaos that it is: what is happiness? Its a question that doesn’t get old.

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Across fires and under stars, we share stories of how silly we were. We have to look at it as silly, so as not to fall into a rage at the ideas and practices that our ancestors allowed to decimate so much beauty in the world.

“It turns out people like to create things, and like it even more when what they create is useful to others. This obvious fact about our being, so evident all around us, was obscured by the foggy lens of ‘the economy.’ They had actually convinced some of us that it was money and selfishness that made people work! Having never actually allowed people to live without scrambling for their basic necessities, the economists never actually got to observe free people undertaking free activity. As if humans before the economy were isolated misers, as if they weren’t born from and dependent on one another. As if our greatest joy wasn’t to be found in being the cause of joy to others!”

A child speaks up: “But what was ‘the economy’ you’re all always talking about?”

Old timers laugh: “We didn’t know either! That’s what was so crazy about it!”

A more serious voice rises: “When you were in it, it was hard to see it for what it was. When you were in it, it just looked like ‘the way the world worked’: you had to sell your time in

exchange for some paper or numbers, in order to buy the ability to live and sell your time more. You got a weekend, a few holidays, some vacations if you were lucky, but otherwise your life was owned by the companies you sold it to. At the end there, it seemed like people turned themselves into little corporations, and forgot entirely what it meant to be free. Now, outside of it, we can see it more clearly: it was a way of controlling us, of governing us. Of keeping us ignorant of the fact that we didn't need the companies and the governments who said we needed them."

"But how did such a thing ever take hold of everyone in the first place?"

"That's a very good question." The fire crackles. "Let me tell you about our ancestor, Tecumseh."

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Tecumseh was a Shawnee Indian chief, who led a rebellion against the colonizing forces of early America. In 1811, a year before the rebellion he fomented broke out, Tecumseh passed through southern Illinois during his ceaseless efforts to unite the tribes. He carried with him a bundle of sticks, demonstrating that while a single stick can be broken, a united bundle holds under pressure. This image was so powerful it was eventually taken up by his – and our – enemies, to signify their commitment to a united force of colonization and genocidal conquest.

After Tecumseh's visit through southern Illinois, the New Madrid fault line let loose an earthquake that reportedly rang church bells as far as Boston. The most powerful active fault line in the North American continent, it slumbers, for now, in the southernmost parts of Little Egypt. The 1811 quake was taken as a sign of the justness of Tecumseh's cause.

"But what was his cause?"

Well, as he put it:

'No tribe has the right to sell land, even to each other, much less to strangers ... Sell a country!? Why not sell the air, the great sea, as well as the earth? Didn't the Great Spirit make them all for the use of his children?'

You see, the game the economists and the others who controlled us played was to tell us that people like Tecumseh were not our ancestors. That they were backward or savage or that their way of doing things would never work again. And so they gave new names to the genocide and the destruction of all the possibilities in the world. They called them 'progress,' and they taught us that we were better than all those folks who'd lived for so many thousands of years.

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We construct tiny utopian glimpses because they are potent exercises in unfreezing the imagination. For too long its been easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. Maybe the image of chaos that we are told lies beyond this tightly controlled society is just the ruling class's view of what autonomy would mean: a world that could not be controlled from above. A world of free communities, unsubmitive to the rule of money.

4. Autonomy

Autonomy. It's a word that today has more of a direction and a practice than a meaning, *per se*. Around the globe, from the Zapatistas of southern Mexico, to the Kurds of northern Syria, to networks of communes throughout Europe and North America, autonomy is the dream taking shape.

We could define it as collective self-determination, the ability for the people of a place to chart their own future. To eclipse the power of financial, industrial, and political elites.

The obstacles to autonomy are twofold: on the one hand, a global economy that wraps people's everyday lives in an international network of money exchanges, and on the other hand, the governments and their police whose job, at bottom, is to keep it that way.

Struggles for autonomy, then, involve both building and fighting. Building the means for regional production outside the existing economic order. Fighting for the right to organize our lives in ways are inevitably contrary to the laws of the state. Those laws, whatever their stated intention, have the fundamental purpose of keeping us dependent on the institutions that are destroying the earth and its various worlds. Reducing us to isolated individuals, whose sole course for freedom involves submission to the gambling ring called the economy.

Autonomy is about creating different freedoms. Creating different worlds. Creating the conditions to create ourselves, with all the potential dangers and joys that such a project entails.

5. How?

How would we do it? How would we eclipse their power?

a. Many of us are already doing it. Around the continent and around the region, networks of organic farms are self-organizing. Spaces are being taken over and filled with people and projects for the struggle. What is necessary is not some party or political organization that sucks us into the dying gasps of a system that, with Trump, has shown its true colors. We are already a party, partisans, of a world that is inconsistent with this one. Acknowledging this fact, deepening our cooperation, and extending our ambitions are our first tasks.

b. Start with desires, and build what is needed to fulfill them. None of us want a life reduced to blandness and scarcity. We want a luxurious life that can be shared with others, and we're willing to work for it. A craft brewery or ice cream company that builds its own local production network can be a partisan project, building within the money economy a set of skills and resources that could just as easily be detached from it. Create something, share it, and link up with others.

c. Don't try to do everything. Make friends who have the skills you don't have to accomplish what you want. We need engineers, farmers, computer scientists, permaculture experts, listeners, singers, thieves, nurses, historians, visionaries, carpenters, plumbers, and a thousand other people who love the skills they've developed and want to share them. Make your skills available, and look at something you can't do alone as an opportunity to meet someone new.

d. What passes for "political debate" today is a trap. Political discourse today is designed to pigeon-hole us into pre-defined, easily manipulated categories. If you have a neighbor or a high school friend that is on opposite sides of the political spectrum, find a common practice or form of sharing material things that can create common ground for a relationship. Chart a course off the political spectrum with unpredictable friendships.

e. Build a culture of resistance. Non-cooperation with the police and the state, solidarity with those who resist. Turn out to demonstrations and make them true expressions of our collective capacity to transform life and the city, if even for a moment. Ask yourself how you can best contribute to creating or sustaining joyous chaos, a breakdown of the sad reign of normalcy, and make a plan with those you know.

f. Diversity is strength. Racial and class diversity, but also ideological, spiritual, age, and any other kinds. We want a world that values each of our perspectives and unique abilities to contribute, and this is an ethos that needs to be in the genetic code of our struggle. Keep in mind, the most effective tool of the powerful is division along racial, ethnic, or other lines. Within any identity, there is more difference than there is across its boundaries. The only lines that matter are ethical lines: how you are, not who you are; what you want, not where you come from.

g. Think ethically and strategically. Breaking out of the structures of this world is not something that will happen simply because it is a good idea. Good ideas lay buried in the brains of millions of dissidents. Similarly, rigid moral principles paralyze people from acting in a context where no action can be safe from a context of suffering. I type this on a computer, using electricity created from burning coal, which is warming the atmosphere and destroying the lungs of people around the globe. Morality creates guilt around these facts, which are beyond any of our control and therefore responsibility. Guilt paralyzes and brings out nastiness, resentment.

What is needed is a strategic ethics, which starts from what is practically possible in any given situation, and is oriented toward expanding those possibilities for the next moment.

Morality commands, whether it is from a church pulpit or a conscience. Ethics, in contrast, invites us to steer a course through the undesirable extreme consequences to grow more powerful in each unique situation.

For our broad situation, there are clear extremes we want to navigate between: on the one hand, we want to steer clear of what is normal, which is the destruction of the world at the hands of the economy. On the other hand, we don't want to catalyze the outbreak of open civil war in a context where the state and right wing paramilitary forces can be deployed to crush everything we love. Veer too far from normal, without having built enough strength, and the reactionary forces will be shipping us off to the camps. Come too close to normal, and our projects will be captured in the economy and become a nightmare version of what we hope for, as has happened so many times before.

6. Which Future Past?

Fifty years ago, no one could have imagined the world we have now. Fifty years from now, the world will have transformed several times over in ways that we currently cannot imagine. This is beyond question. The only question is whether the terms of these changes will continue to be set by the interests of the wealthy and their political lackeys, or whether a new historical force will enter the equation.

Eclipses are useful to historians, because they allow the precise dating of events that otherwise may have been recorded unreliably. What will these eclipses mean to the future? A moment where the sublime movements of astronomical bodies was reduced to a marketing gimmick for a dying region? Or a moment when, however subtly, some otherwise inconsequential earthlings began seriously organizing to save themselves?

vol. 2.1: Frozen in Place

Repairing Our Relation to Carbondale's Rebellious History

The following essay is a beginning to the second installment to *The Next Eclipse*, the beginning of a longer, deeper project of repairing our relation to history. History, in order for us to have a relationship with it, must be local. But local history must be informed by an understanding of the broader political and economic transformations, of which the changes in a particular place are only an instance. The guiding existential hypothesis of this text is the following: if things feel meaningless, without sense or direction, it is because we have lost the capacity to understand the historical forces that control our present and shape our future. The aim, then, is to reconnect our existence with the historical forces that have shaped it, and to draw attention to what was lost along the way. This aim is *strategic*, because it outlines our reality in terms of the power relations that define it.

Introduction

Southern Illinois University Carbondale is in crisis. The university is hemorrhaging students and the state has revealed itself to be an unreliable source of funds. Everyone agrees that something needs to change. Many have given up already: their applications are out, their houses are for sale, they are trying to find a way off a sinking ship.

There was a time when crises could be seen as moments of opportunity, moments when the problems with the existing social and economic system were revealed and genuine questions could be asked about new directions. Since the 1970s, however, a new form of thinking has become dominant, sometimes called "neoliberalism." According to neoliberalism, *there is no alternative* to the existing social system. The only possible world is a world where everything is evaluated according to one measure: that of the economy. Crises today, rather than an opportunity to reflect on new directions, are used as an opportunity to force more and more aspects of life into economic values. The only cure we are offered is more of the same poison.

Chancellor Montemagno's plan is an exemplary case of this. Like so many other neoliberal gestures, it is an attempt to centralize power within the organization, and discipline it to make it attractive to capital investment. No values other than economic values count when it comes to attracting capital: drones that will surveil and kill, Homeland Security to deport our neighbors, police to lock people up, fossil fuels to continue the destruction of the conditions for human life on the planet? Anything, as long as its money. The only "solution" on offer for the institution is to more deeply collaborate with the institutions that are causing the problems.

But neoliberalism didn't come out of nowhere: it emerged as a response to social movements that challenged the functioning of the American Empire to its core. It was a form of government that was developed to destroy the welfare state, build up the prison and policing system, and

tame sites where rebellion had broken out during the 1960s and 1970s – among those sites, the University was one of the most powerful for generating a critique and opposition to capitalism and the wars that sustain it.

If we look closer at those social movements, we see that they were fighting against the same problems that we are concerned about today, and they were developing solutions that were based on principles that many of us hold today. Principles of egalitarianism, of autonomy, of community, and of ecological responsibility. We must rediscover and pick up the baton from those struggles, long repressed in our memory. Any proposed solutions that do not address the fundamental problems of our society – problems that have been evident for almost 50 years – will fail, and will continue us down a nightmare path of endless war, ecological catastrophe, and widespread immiseration.

The University can, and should, be a site where these problems are being faced head on. It should be a site where we develop the means to break free from the economy.

CHAPTER 1: THE UNIVERSITY THAT SHOULDN'T HAVE HAPPENED, BUT DID

Southern Illinois Normal College was opened in 1869, thirteen years after the first train stopped in the newly founded city of Carbondale. Carbondale had been founded by Daniel Brush, when he heard that there were plans for a railway to be constructed through the region. He hired a surveyor to determine what the most likely path of the railway would be, and planted Carbondale in that path so it could become the center of rail traffic for Little Egypt.

Little Egypt, the name for southern Illinois since the early days of European colonization, itself has always been a resource colony for business interests located in larger midwestern cities:

“In many ways Southern Illinois has a ‘colonial economy’, one controlled by outside financial interests. Outside interests have developed the regions mineral and timber resources, its shoe and work-clothing factories and the rail transport for such development. These companies have employed local labor, even recruited labor to come to the region to work, but have taken the profits from their operations elsewhere. To a degree, the corporate base of Chicago and St. Louis has been built on Southern Illinois labor and resources.” (Harper, 10)

This attitude of business interests toward the region, and the determination of southern Illinoisans, helped fuel massive and intense labor struggles throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. For coal miners and their families, the fight for unionization was a life or death struggle, since non-unionized mines meant not just starvation wages, but lax safety protocol that time and again led to collapses or explosions that killed dozens of people at a time.

Throughout this era, Southern Illinois Normal College was a small teachers college a few thousand students at most. The city of Carbondale was the major connection with the rest of the world – which also meant the site from which the national guard would be deployed to beat up striking miners and protect scab laborers.

From the 1930s through the 50s, many mines began to close, leaving small towns throughout the region without any ability to participate in the money economy. Interestingly, the mine closures were not a result of coal running low, nor as a result of the ecological concerns that we

have today. Rather, they were closed as a part of a global strategy to shift from coal to oil as the major industrial fuel source, a decision that was made specifically to break the power of the coal unions.

The coal unions played a decisive role in early 20th century labor struggles because they had the privileged ability to literally paralyze the economy. And they use this power to help striking workers around the country win basic labor rights. This power of coal workers was a vulnerability to industrial capitalists, who shifted their fuel to oil because it required less labor to both produce and distribute, and could be more easily rerouted around blockages posed by workers in any given area. The coal mines closing left the region, already “undeveloped” in capitalist terms, in a localized depression.

And this was the regional condition in which Southern Illinois Normal College would be transformed into a completely unlikely University, ten times its previous size. The fact that the region was viewed as backward and violent, combined with post world war 2 investment in higher education through the GI Bill, were seized upon by a man of some extraordinary talent: Delyte Morris.

Morris was appointed President of the new University in 1948, after a quick succession of unsuccessful Presidents. Morris had two big ideas that guided the remarkable growth of the University: first, to pitch the University to the State as a development project for a troubled region, and second, to draw upon alternative visions of higher education which were by no means well-established at the time.

Major research universities tend to be located in or near major cities. The idea that one could – or should – be built in what we would today call flyover country was unorthodox. But Delyte toured small towns throughout Little Egypt to pitch the idea of a “open university,” one that would be a resource for developing economic and cultural life throughout the whole region. His philosophy of education related to this: the University was not to prioritize inquiry and reflection detached from real life. Naturally, the classics of higher learning were to be on offer, but not the centerpiece. One of Delyte’s hires was Baker Brownell, a philosopher turned radical educator who developed regional educational programs for the University and author of the rhapsodic book *The Other Illinois*. According to Brownell, in response to the stuffy, Ivory tower vision of education that privileges reason detached from experience,

Southern would reply, “Reason with a small r is the only useful kind of reason. The training in its method, its beauty, its triumphs, and its uses is surely important. But reason segregated from the community of men is sterile. Withdrawn from the experiences, the disasters, the problems, the delights of the human adventure it is cracked and futile. For these things are the crucible in which reason is created. Neither reason nor any other single function of our many-stranded life is the key to it all.” (241)

This unique philosophy of education is what gave rise to the first ecology program at touch of nature, a hodgepodge of classical academic and vocational training distributed throughout the region, as well as early steps toward racial integration and handicapped accessibility. But the program that most embodied this philosophy was the Division of Area Services, pioneered by Baker Brownell. This program sent out teams of academics and experts in various fields to conduct community inquiries and discussions about how to develop small impoverished towns in the area. The delegates from the University were not to impose their own ideas, but to listen to the needs and desires of the communities and figure out how to make their plans a reality.

Unfortunately, since many of those plans involved attracting outside capital in the form of factories, they were not able to be realized. But imagine for a moment if the task was to specifically develop the means for life that could allow for local production of basic needs – imagine if rather than the assumption that “development” meant “integration into the capitalist economy,” the aim instead was to help communities build their own autonomous infrastructure outside of it. If that path had been taken at the time, decades of poverty and all its attendant social problems could have been avoided.

But that’s not how it worked. Instead, the University did indeed become a center of capital investment in the region – the economic engine that we all know. And it did grow into an unlikely major research institution, responsive to the local region while attracting students and scholars from all over the world. And, in due time, the insistence on connecting reason with life came back to Delyte in a way that he couldn’t have expected, and ultimately led to his downfall.

CHAPTER 2: REASON REBELS

When reason is connected with life in a society that is hostile to life, reason leads to rebellion. This is what happened in universities across the country in the late 1960s, and SIU Carbondale saw some of the most intense outbreaks of a rebellious reason of anywhere else. In order to understand why the student movement was so intense, we should consider, among other things, the way SIU had encouraged students to think freely, outside the logics of the state and the economy. No single faculty member better embodied these values than Buckminster Fuller.

Fuller was a world renowned intellectual, hailed by some as the Leonardo Da Vinci of the 20th century. He was critical of both American capitalism and Russian state socialism, and argued that a political revolution was destined to fail. Instead, he encouraged his students and audiences the world over to initiate a design revolution: to redesign the conditions of life, to create *livingry* instead of *weaponry*. Fuller would hold massive lectures, sometimes outdoors, speaking for hours on all subjects. His philosophy of education was a radical extension of Morris’s own vision of a university open to all:

“We should do away with the absolutely specious notion that everybody has to earn a living. It is a fact today that one in ten thousand of us can make a technological breakthrough capable of supporting all the rest. The youth of today are absolutely right in recognizing this nonsense of earning a living. We keep inventing jobs because of this false idea that everybody has to be employed at some kind of drudgery because, according to Malthusian Darwinian theory he must justify his right to exist. So we have inspectors of inspectors and people making instruments for inspectors to inspect inspectors. The true business of people should be to go back to school and think about whatever it was they were thinking about before somebody came along and told them they had to earn a living.”

Bucky and his ideas were a major influence on the counterculture of the sixties, his geodesic dome design springing up in communes around the country.

His ideas, and the wider counter-culture, was active on campus and around Carbondale. The aim of the counter-culture was not merely to do drugs and have long hair, as so many stereotypes

today would lead us to believe. Actually, people were building organizations and forms of life that responded to their own needs, without asking for permission from those in power.

The Women's Center, now an established non-profit, was begun by a group of women who saw a need for a home for those escaping domestic abuse. So they rented a house and created one. The Black Panther Party, whose Carbondale chapter began in 1968, created a free breakfast program for local children, a free medical clinic, and the first food co-op in Carbondale, which brought in weekly shipments of eggs, bacon, and vegetables from local farms. There was a health food store run by members of a commune located outside of town, a cheap dental clinic, endless music, radical newspapers, an LSD crisis-hotline, and even a drug testing collective that checked for toxic additives to recreational drugs coming into town. The drug testing collective was called "Synergy."

On campus, students developed a Free School, open to anyone, where people could collectively pursue subjects oriented toward expanding their sense of joy and meaning. There were classes in Zen Buddhism, Yoga, philosophy, and skill shares in everything from building to "making love in the fields."

And these expressions of the world people were trying to build – a world of local agricultural production, of sharing, of food for all, of a harm-reduction approach to drugs, of support for the most vulnerable in society and joy in one another's presence – were connected with the struggle against the current system and its injustices. This was reason connected to life at its best: people freely coming together to creatively solve pressing problems in their communities, using the university's resources – with or without permission – to improve the lives of everyday people.

In the late 60s, protests against racism and sexism on campus were building, as well as an anti-war movement that would eventually transform the course of the entire university. At bottom, the counter-culture students were rejecting not just the specific war in Vietnam, but an entire social system and economy that was premised upon war, racism, and destruction of the environment. And the strategy for taking on such a monstrous thing was the same as that of the coal miners 50 years earlier who fought, not merely for their own higher wages, but for the rights of working people everywhere: paralyze the functioning of everyday life that allowed the economy to operate. Also, just like in the coal miners struggles, arson, sabotage, and bombings were used to gum up the wheels of the system. In 1968, a bomb was placed in the Ag building – detonated in the middle of the night, so that no one would be injured. In 1969, Old Main was burnt to a crisp, presumably by student activists/arsonists. Again, no one was hurt.

The focal point of the local anti-war movement was the Center for Vietnamese Studies, a research center funded by a million-dollar federal grant to advise and provide technical support for Vietnam when the war ended. Students had read about a similar center at the University of Michigan, in which it was revealed that there were CIA operatives working there. One of the faculty members associated with the CIA faction in Michigan, William Fischel, was hired for the center at SIU. This was the source of the allegation that the Center for Vietnamese Studies was a CIA front. Apart from that, it would have been opposed anyway as a symbol of colonial development in a country that America had been murdering people in daily. As one faculty member opposed to the Center put it, in reference to the center's mission of post war "planning": "you've planned enough already."

The rebellion began after the Nixon administration expanded the war in Vietnam to Cambodia. Students marched, smashed some things, and about a hundred set up camp on the train lines, blocking train traffic through town. This action brought the Illinois national guard in – [the

national guard which had been created in 1877 to beat up workers in a nationwide railroad strike, which had led to the first general strike in American history, which took place in St. Louis, where workers took control of the city for three days before being beaten and shot into submission by a small army raised by the ruling class (this ruling class victory was commemorated every year in the so-called “veiled prophet” parade, in which arms were displayed led by a Klan figure. The tradition continues to this day as an exclusive gala.)] When on May 4, 4 students at Kent State in Ohio were murdered by the national guard, students went on strike and took over the town.

Days of streetfighting ensued. Students, out of town rebels, and community members, took on the police and the national guard. Eight days of riots culminated in a march to the President’s house, which was smashed up. School was cancelled for the remainder of the semester, and all students received full credit for the classes they were enrolled in.

What needs to be understood is that this was not merely childish acting out or mere chaos: this was a rebellion that followed a conscious and coherent political strategy. In the face of a business that is exploiting and threatening the lives of its workers, the proper response is to strike for better conditions. In the face of a society that is powering a war machine that is murdering people both at home and abroad, the proper response is to strike – to prevent that society from functioning.

This event spelled the end for Delyte Morris, who had already overstayed his welcome as far as members of the Board of Trustees were concerned. He was stripped of all his Presidential powers, and consigned to a marginal, symbolic role.

The irony is that the rebellion of May 1970 could be aptly described as the fruit of a philosophy of education that Morris endorsed in principle, but whose consequences he couldn’t see. To connect reason with life, in a society that produces horrors, is to invite reason to rebel. The students took risks – to their lives and livelihoods – based on their conviction that the world could be changed, their correct assessment that the official channels were not willing or able to change it, and their sense of justice that this change could not in good conscience be postponed. So they became what all great people become: historical actors, who recognize that *now* is the only time to act in.

CHAPTER 3: THE REACTION, OR, THE AGE OF DEPERSONALIZED AUTHORITY/CONTROL

[After the student rebellions from 1968 to 1970] the university’s development was sharply arrested... [T]o a large extent Southern Illinois University lost its momentum, its vision, its leader. It has been largely frozen in place since 1970. Its future became hostage to a frightened board of trustees, a restrictive state legislature, and false impressions created during the events of Morris’ downfall.” (Robert L. Harper, *The University That Shouldn’t Have Happened, But Did!*, 4)

What could it mean for a university to be “frozen in place”? No doubt, things have happened, lives and careers have been led, time has passed and things have changed. And yet, this metaphor of being “frozen in place” somehow rings true: development has been stunted, the contradictions and tensions that a generation sought to resolve have been maintained by ever increasing levels of

force and novel forms of control. The wrong things change, and the things that so many struggled to change remain the same.

In a sense, this is what the role of governing powers has always been: to freeze a society from developing beyond the need for them. In the 1920s, when the labor movement was at its most militant, the U.S. government pioneered a strategy of counter-revolution: use direct repression against organizers, associating them with foreign governments, killing them, deporting them. And then, to hamper the ability for communities to continue organizing, pass laws that allow the police the ability to raid and disrupt those communities. In the 1920s, this meant Prohibition of alcohol, which was used to target working class immigrant communities who were accused of being the most radical segments of the labor movement.

This drama played itself out in Williamson County, Illinois, with a catch: the police in Williamson County, at the time, were themselves “corrupt,” i.e., they tended to support the union over the federal government. As a result, the wealthy business interests of the county had to invite S. Glenn Young, a former federal agent and Klan organizer to lead a campaign of “cleaning up” Williamson county, targeting the immigrant labor movement under the veil of enforcing Prohibition. This led to the fracturing of the labor movement into bootlegging gangs, and waves of violence that recall the gang warfare under the War on Drugs today.

This strategy was how, in the wake of the first world war, the U.S. government managed to “freeze in place” the class relations that were intolerable to working people of that generation.

A similar strategy has been deployed nationally since the movements of the 1960s. This was famously admitted to by John Erlichman, the domestic policy advisor to Richard Nixon, after he was released from jail for his role in the Watergate scandal. In a 1994 interview with Harper’s Magazine, Erlichman said:

“You want to know what this was really all about?” he asked with the bluntness of a man who, after public disgrace and a stretch in federal prison, had little left to protect. “The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I’m saying? We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.”

This quote is a lens through which a whole, deliberately obfuscated, sequence of history becomes clear. But almost all instances in which it has been quoted focus solely on its meaning for race relations, its role in constructing a “colorblind racism” that persisted through the criminalization of black life. This is no doubt true, and significant. But what is left out of these interpretations is the fact that Erlichman points to *two* enemies, the other of which is the “antiwar left.” Targeting Black radicals meant targeting urban areas for repressive restructuring, turning them into zones of police occupation. What did it mean, however, to target the anti-war left?

Simple: it meant targeting universities, turning them into sites that were adapted to the interests of capitalists. It meant “freezing them,” and freezing the capacity of thought to interrogate and intervene in the society more generally. It meant, as Ronald Reagan had proposed when

running for Governor of California in 1968, creating a situation where students were more concerned about getting a job after school than about reflecting on the conditions of the society they were being asked to inherit and reproduce (Reagan's plan to do this was to raise tuition). And it meant doing so in a way that was shielded from criticism of the movements that they were targeting, movements which had launched a devastating cultural critique of authoritarian power, just as the movements for Black freedom had launched a devastating moral critique of overt racism. For the latter, after key organizers were assassinated and organizations destroyed, a form of "colorblind racism" was invented that had the same effect of maintaining a racial caste system, but without overtly racial justification. Similarly, for the anti-war left, whose stronghold was universities across the country, a form of "politics-blind political repression" was created, as generations of students were burdened with debt in order to control the direction of their inquiries and action into avenues subdued by the economy.

At the national scale, this is partly how the "freezing" of social relations has been accomplished, and why we are left burdened with the same problems that the generation of the 1960s rebelled against, only in a different and more intensified form: racism, now in the form of the largest system of prison slavery in the history of the world; ecological devastation, now in the form of literal ecocide, or the destruction of habitable life on the planet; imperial wars, now in the form of endless global policing operations fought increasingly by people whose heroic warrior activity has been reduced to something barely distinguishable from playing video games.

Our task, then, is to repair our relation to this history, to the struggle for liberation from these conditions. Which means understanding, at a local level, the war that has been waged against us to maintain them.

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So how did this happen *here*?

Consistent with the wider FBI project of neutralizing the Black Panthers, in November of 1970 – the semester after the student rebellion – cops from Carbondale and other surrounding towns shot 778 bullets into the Black Panther house on the northeast corner of Washington St. and Allyn St. Shockingly, no one was killed, and, just as shockingly, a cease-fire was negotiated by members of the northeast community. Six Panthers – the Carbondale 6 – were arrested and none were convicted. But the legal battle lasted for a long time, and the attempted massacre by the Carbondale Police Department accomplished its presumed goal of neutralizing the organization's activity.

The Black Panthers had been declared by FBI director J. Edgar Hoover to be the greatest threat to American democracy. The FBI's counter-intelligence program, or COINTELPRO, engaged in assassinations, frame-ups, and misinformation campaigns to demonize and neutralize the group around the country. The Carbondale Police's story that they had seen a "suspect" enter the Panther house on the night of the shoot-out is consistent with stories used to excuse assassinations around the country that destroyed the Panthers' organization.

Apart from the Panthers, there were drug raids of high profile leftist activist houses, suspected at the time to be pretenses for repressing them. The house of Reverends Norman S. Bach and William E. Garrett, two of the many clergy involved in the anti-war movement, were raided on suspicion of marijuana possession. The Big Muddy Gazette interpreted this, at the time, as an act of repression, which is consistent with how we know the drug war was used. A chilling effect

must have set in among public organizers: if you're Black, the cops might shoot up your house; if you're white, you may be publicly shamed and arrested on whatever charges can be cooked up. Step one of counter-revolution: target the organizers.

Next, there was the Horsely Commission, led by Senator Horsely to investigate the conditions that led to the student uprising. Initiated at the beginning of the semester after the riots, a few months before the Panther shootout, the commission blamed the uprising on an "international communist conspiracy," and made the following recommendations to the University:

- introduction of student ID cards
- that the administration be able to fire politically problematic professors, even if they are tenured.
- Introduction of pornography legislation, presumably as an excuse to ban independent student newspapers
- The banning of material "inciting violence," presumably for the same reason
- to cut off scholarship to students awaiting hearings for participation in the unrest.
- Elimination of the difference between property destruction causing under \$150 in damages and damage in excess of that. In other words, punishment was not to be proportional to the economic damage, but rather the principle of property itself was what was to be protected, and any violation of it, no matter how economically small, was to be considered with equal seriousness.

Each of these recommendations, with the exception of the ability to fire "problematic" professors, may appear innocuous, or at least "reasonable." They had to: there was a strong movement, and the measures taken to suppress it had to be careful not to trigger more resistance. In light of what has occurred – the construction of a hyper-controlled world, justified at each step with reasons that obscure its true aims – we can see these measures for what they are: excuses to expand the ability for police and administrators to intervene in and make trouble for the movements that had challenged their authority. Governments being what they are – organizations for maintaining hierarchical power – we should assume that the published recommendations of the Horsely Commission were only the visible surface of the policies that were being pursued.

The recommendation that the University fire problematic professors for political reasons was tested on Douglas Allen, a philosophy professor who was up for tenure. Allen had the support of his colleagues and department, but was denied tenure explicitly for his participation as a leader of the anti-war movement. The administration was sued by Allen and eventually had to offer him tenure. By that point, he had already found another position at the University of Maine, and did not return. Although they achieved the intended effect of rooting out a radical, it was clear that the method of overt political targeting would not stand up legally.

Another tactic for rooting out problematic professors and reshaping the university in the interest of the wealthy needed to be found. And, within a couple of years, it was: the tactic of the "budget-crisis."

It has to be stressed that the first "budget crisis" that SIU experienced was a *direct result* of the student rebellions. The Illinois Board of Higher Education was formed in response to the

state's sense that things had gotten out of hand down in Egypt, and they were no longer going to support Delyte's dreams. They turned off the spigot, and demanded the university adapt.

In 1974, SIU President Derge fired 104 professors, a quarter of them tenured. The fired faculty were largely from departments of philosophy, history, english, sociology, and from the Division of Area Services, ending the latter program of community engagement. Adding insult to injury, Derge's administration also tried to sue a number of the faculty that they were firing. The fired professors publicly declared that they saw this as a political purging of those departments that were most supportive of the anti-war movement. Derge denied this, and articulated for the first time what would be the standard justification for all university changes down to today. It wasn't about politics, it was about budget cuts, failing to mention that those budget cuts themselves were about politics. In a statement that could have, and indeed has, come out of administrators from Derge to Montemagno, Derge said "decisions as to what departments should be cut were made according to enrollment trends." This was the local application of a form of governance that would overtake the globe in the coming decades: political decisions imposed from above, justified not in political terms, but as necessary adaptations to the demands of "the economy." This sleight of hand was first applied here as a repressive retaliation for a university that had brought thought together with life, and demanded that life change.

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But the rebellious spirit of Carbondale and SIU didn't die so easily. It continued for decades after the uprising, in a town in which the university administrations and the city government had become afraid of the students that were also their bread and butter. The city government and university administration have gone to quite extreme lengths to kill the rebellious energy of students and locals, only to find that it was this energy that kept the place alive. So they always look like idiots: destroying the conditions for collective joy, and yet begging people for "vibrancy" downtown. This was a vibrant town, but its vibrancy was connected to freedom, to the possibility of rebellion, to a counterculture. They have worked to police that out of existence, but also long for the flowers of the plants they have ripped out.

What were called the 'riots' were really just a ceremonial culmination of the life of the town, a moment of communion for the energies that had been released by the 60s, and denied their right to remake the world. From the party scene in the 80s that would shut down the strip on a weekly basis, to the Halloween riots that brought rebellious energy from all around the midwest. These events need to be understood, not simply as kids getting rowdy – though they are also that – but as the continuation of the rebellion launched in the 1960s, but within a new circumstance where the terrain of politics had shifted to undercut the possibility of this energy taking an explicitly political form. As a result, the measures of control, the process of policing existence, took a form that were similarly apolitical – as measures of crime reduction and safety.

Taking the strip was a collective gesture of transforming public space, of intervening in the order imposed by the police. Engaging in such acts, especially if connected with a party atmosphere, is what creates a genuine experience of community – the feeling of friends, neighbors, strangers, stepping outside of the roles and rules imposed upon them and creating their city on their own terms. It is ironic that today everyone is obsessed with "community," but so few recognize how to build it: it comes from people having experiences together that are not pre-defined and constrained from above, from the moment when people engage with each other in recognition of their individual and collective capacity to shape their world and their futures. This is

precisely what every act of government today is designed to destroy. The role of government, achieved through its police, its procedures, its regulations, its laws, is to *lock all the exits* from the burning house that is this ecocidal/prison society; to prevent the development of the very possibility of community life, and the sense of collective autonomy that it requires.

So it is worth stressing the extreme measures that were taken to destroy this spontaneous continuation of rebellious life. First, there were the riot police and their tear gas. Next, the city *cancelled Halloween* for a few years in the 90s – an extraordinary step – blaming the riotous activity on “outside agitators.” After a few years they lifted the ban only to find they had not killed the spirit, and the town choked from tear gas for days. Thus began a decade and a half long ban on Halloween, a celebration that was in the process of becoming a midwestern Mardi Gras. Rather than recognizing this as a local culture in the making, the city government and reactionary forces clamped down for 15 years, finishing off the death of the public counter-culture. Now confined to basement shows, this culture, while it has nurtured musicians and a few rebels, suffers from the isolation it was forced into.

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This has been the beginning of a sketch of a different history for Carbondale and SIU. It is not complete or authoritative: it is more of an invitation for others to speak up, to correct, to fill in the gaps, to value their own memory.

It is easy to see why people wouldn't do so. The world appears to have changed into something unrecognizable, and it is hard to imagine how experiences 50, 30, even a decade ago feel relevant today. This too must be understood as a move in a battle for control: the principle tool of American power is amnesia, the smothering of the possibility of collective memory. The story sketched here is an invitation for us to fight back, to recover a history that makes sense of where we are, to recognize that the official narrative is deaf and blind to all that is relevant for life, for our desires, and for the challenges we face. Reducing everything to the laws of economics and the government that imposes them, it systematically ignores that these laws, far from being natural, are tools for preventing the growth of an autonomous community power. Such a power was growing here in Carbondale, nourished and inspired by rebellion, by thousands of people recognizing that life as it was offered was intolerable, and who insisted that thought and life must be brought together against the forces that subject both to the superficial calculations of penny-counters, to the reign of the neurotic, the paranoid, their wealth and their police.

Our guiding thesis, hardly proven here, is this: we cannot understand the problems we face today – at the university, in Carbondale, or indeed nationally – unless we understand that the world we have was built to destroy the movements that sought to fundamentally change it. Here in Carbondale, that means that we need to remember that the roots of the long stretch of budget-crises have their origin in thinly veiled political repression, disciplining the university for producing students that were capable of asserting their power against a war machine. Unwilling to change, and now afraid of what young people were capable of, a process of “freezing” life began.

It is not, and never has been, money that makes the world go round. It is labor, love, friendship, desire. These forces must be mutilated and confined to money-relationships in order for the wealthy to stay in control. Today, here, the crisis is not really lack of money – that is only the crisis for those in power. The crisis for the rest of us is disconnection from our own sense of the world, disconnection from the power we have to build what we need and desire without

the crutch of money and those who have it. We have a crisis of energy, and a crisis of struggle, a disconnection of our thought and our lives, a studied superficiality of our relationships, a paralyzing anxiety that holds us back from recognizing that all we need to chart a path out of this mess, and to repair our relationship to those who struggled before us, is here with us already.

Fred Hampton, the 21 year-old revolutionary genius of Chicago, who had travelled to Carbondale and advised Reggie Brown to start the Panther chapter here, had been shot in his bed by Chicago Police. It was later learned that Chicago Police were working with the FBI and this was a targeted assassination, since the FBI was concerned Hampton could have been a “Messiah-figure,” linking struggles between black and poor white people. Indeed, this is exactly what he did with what would become the original “rainbow coalition,” in which the Panthers organized against the cops with displaced Appalachian white people, many of whom were racist and proudly wore their Confederate flags. This willingness to organize across the cultural/color lines and against the state made Hampton in particular a target, and his brief life has been examined to an extent that other Panther chapters, like the one in Carbondale, have not.

vol. 2.2: Introducing the Knights of the Flaming Circle

During the 1920s, a nation-wide, secret organization called The Knights of the Flaming Circle took on the Ku Klux Klan in the streets. Little – far too little – is known about the organization. But we do know that there was a chapter in Williamson County.

This essay collects what little we do know about the “Red Knights,” and helps us to recognize that today’s antifascism is a part of a long, largely forgotten, tradition of giving no public forum to fascists.

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In late September 1923, a dynamite blast went off in the hills outside Steubenville, OH. Residents streamed out of their houses to see “white robed figures moving about in a strange ceremonial,” lit only by a gigantic, flaming circle.

Were these members of the Ku Klux Klan that had simply switched their flaming cross for a circle? Soon word spread through the town that, in fact, this was an anti-Klan group that was inaugurating its formation: The Knights of the Flaming Circle.

A month before, in Kane, Pennsylvania, a similar circle had burned, and the local paper, the Kane Republican, received an anonymous letter announcing the founding of the “Knights of the Burning Ring.” The letter stated: “Kane is selected as the starting point of a movement that will ring the earth with blazing justice to all. We are enemies of all clans or klans. We believe in liberty for every human being, black, white or yellow, regardless of race, religion or creed.” For reasons unknown, the “Burning Ring” name seems to have been subsequently dropped.

A short time after, a Klan parade in Steubenville, OH, a few hours away, led to a riot, during which “six or seven Klan cars were overturned by the Steubenville people. Flags were torn off the machines and their occupants were attacked with bricks and bottles and clubs and other flying objects.” The hillside dynamite blast and ceremony in Steubenville followed the riot by about a month, announcing to western Ohio that there was more than just a raucous disruption of Klan demonstrations going on, but rather an organized effort.

A local dentist, Dr. W. F. McGuigan, claimed to be the founder of the Steubenville chapter of the Knights of the Flaming Circle and the Grand Supreme Monarch of the organization’s “central division,” stretching from Massachusetts to Illinois. A few days after the initial ceremony, McGuigan told reporters that “The Knights of the Flaming Circle is a non-sectarian society and its object is to combat religious, racial and political intolerance.” They wore no masks or hoods, but did wear white robes, embroidered with their official insignia: a red circle with the figure of the State of Liberty at the center.

But the very notion that there was an “organization” at all is disputed by one of the few oral histories that mentions the Flaming Circle. In an interview conducted in 1984 with Nicola

Criscioni, of Youngstown, OH, Criscioni claims “there was no organization, it was the papers that dubbed them that, but it was no organization, just a thrown-together outfit.... What we did was we got a bunch of tires and put them around a circle and burned them, or bailed the hay and put them around a big circle and burned them. They burned the cross and we burned the circle. It was a hit-and-run outfit. There were no heads of anything... then when we heard that there was going to be a parade, by then we maybe put together a certain bunch and would try to disrupt it.”

This ambiguity – an organization with Klan-esque titles like Grand Supreme Monarch, or a rag-tag hit and run outfit with no meetings or dues – hints that this was a decentralized organization, one for which any group that wanted to take up the cause could do so on their own terms.

According to the 1923 *A Dictionary of Secret and Other Societies*, the Knights of the Flaming Circle “welcomes Catholics, Jews, and Negroes, but excludes Protestants. The members wear robes at the initiation ceremony, and each knight has a flaming circle over his heart, symbolic of the truth.” White protestants made up the base of the Klan, and were presumably excluded on that ground. According to the Klan, the Knights of the Flaming Circle were “a mob that proffered anarchism and sought to ruin the Republic.”

We have evidence that there were chapters of Knights of the Flaming Circle in Vermont, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio, Illinois, Iowa, and New Mexico. In the coming years, in various parts of the country, they used a diversity of rebellious tactics to confront the Klan. Many of those tactics are also practiced today by antifascists: pressure on meeting-halls to refuse to allow the Klan to meet there; publishing lists of Klan members, destroying the anonymity of the organization; organizing counter demonstrations to show mass opposition to the Klan and what it stood for; physically interrupting their parades and rallies; assaulting Klan members and damaging their property. In Youngstown, Criscioni recalls lining the road with roofing tacks before a Klan parade, popping their tires and getting some laughs at their expense.

They even, one could say, “trolled” the Klan. In addition to wearing illustrious garb of their own, sometimes white, sometimes red, they fought back with fire: in response to the Klan’s practice of burning crosses in front of the homes of immigrants and minorities, the Circlers’ would set tires alight on the yards of known Klansmen. It seems likely that McGuigan’s claim to be “Grand Supreme Monarch” was just another jab at the Invisible Empire’s ridiculous hierarchy.

But if indeed McGuigan was in some role of leadership in the midwest, he was certainly hard at work organizing. Numerous articles from the time repeat the Flaming Circle’s claims that they had organizers in every city in Ohio, and throughout Pennsylvania and West Virginia. And somehow, within a year, a chapter was formed in Williamson County, Illinois.

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Williamson County, known at the time as “Bloody Williamson,” had just been the site of one of the bloodiest labor battles in American history. The Herrin Massacre was the final major explosion of decades-long battles between coal-miners and mine-owners, and it had brought international infamy to the county. During the massacre, 19 scabs were killed by coal-miners. No one was convicted by a Williamson County jury.

A group of wealthy businessmen, interested in restoring the county’s reputation and affiliated with the Ku Klux Klan, hired a former Bureau of Investigations officer, S. Glenn Young, to lead

their campaign. But the campaign wasn't against the miner's union. The Klan made the move characteristic of all fascist movements: it attempted to divide the working-class union movement along racial and national lines, targeting Italian-American immigrants.

Moreover, in a move that prefigured the War on Drugs, they targeted them not for political activity, but for violations of Prohibition. A "clean-up Williamson County" movement was underway, led by the Klan, which blamed the violence of a thirty year long class struggle between miners and mine-owners on immigrant communities in Herrin. S. Glenn Young's raids targeted immigrants and anyone who opposed the Klan, ignoring the drinking of Protestants and flamboyantly ignoring the very laws he claimed to be enforcing. Eventually, Young even opened a "soft-drink parlour" of his own.

Prohibition, a constitutional amendment passed in 1919, didn't go into effect until 1920 because it was well-known to be unenforceable by the American state-apparatus at the time. The Ku Klux Klan served as a para-military force, disproportionately targeting minority groups in the name of enforcing "law and order." They defended their targeting of immigrants because of their unfamiliar culture and their supposed "predisposition to radicalism and anarchism".

And this might have gone well for them in Williamson County, IL, if they hadn't encountered an unexpected adversary in the Knights of the Flaming Circle.

We don't know how the Knights of the Flaming Circle made it to Williamson County. Perhaps word of the group travelled along lines of conspiratorial communication that the miner's union had already established. If not, anyone reading *The New York Times* would probably have encountered mention of the group in 1923. Perhaps Ora Thomas and E.E. Bowan, the rumored founders of the group in Herrin, decided they could take up the name without asking any permission from some Grand Supreme Monarch. That would have suited them.

The Flaming Circle in Williamson county was an alliance of miners, immigrants, bootleggers, and even law-enforcement who were none-too-happy to lock up their communities just because some new Prohibition law had been passed. The city of Herrin was almost completely integrated with the miner's union, and what little wealth and safety miners knew at the time could be attributed only to the solidarity that union embodied. The union rightly saw the Klan as a threat, a ruling-class funded attempt to divide the strength of the working-class union along racial and ethnic lines, obscuring the actual conflict between the poor and the wealthy. For that reason, the UMWA issued a statement barring all Klan members from the union, and noting that the Klan's efforts were aimed primarily at disrupting and dividing the power that working people had gained through Union organizing. It was later learned that S. Glenn Young, who was notoriously fast and loose with the facts about his own history, had worked as a scab-herder during the 1922 Railway Shopmen's Strike – a feature of his past that he tried to conceal.

The Klan, under the leadership of S. Glenn Young, was so powerful in those years that it would have been very dangerous to make membership in the Circle known. Still, newspaper articles from the time attest that when the Klan would hold a parade, the next day you could be sure the Flaming Circle would, "neutralizing the effect of the Klan's."

But events did not remain at the level of competing parades for long. The first shooting occurred at an anti-Klan meeting, by pro-Klan police. While the first victim was recovering in the hospital, a constable, and member of the Klan, named Ceasar Cagle was shot and killed in retaliation. In response, the Klan laid siege to Herrin hospital, where Flaming Circle members were gathering with their wounded. The Klan fired into the hospital, and the Circle members that found themselves held up in there refusing to leave. The National Guard was called in. This was just the first

round of what would be an all out war that would engulf Williamson and surrounding counties for the next year and a half.

The war came to an end when Ora Thomas entered a cigar shop at the Embassy Hotel in January of 1925, overhearing the familiar voice of S. Glenn Young threatening a young miner for spreading the story that Young had been a scab-herder prior to his becoming a Prohibition agent. Young had two men with him, and all three of them died in that cigar shop. As did Ora Thomas, the founder of Herrin's Red Knights.

In the years after the Klan was defeated, many of these bootleggers would go on to engage in bloody battle with one another. Even the notorious Shelton and Birger gangs, who wreaked havoc throughout southern Illinois for the next decade, were momentarily allied in opposition to the Klan.

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The Knights of the Flaming Circle, whatever they were and whatever their shortcomings, are a sign that there has always been a counter-history to "America" on this continent, one full of people who, regardless of race, religion, or creed, have been quietly conspiring and jubilantly acting toward freedom for all. Today's anti-fascists fall into a long tradition of those willing to risk everything to confront the racist forces who aim to re-create the "Founding Father's" dream of a white ethno-state. That old American dream is recreated with new racist, nationalist lies in every generation that the wealthy feel their power threatened.

May we instead remember as our ancestors the brave people who fought to the death against the racist dreams of the wealthy, and against the stupid who accepted their lies.

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