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The cover image is courtesy of Michelle Garvey from her article in this issue.

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Editorial Staff

Contact Us

Open Rivers | Institute for Advanced Study,
University of Minnesota
Northrop
84 Church Street SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Telephone: (612) 626-5054
Fax: (612) 625-8583
E-mail: openrvrs@umn.edu
Web Site: https://openrivers.umn.edu

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IMAGINING LIFE-AS-PLACE: HARM REDUCTION FOR THE SOFT ANTHROPOCENE

By Sarah Lewison

During the summer of 2023, at a conference of the Mississippi River Open School, an experimental learning group I belong to, the brilliant Dakota astronomer Jim Rock invited us to enact a performance of reinhabitation. We met near the site of Wakan Tipi Cave in St. Paul, Minnesota, a place sacred to the Dakota people. Upon gathering, each participant in our group was asked to name and express gratitude toward a river or body of water that connected to their lives in a meaningful way. Rock then invited us to join him in honoring the bison people, Tatanka Oyate, from whom he is descended. To do so, he guided us in a somatic understanding of the Dakota Sky-Earth mirror symbol through a ceremonial personification of a bison.[1] Under

Bison and Stars reinhabitation ceremony with Jim Rock at the Wakan Tipi site in St. Paul, Minnesota, 2023. Image courtesy of Sarah Lewison.

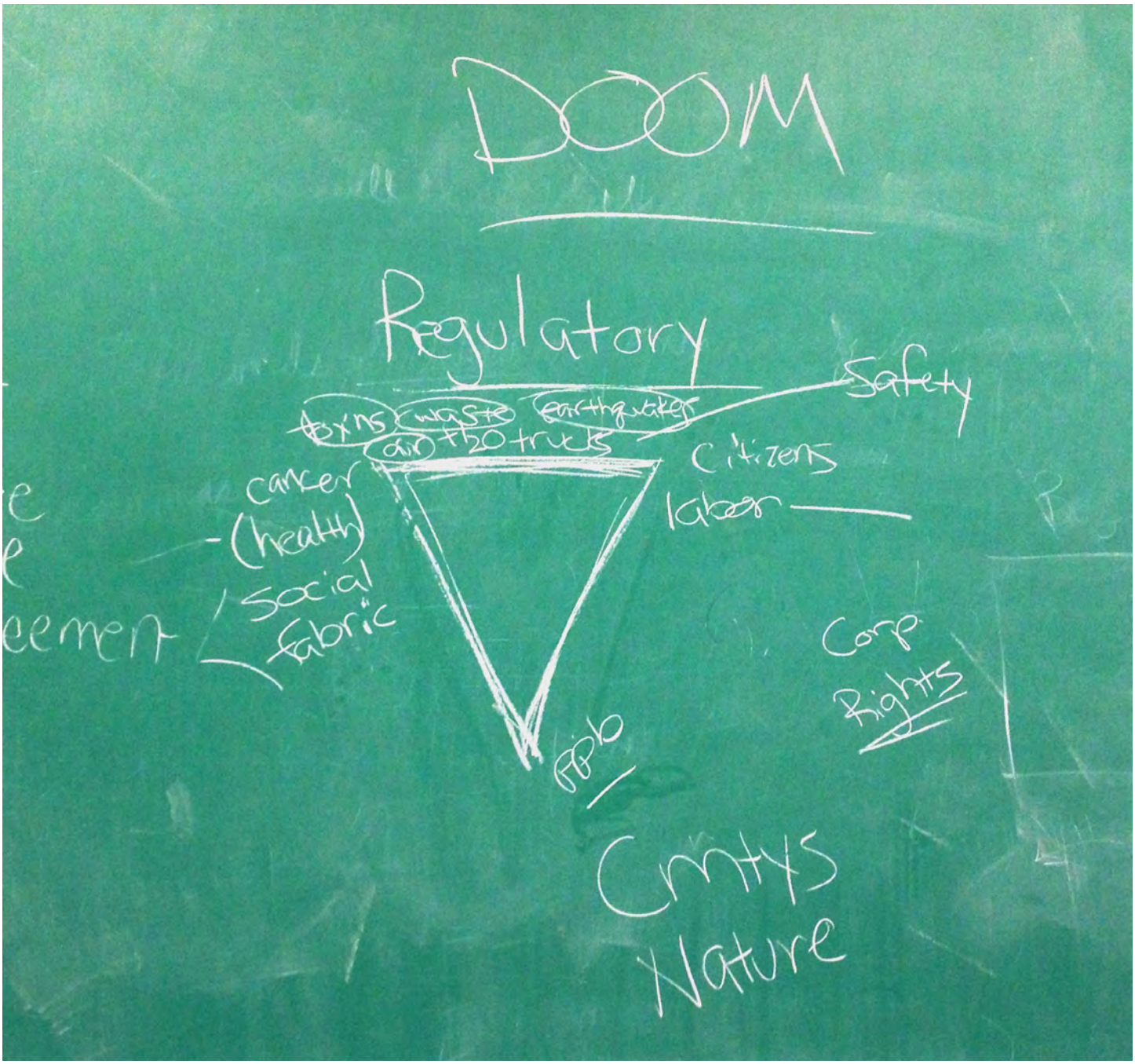
his instruction, we become bearers of stars and bison, connecting land and sky through embodied actions that made our connections and responsibilities to each other and the lands and waters we live with apparent. Through his story-telling, Rock drew us into an awareness of being part of something bigger than our individual selves, melting away our modern alienation. He effectively showed us how we twenty-first-century technological humans might reinhabit the earth-bound place where we live with a sense of care, attention, and belonging. Rock transported us by bringing together our individual histories and our bodies in movement with ancient stories from the Dakoka people. Although many of us were not part of the rich Indigenous cosmologies that Rock exposed us to, he briefly composed a connection for us. This transporting experience has led me to think about the incremental nature of healing and to wonder about pathways for addressing our anthropocenic human loss of place.

In this essay I meditate on society's separation from nature as a key underlying characteristic of the Anthropocene. I suggest here that alongside a physical, or "hard" Anthropocene of human-made infrastructures, objects, and practices, is a "soft" Anthropocene of the consciousness which normalizes human overreach of the planet's capacity and its subsequent impact. In this thought experiment, I pursue the perspectives of two distinct modalities for fostering the trans-formation of human consciousness in relation to the environment. I compare some principles from harm reduction, which aspires to balance the psychosocial ecosystem of an individual, to the affective language of bioregionalism, an eco-cultural movement intended to reintegrate humans within a territorial ecosystem.[2] I begin by defining both harm reduction and bioregion-alism, before introducing the latter's creative and interventionist approach toward opening new pathways of imagination regarding placemaking.

Still captured from "Naxilandia," a feature documentary about rural development in Yunnan, China. Image courtesy of Sarah Lewison.

I compare the analytical practices of harm reduction with those of a bioregionalist understanding of place to frame ways of helping humans cope and heal from trauma and to highlight the role of creativity, compassion, and direct action in addressing social and ecological disconnection.

Finally, I'll share some of my own interpretations of bioregional pedagogies that align with harm reduction's analytical frameworks. In so doing, I conjure harm reduction as a provocation for conducting ecological healing in the human social terrain of the Anthropocene.



Doom Diagram: diagramming corporate capture on the chalkboard. From the 2017 Media and the Environment class, "Storytelling in the Anthropocene" at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. Image courtesy of Sarah Lewison.

The Material Anthropocene and the Anthropocene of the Mind

The Anthropocene is so called to mark the pervasive material ways humans have altered our planet. As a complex of cascading impacts by human technologies upon Earth and its atmosphere, the Anthropocene works through layered violences of colonization and systematic subjugation, a globalized and totalizing agent of trauma and addiction. The Anthropocene operates on embodied agents, human and beyond-human, changing consistencies and possibilities, not unlike substance addiction and unwanted pregnancies. Anchored in the principle of turning life into property, and then producing profit off this property, anthropocenic techne also harms human people by alienating them from the planet as the place which sustains their lives. This happens without our awareness. It could be considered that our everyday fossil-fueled human existence in the developed world both speeds up experience and changes our sense of time to an extent that it becomes hard to find out how we feel and where we are. As Jim Rock reminded us at the Wakan Tipi site, our connections to place, environment, and to our own social histories need to be actively recalled. It could be said that we become addicted to the accelerations that capitalism and fossil-fueled markets expose us to; witness the difficulty people have in turning away from their screens and devices. I propose that this addictive behavior alienates us from connecting to an environment, and all the more so, from the capacity to even imagine alternative futures for ourselves within an environment.

Undoing Harm Through the Devolution of Power

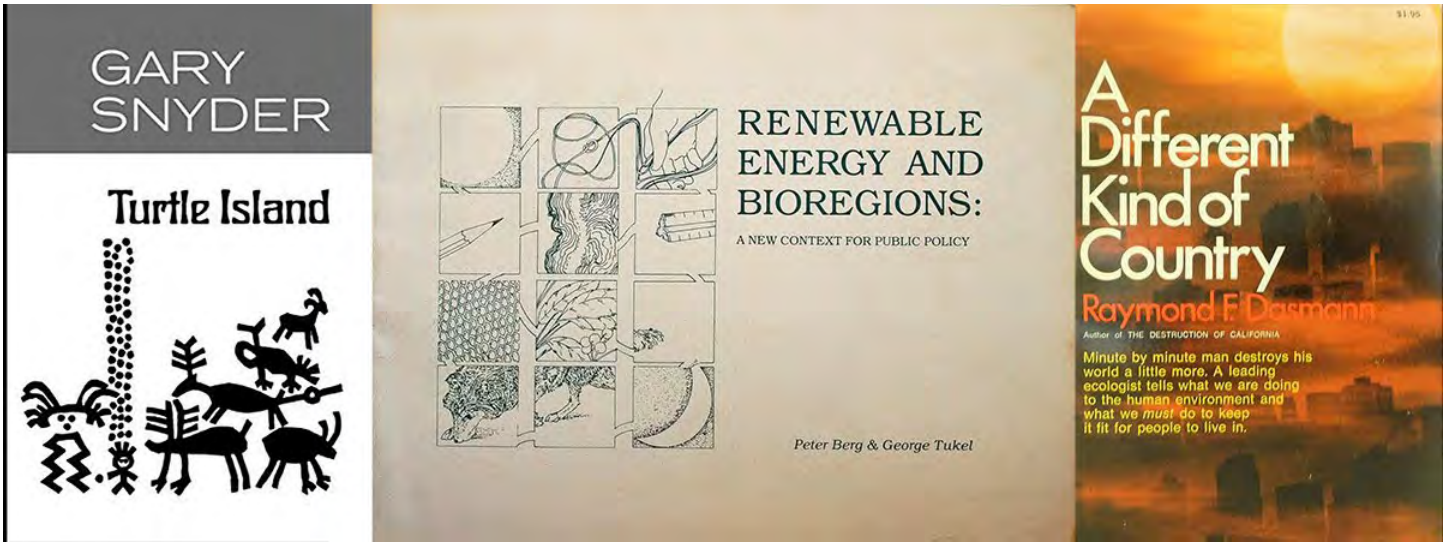
Harm reduction is an activist approach to public health that mitigates the negative consequences of substance addiction and disease transmission by giving people the material and psychological assistance they need without judgement.[3] Harm reduction can also be seen as an interpretive device which enlists attention, acceptance, and dialogue to clear pathways for change in complex circumstances. Harm reduction takes different forms. It is tailored to local human-social ecologies to effect a drawing down of trauma-coping behaviors that have destructive or negative outcomes. It may mean providing condoms to high school students or clean syringes to substance-addicted people. According to the National Harm Reduction Coalition, the approach offers dignity for vulnerable people coping with extremes of injustice, deprivation, and grief, allowing time for healing without stigma. Harm reduction in the United States draws its transformative inspiration from earlier models of public health activism, such as the Young Lords' provision of acupuncture to treat addiction in New York City in the 1970s.[4]

I am most interested in how harm reduction strategies respond to the human-centered ecological specificities of a place. As an example, clean needles for substance-dependent people are distributed in the neighborhoods where people buy and use. Although such actions might be imitated as models elsewhere, they are devised and conducted on a local level by community volunteers with insight into that location. It is an activist approach that devolves power wherein amateur practitioners step in with safety measures not otherwise available. Sometimes harm reduction activists operate outside of the law (as with needle provision), autonomously addressing a lack of policy. Thus, harm reduction becomes an interpretive and analytical tool for understanding healing and struggle in an ecosocial context.

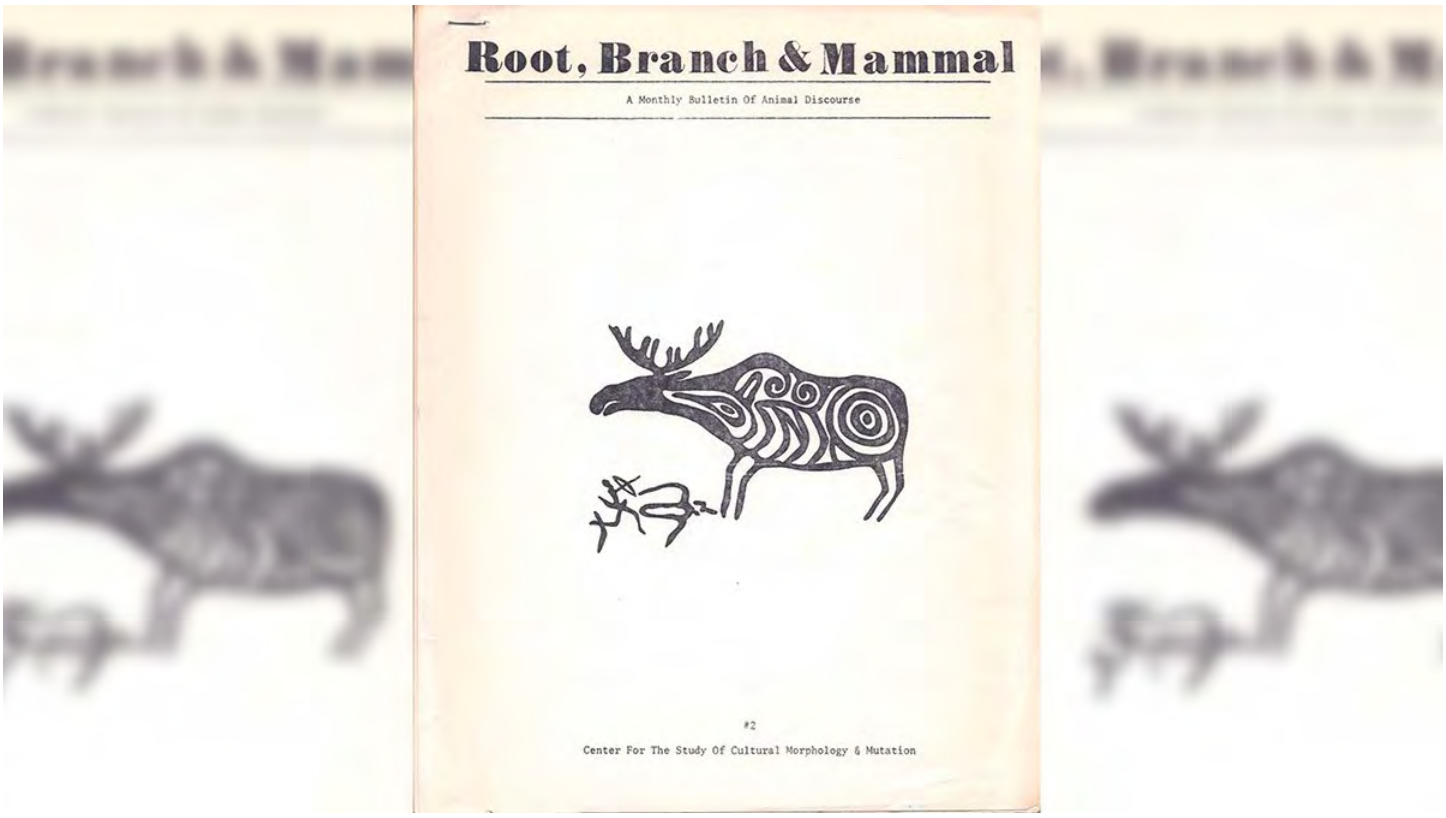
A new global map of terrestrial ecoregions provides an innovative tool for conserving biodiversity. This map recognizes 867 distinct units of terrestrial ecoregions, over four times that of the 193 units of the previous standards. This map of terrestrial ecosystems is by Emma C. Underwood and Jennifer A. D'amico included in 'Terrestrial Ecoregions of the World: A New Map of Life on Earth' by David M. Olson et al., in "BioScience" 51, no. 1 (2001), and used with the permission of Oxford University Press.

Bioregions as a Basis of Community

Bioregionalism may be familiar to some as an eco-cultural movement that arose in the 1970s to address the ecological and psychological damage of human disconnection from ecological place. [5] The 1970s artists, writers, ecologists, activists, and poets who conceptualized bioregionalism were already addressing capitalism, violence, and commodification in the urban sphere, concerns which were incorporated into their environmental turn. A bioregion was defined as "a distinct area with coherent and interconnected plant and animal communities, and natural systems, often defined by a watershed, a whole 'life-place' with unique requirements for human inhabitation so that it will not be disrupted and injured."[6] In contrast to mainstream environmental approaches that are premised upon a nature outside of humans to be identified, repaired, replenished, or conserved, bioregionalism sees humans as integral to an ecobiotic mesh. Bioregional writers used concepts and metaphors promoting the idea of humans as a species among other species within specific places, offering practical, affective,



Three significant texts include "Turtle Island" by Gary Snyder; "Renewable Energy and Bioregions: A New Context For Public Policy" by Peter Berg and George Tukel; "A Different Kind of Country" by Raymond F. Dasmann.



"Root, Branch & Mammal" by the Center For The Study Of Cultural Morphology and Mutation.

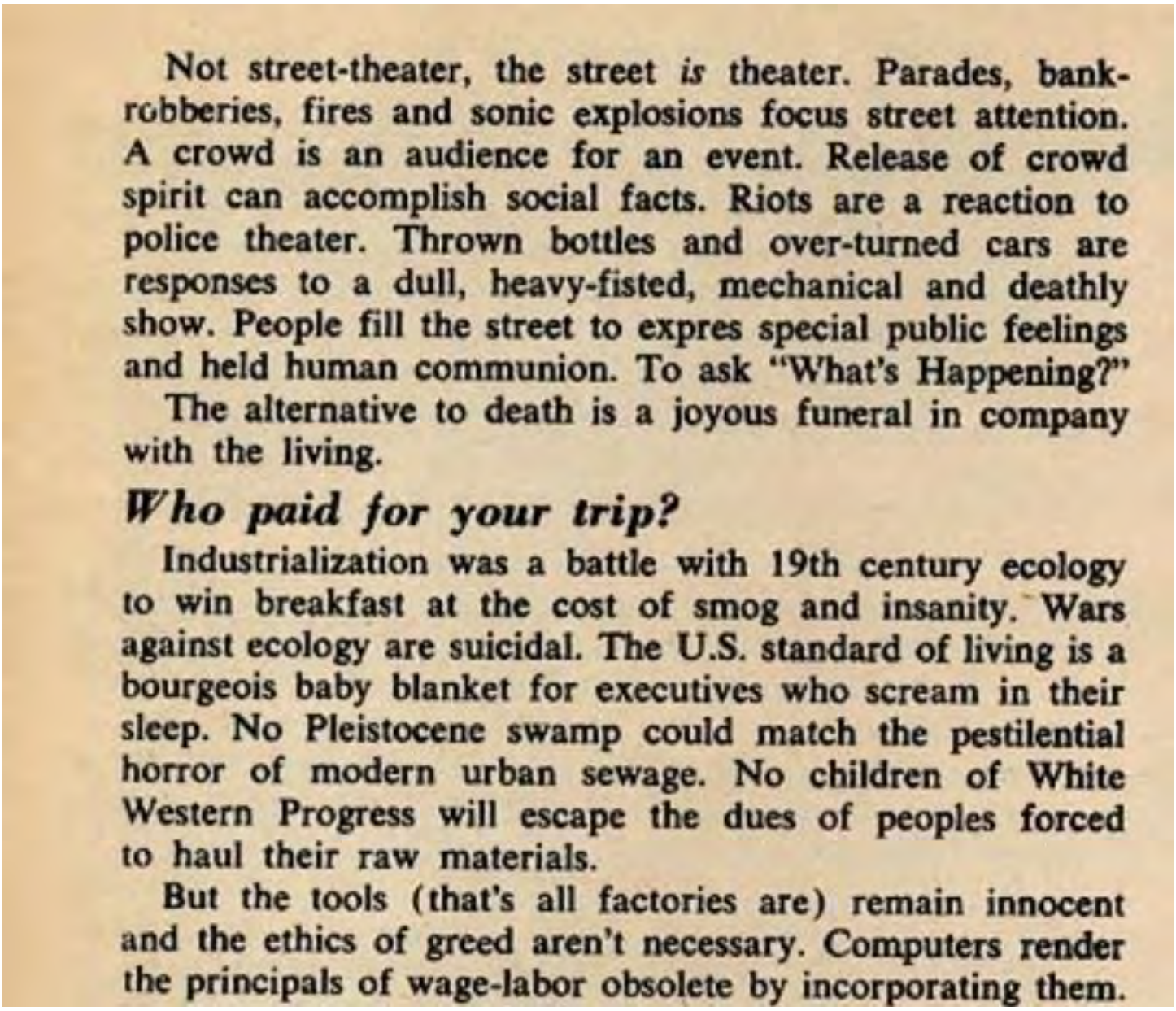
and somatic experiments in repairing the rift between humans and beyond-human ecosystems.

This essay mostly highlights concepts developed by California-based writer and environmental activist Peter Berg. His ideas, however, were forged in dialogue with many other writers, activists, scientists, and artists, including well-known ecological poet Gary Snyder, conservation biologist Raymond Dassmann, and writers Stephanie Mills and Kirkpatrick Sale. The use of the word *bioregion* to define a territory by qualities *other than human distinctions* was coined by surrealist poet and publisher Allen Van Newkirk in his independent journal Root, Branch and Mammal.[7] Newkirk sought "models guided by less arbitrary scales of human activity—in relation to the biological realities of the natural landscape."[8] Adopting Newkirk's term, Snyder, Dasmann, and Berg added humans back into the conception of a bioregion, investing them with a responsibility "both to geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness—to a place and ideas that have developed about how to live in that place."[9] In a 1976 talk given at the University of California, Berkeley, Raymond Dassman described peoples who "lived in communities that were dependent upon and in harmony with their local ecosystems as 'ecosystems people,' who 'did not consider themselves apart from nature.'"[10] Stressing the concomitant destruction of Indigenous people and their cultures with the

Diggers distributing free food. The Digger Archives (www.diggers.org) (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

destruction of the natural world, he called for an end to "dependence on the exploitation of other people, places, and living communities."[11]

Peter Berg's environmental insights evolved in the rich matrix of creativity, resistance, and activism of 1960s-era San Francisco where he was a performer and writer with The San Francisco Mime Troup, an alternative theater project which held performances in the city parks. San Francisco in the 1960s swelled with youth seeking alternatives to mainstream U.S. culture, and Berg and a small crew of artists started to use everyday spaces of the city for provocations that reframed social relations outside of the commodity. Calling themselves Diggers after the seventeenth-century radical protestants who planted on the enclosed land of wealthy estates to meet their subsistence needs, the San Francisco activists took the practice of liberating property into a



Not street-theater, the street *is* theater. Parades, bank-robberies, fires and sonic explosions focus street attention. A crowd is an audience for an event. Release of crowd spirit can accomplish social facts. Riots are a reaction to police theater. Thrown bottles and over-turned cars are responses to a dull, heavy-fisted, mechanical and deathly show. People fill the street to expres special public feelings and held human communion. To ask "What's Happening?"

The alternative to death is a joyous funeral in company with the living.

Who paid for your trip?

Industrialization was a battle with 19th century ecology to win breakfast at the cost of smog and insanity. Wars against ecology are suicidal. The U.S. standard of living is a bourgeois baby blanket for executives who scream in their sleep. No Pleistocene swamp could match the pestilential horror of modern urban sewage. No children of White Western Progress will escape the dues of peoples forced to haul their raw materials.

But the tools (that's all factories are) remain innocent and the ethics of greed aren't necessary. Computers render the principals of wage-labor obsolete by incorporating them.

"Trip Without a Ticket" by Peter Berg.
The Digger Archives (www.diggers.org) (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

twentieth-century context with free concerts, festivals, housing, and food.[12] They distributed pamphlets extolling a philosophy of abundance, and used guerrilla theater to interrupt traffic and business-as-usual on San Francisco's Haight Street.[13] Berg wrote prolifically about the consequences of converting life into property, elevating the liberatory, communitarian, and libidinal potential of human relationship and existence once freed from service to the abstraction of an economy:

> First free the space, goods and services. Let theories of economics follow social facts. Once a free store is assumed, human wanting and giving, needing and taking, become wide open to improvisation.
>
> A sign: *If Someone Asks to See the Manager Tell Him He's the Manager*.
>
> Someone asked how much a book cost. How much did he think it was worth? 75 cents. The money was taken and held out for anyone. "Who wants 75 cents?" A girl who had just walked in came over and took it. [14]

Berg's broadsides and essays were poetic provocations to resist the commodification of consciousness, or what I am calling a Soft Anthropocene that works upon people's desires,

Death of a Hippie Procession. The Digger Archives (www.diggers.org) (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

perceptions, and expectations. His polemics called out the alienating effects of putting a price on everything and offered propositions for positively transforming relations between people and environment.

In 1973, Berg and his partner, dancer Judy Goldhaft, founded the Planet Drum Foundation as a forum for imagining codependence between people and the biosphere through the bioregion concept. Publishing was, and continues to be, central to this project, beginning with a series of letterpress broadsides focused on and authored by people in specific bioregions, with titles such as "The Pacific Rim Alive." These were distributed as bundles by mail to subscribers.[15] The basis of a bioregion was not proscriptive. It was, on the contrary, up for participatory debate based on group studies of geographical features, cultural motifs, historic dwelling patterns, economies, and practices. Eschewing colonizing and extractive patterns such as homesteading, where people bring foreign cultures and building styles to reproduce an image of a former homeland, the goal of bioregionalism was to consider how to contribute to the biodiversity of place. Bioregionalism wrapped together environmental philosophy, social critique, and evolving practice. The core idea of "living-in-place," would thus always look different, a coevolution of biodiverse habitation. The introduction from Planet Drum Foundation's collection of essays, art, research, and maps titled *Reinhabiting a Separate Country* set out

Images from "Reinhabiting a Separate Country" (1978) taken by Judi Quick. Image courtesy of Planet Drum Foundation.

the motifs for what Berg called living-in-place, or *reinhabitation*:

> Reinhabitation means developing bioregional identity. It means learning to live-in-place in an area that has been disrupted and injured through past exploitation. It involves becoming native to a place through becoming aware of the particular ecological relationships that operate within it. Simply stated, it involves becoming fully alive in and with such a place. It involves applying for membership of a biotic community and ceasing to be its exploiter.[16]

Reinhabiting a Separate Country featured regional authors from scientists, poets, naturalists, and storytellers reflecting on a "natural country" formed by the geographic boundaries and ecological uniquenesses of Northern California. These specificities extend beyond physical features to encompass social and economic customs, including those of the Indigenous humans and beyond-human denizens.

Image from "Reinhabiting a Separate Country" (1978) taken by Eric Weber. Image courtesy of Planet Drum Foundation.

Reinhabitory Theater

To reinhabit is to begin with the premise that you, a human, are a species among many other species. Reinhabitation is an incitement to cultivate sensitivity, creativity, dialogue, observation, and study as a way to care for an inclusive community. Community membership is defined by the inhabitants in the region; reinhabitation asks, "how will all members live better in this place?" Reinhabitation counters the force of the Soft Anthropocene we carry within, that lets us hallucinate a separation between humans and nature or territory. Demolishing dams, for example, is a practical act that reclaims the river for the good of the salmon. The destruction of dams, however, must be preceded by the potential of humans to imagine the needs of salmon. Reinhabitation can include more conventional practices of conservation or restoration but also exceeds these approaches by queering relationships to place and the other inhabitants. The human is encouraged to imagine themselves within an ecological matrix, to learn who else lives there, and to ask questions about how to share the abundance of that place with all species within a territory. What is the spirit that drives people to make paintings in caves? What would that look like today? What are appropriate technologies? What do the animals want? Questions like these gave rise to research on animal behavior and ecosystems. Sparked by her dance background, Judy Goldhaft studied ways of miming animals to create an emergent kind of ecological theater. Working alongside Berg, they incorporated ideas from Indigenous stories to illustrate reinhabitation as dialogue and physical play. Joined by other actors to form the Reinhabitory Theater as a performing troupe, players imagined and invoked the territories and behaviors of beyond-human dwellers while also modeling ways for humans to share space with beyond-humans within a territorial boundary. [17]

Figures of Regulation

Coexistence is not an easy proposition in our society! How can humans develop self-regulation through nonauthoritarian and non-proscriptive constraints? In his essay "Figures of Regulation: Guides for Rebalancing Society with the Biosphere," Berg enlists the dialogic imagination to concoct what he alludes to as a dance with place.[18] He hypothesizes what he called "the new equivalents to customs that we need to learn."[19] Regulation, he explains, can be understood biologically in terms of resource distribution, while the *figure* is a tentative iconic or symbolic move rather than a hardline rule—something to be tested incrementally as if it was a game. In proposing a *figure* as a unit of action to be executed in a serial, dialectic and experimental fashion, he breaks systems-within-place into fragments to be articulated and tested variously as a kind of analog cybernetic system. His examples include the drawing and redrawing of lines, dance steps, and other series of movements that respond to force, friction, or wobble, the physical means by which one organism performs a regulatory effect upon another by the impact of its actions.

As an example, a flowing river repeats itself in patterns and variations, producing figures in the sense of dance steps coming one after another, extending or opposing the last one. A figure, like a seasonal flood, is only partial—partially decided or described—and there are other parts still undetermined and changing. Think about how undulating tango dancers share the weight of each other, reacting and compensating. Alternatively, consider the attitude of reciprocity toward gifts of strawberries from the land, described by Robin Wall Kimmerer in *Braiding Sweetgrass*.

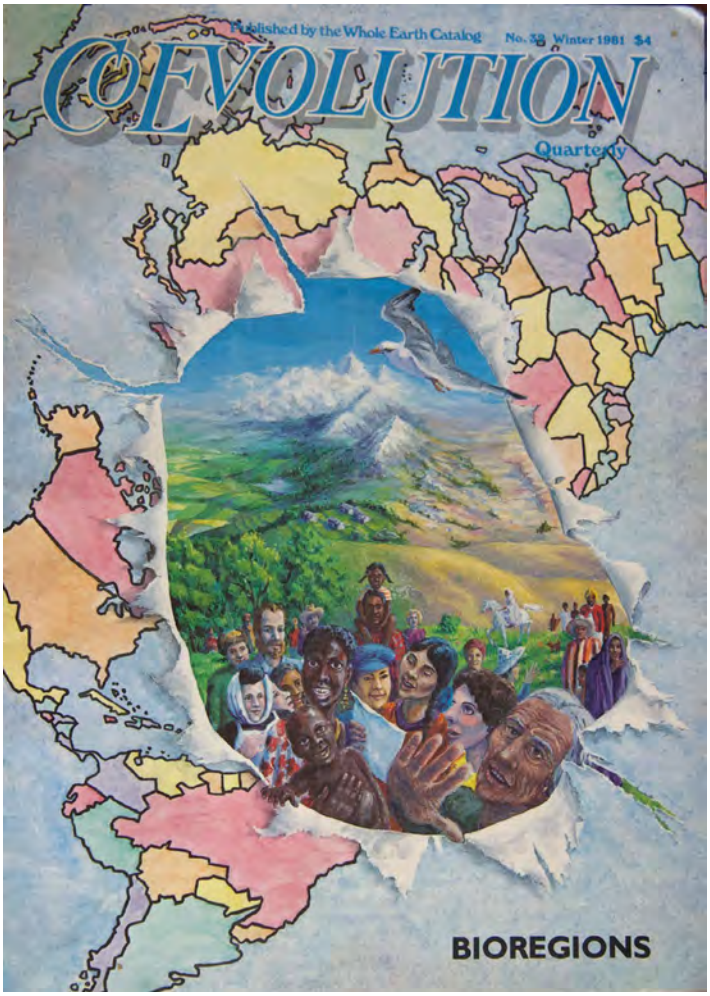
[20] Strawberries grow, and humans and animals eat them. In this way, we humans interact with nonhuman others. How shall we acknowledge these interactions? This exchange between human desires and the capacity of the land to give can be seen as a dialogic flow of human action and ecosystemic response. For Berg, the weight of impacts between humans and beyond-human entities can be observed in incremental steps that cultivate sensitivity to the patterns and scales of human action, seasonal changes, the movement of animals, soundscapes of hurricanes, glaciers, rising waters, and other substantial processes of nonhuman assemblages, past and present, in relation to human activity. This incrementalism can be seen as a kind of harm reduction for both earth and humans.

The *figure of regulation* preemptively critiques how environmental regulations are often not enacted until after ecological harm occurs in the United States. Berg experiments with an unfolding precautionary principle as practice, as opposed to the use of mitigating regulations enacted after environmental damage has occurred. Figures break down regulation as rules by patterning changes into increments that can be taught, observed, and listened to, a call and response. For Berg, figuring becomes a process of evolving new social customs by incrementally incorporating complexity.[21] If practices of figuring within a community are dedicated to imagining a built environment that harmonizes and rescales human lives, habits, and infrastructures, they could present new challenges to the

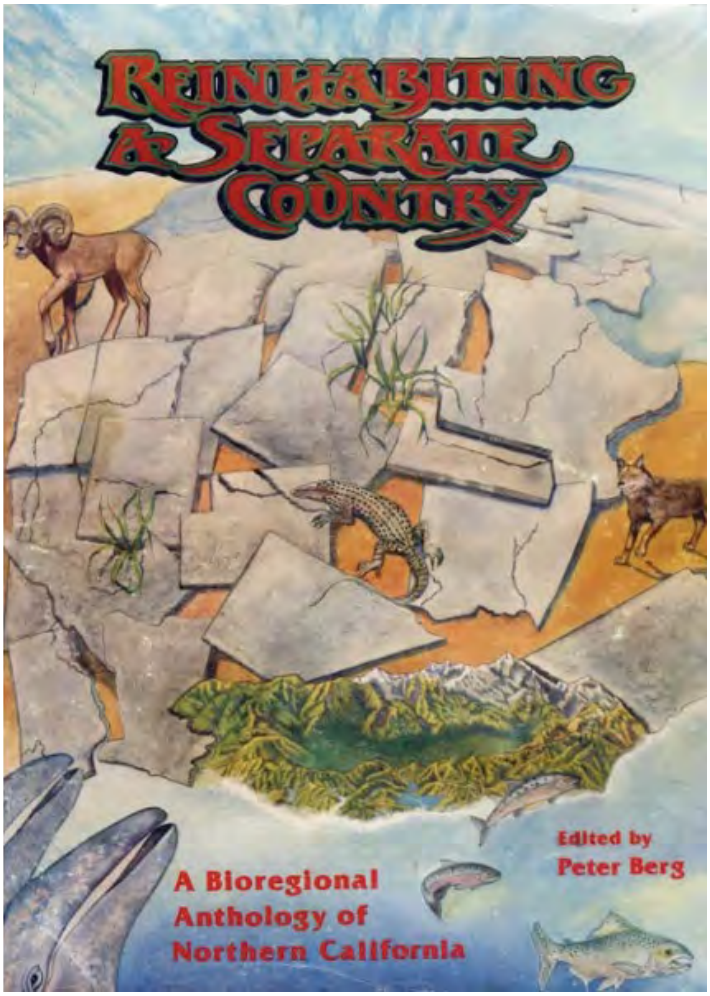
Fluvial geomorphologist Steve Gough demonstrates figures of regulation pertaining to river flows by moving around plastic embankments and dams with the EmRiver River Model. Image courtesy of Sarah Lewison.

anthropocenic discourses of individual rights that hold legislated regulations such as the Clean Water Act hostage.

One of the ways that humans learn is by observing difference and change. The figure of regulation, based in the observation of change, charts a path for creating customs as pedagogical practice. It also bears a resemblance to the healing processes conducted through harm reduction, as a prefigurative and diagnostic process of exploring the potential for human dignity and transformative healing through association to place. In the Argentinian La Plata watershed, Brian Holmes and Alejandro Meitin use the term "bioculturalism" with the same intention as a figure of regulation, "as both something autonomously real, and as idealizations or imaginaries that can guide collective behavior and action."[22] Much like Berg and Dasmann's framing of bioregionalism as both geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness, bioculturalism expresses the consciousness of a terrain's people as much as its biological character.



"CoEvolution Quarterly." Issue 32. Winter 1981.

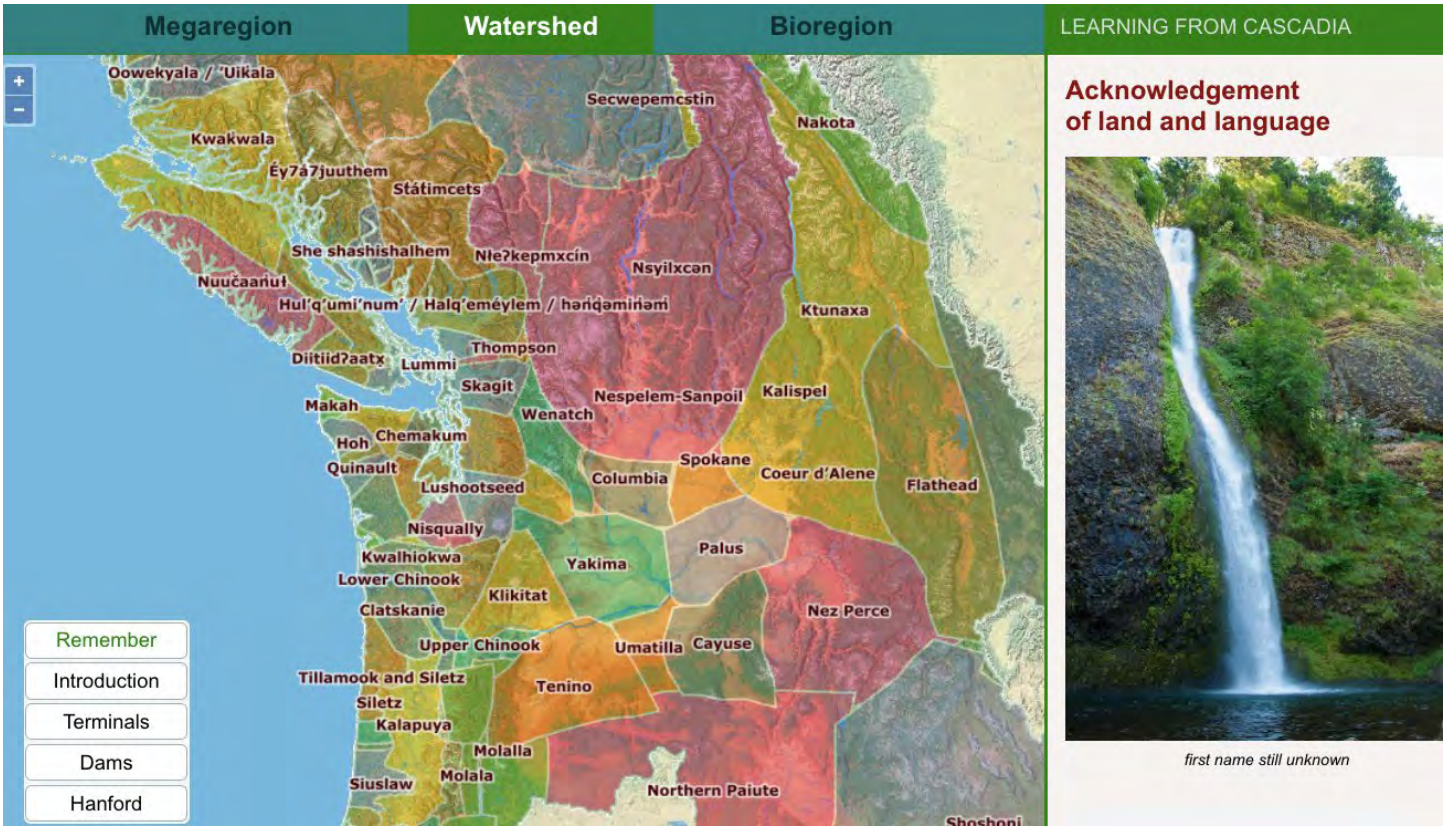


"Reinhabiting a Separate Country: A Bioregional Anthology of Northern California." United States: Planet Drum Foundation, 1978.

Devolution

In 1981, Anishinaabe organizer and economist Winona LaDuke spent her summer studying European secessionist movements where distinct regional language and culture groups were resisting state policy and control as a form of internal occupation. Tracing between these movements and the jurisdictional status of Indigenous lands in the United States, her article for *CoEvolution Quarterly*'s Bioregional issue, "Indian Land Claims and Treaty Areas of North America: Succeeding into Native North America," made a case for Indigenous treaty rights—the right of Indian governments to hold regulatory and enforcement power over traditional lands. She wrote, "It means the land which is currently taxed, regulated, strip mined, militarized, drowned by overirrigation and nuked by and or with the blessing of the US and Canadian governments would not be under their jurisdiction anymore."[23]

Landback movements and purchases for the reclamation of ancestral lands for Indigenous people in the U.S. are slowly, albeit unevenly, facilitating a reversal, or *devolution* of power from the state back to what Raymond Dasmann, in 1976 called "ecosystems people" who wish to manage the land ethically. For LaDuke, to "relocalize economies" is to harmonize human economic and social systems with a region's capacity for sustenance for all who live there through the elevation of traditional cultural practices. [24] Devolution is a form of resistance to colonialization and economic occupation by monocultures of all kinds. In the United States, devolution might correlate to an expansive municipalism in which state decision-making power over the living and



Learning from Cascadia. Screenshot from Brian Holmes' interactive map of the Cascadia watershed. Image courtesy of Brian Holmes.

geological entities called natural resources in a management context are handed to bioregional governance systems. Devolution entails imagining a future for a place that is not reinvented with every new political wind. LaDuke uses the Ojibwe phrase ji-misawaanvaming to describe "something like positive window shopping for your future," adding that "we need to ask what our community is going to look like 50 or 100 years from now."[25] Such future thinking would entail individual and social transformations that seem impossible given the present level of alienation and polarization in our current society; transformation can only happen through a series of adjustments that will predispose people to change. What might those adjustments look like? How could they be achieved?

Counter-Cartographies

Collective mapping plays a key role in creating a bioregional consciousness; such counter-cartographic exercises bring together the experience and knowledge of those who live in a region. These perspectives are rarely represented in maps developed for navigation or for extraction of materials such as coal, oil, or wood. Resource maps reduce regional and ecological uniquenesses to

Washington Street Garden, Carbondale, Illinois. Image courtesy of Sarah Lewison.

what can be grown, manufactured, or mined. Imagine instead a group of people of different ages around a table with pens and paper, old maps, hand-drawn directions, ecological studies, and naturalist observations. Meeting monthly over the period of a year, they draw and discuss, slowly determining the boundaries of their bioregion by defining its unique characteristics.[26] Such a map is a powerful visual counter to the flattening gaze of state and industrial maps. Mapmaking workshops bring people together to share their knowledge of home, including its human and beyond-human inhabitants, its histories, needs and cultures, and its anthropocenic spoilage. Bioregional mapping also affects urban policies and development by addressing social inequities around urban and exurban sustainability as well as access to natural surroundings.

My own work as an artist, teacher, and proponent of the "river as an open school" began with mapping exercises like those described above. These were first done with a group of people in my university's library. Together, we identified trees, creeks, beaver dams, and early sightings of northward migrating armadillos. We also mapped spaces where people felt safe or unsafe or more likely to be stopped by police. Through this sharing of perspectives, we blended our attention to local ecosystems together with the unique experiences of humans in our mapping group.

Bioregion as a Site for Subsistence

Tamil eco-literary critic Nirmal Selvamony stresses that bioregional praxis "cannot be anything other than communitarian," writing that

> Living-in-place is possible only in a land area in which the agent (the one who practices it) can have face-to-face contact with all of the members of the community of the agent, not in an Andersonian imagined community where such contact is not possible.[27]

In 2015, I got to use an old restaurant as a space for collective community research into subsistence, a practice often stigmatized as a marginal form of food provision. In their 1999 book *The Subsistence Perspective*, sociologists Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen tackle this stigma, recharacterizing subsistence as labor that directly satisfies human life and reproductive needs within the limits of place.[28] *The Subsistence Perspective* brings feminist theories of labor to bioregionalism by recognizing the labor of social reproduction, from childbearing to growing a garden. For Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen, a subsistence perspective entails the withdrawal of one's energies from commodity production in order to compose a post-commodity culture that restores what Mies describes as the "diversity, or symbiosis between various forms of life—animals, plants, and people—all living together in a certain area, all with their livelihood and good life."[29]

The Understory Center Kitchen for Subsistence Research (also known as the Subsistence Kitchen), was named for the layer of trees and foliage waiting in the shadow of taller branches until a clearing is made for them to shoot up. The project was framed by the question of what subsistence might look like in our current technological era and our specific place. How could we take better care of each other through attention to our regional specificities? This question was asked again and again across different activities, including a weekly meal that was open to all. Each Saturday, people came to pick vegetables, herbs, and flowers from the urban garden across the street to be used to plan and prepare a free public lunch. During and after lunch we held cultural, practical, and theoretical workshops, teach-ins, and meetings. Some days we cooked

or preserved food together or tried to reverse engineer branded prepared foods, such as salad dressings and cookies, that people's families favored.

Other weeks, local and visiting activists, organizers, and artists gave presentations that were followed by discussion or group action, such as letter writing campaigns. Materials were gathered for Standing Rock, where thousands were camping to demonstrate opposition to the Dakota Access pipeline.[30] There were also closer pipelines to learn about and oppose, and questions about the management of the Shawnee National Forest, one of the largest forested areas remaining in Illinois. Someone painted an iceberg model on the wall to illustrate how 90 percent of the factors controlling a situation are concealed beneath the surface. We used this model in discussions to get a better understanding of how underlying factors determined how people thought they should live. Using the kitchen as a common learning space was empowering, and it was a joy to engage with our small mission of gathering food to feed as many as possible. Each week, new people joined an already diverse group of townies and students willing to spend time reflecting about how we live.

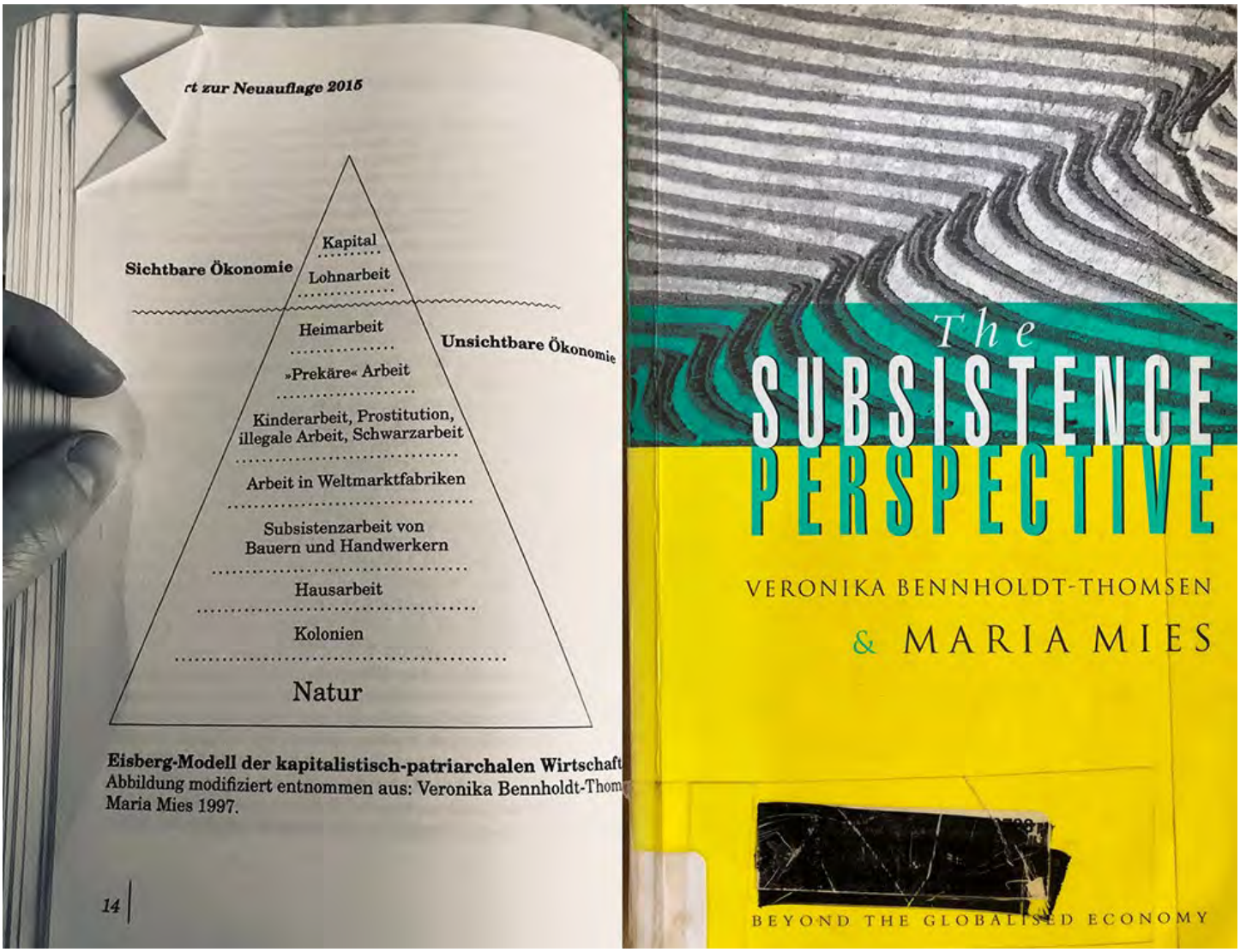
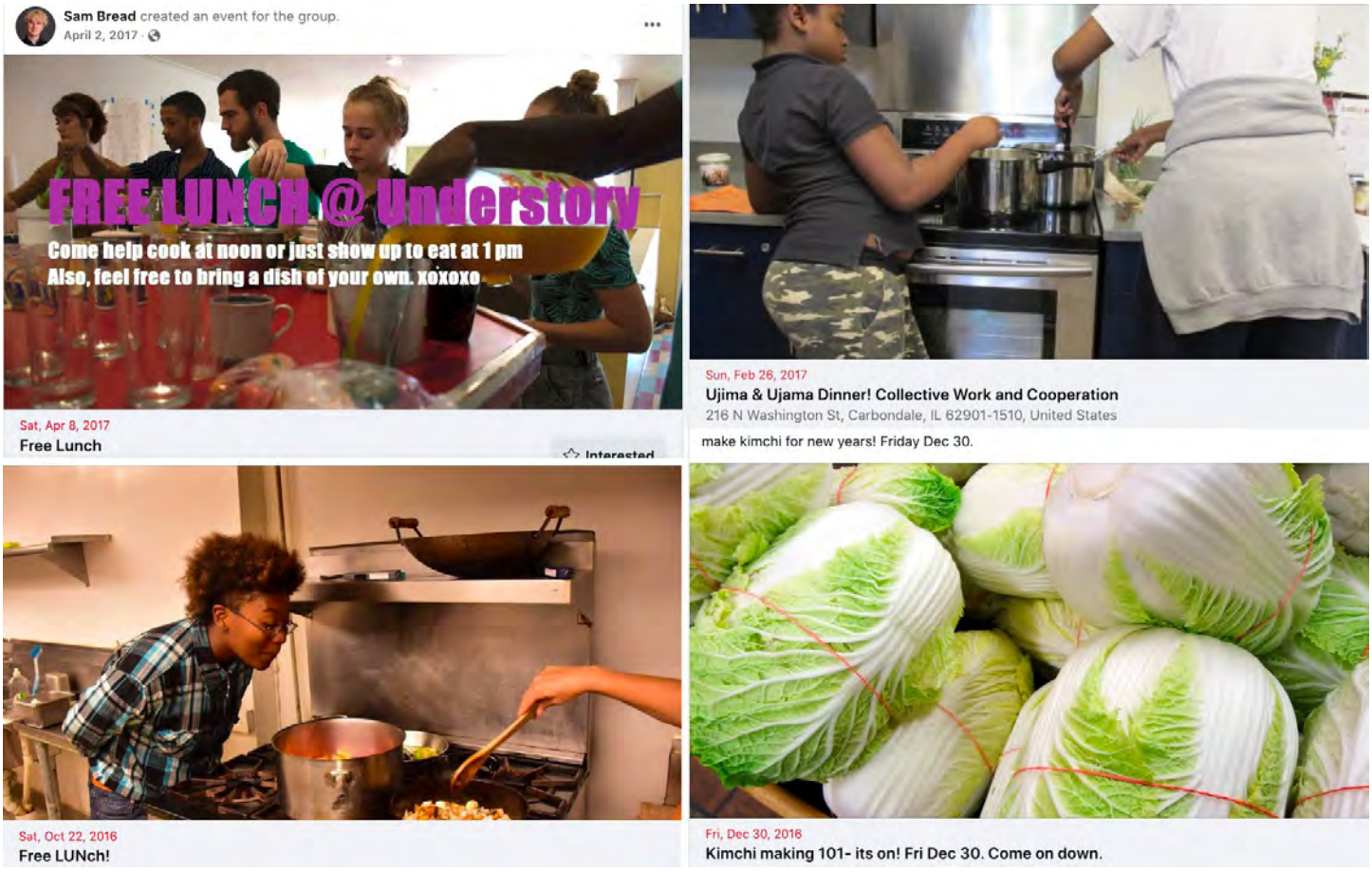


Image from "Patriarchat und Kapital" by Maria Mies, VGE Verlag, 2015 (left); image courtesy of Anna Saave. Cover of "The Subsistence Perspective" by Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen and Maria Mies (right).

Understory Center Kitchen for Subsistence Research exterior in Carbondale, Illinois with student interns Sam Beard and Candance Brogdon, circa 2017. Images courtesy of Sarah Lewison.



Selection of Facebook event postings for Understory Center for Subsistence Research. Image courtesy of Sarah Lewison.

Finding a Way Through Play

In *The Dawn of Everything*, David Graeber and David Wengrow's reframing of early human social organization, the authors problematize a long-accepted hypothesis about the role of agriculture in the formation of civilizations. Citing Plato's Gardens of Adonis, which they call "a sort of festive speed farming which produced no food," they point out that serious concerns and skills evolve from play and social experiment. [31] The Subsistence Kitchen was such a space of material and imaginative play, a place to plant seeds for the future.

Imagining bioregional autonomy is audacious. Kirkpatrick Sale writes that

> bioregional diversity...does not mean that every region of the Northeast or of North America or of the globe will build upon the values of democracy, equality, liberty, freedom, justice or other suchlike "desiderata." There's a risk that truly autonomous bioregions will go "their own way."[32]

Sankofa Series director Sharifa Stewart. Understory Center Kitchen for Subsistence Research, Carbondale, Illinois, circa 2017. Image courtesy of Sarah Lewison.

Brian Holmes, writing about bioregionalist governance in the Pacific Northwest clarifies which entities should lead: "A bioregional state is emergent whenever the survival and flourishing of non-human actors becomes an issue in formal political negotiations over land-use within a given territory."[33]

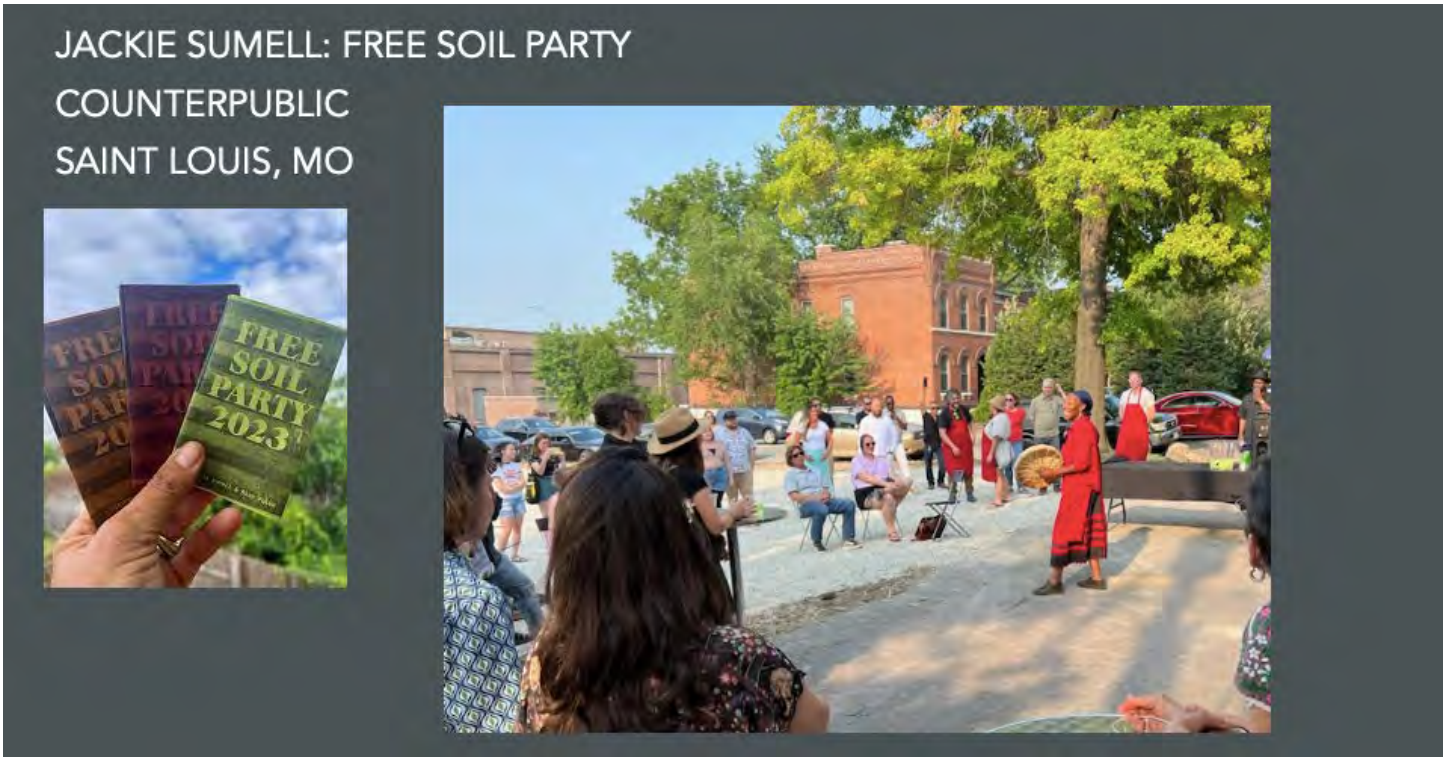
In places that have gathered enough political or social momentum, bioregionalism is expressed in fragments through, for example, local foodsheds, species protection, transition initiatives and the elimination of dams. There are places where inhabitants have become frustrated enough with extractivism by outside interests that they have thrown out external governance and created new governments guided by principles of mutual respect between humans and the natural environment. In the Michoacan, Mexico village of Cheran, the Indigenous Purepecha people drove out loggers, politicians, and outsiders profiting from and destroying their lands and water sources. Returning to traditional forms of self-governance, they banned the unsustainable cultivation of avocados and are developing an economy that protects regional biodiversity. [34] In Southern Illinois, it seems ridiculous to dream about regional autonomy as long as coal companies own much of the land, or while the US Forest Service serves lumber industries instead of protecting our woody carbon sinks.[35] We don't know yet how to transform the consciousness of our region on the scale necessary to stop the hungry ghosts of capitalism, but we can practice, or *play farm*, around the edges. We can develop sensitivity toward each other, toward one another as a collectivity, and toward place as region and territory for the plenitude of diverse beings. We can explore ways of making these practices contagious.

"Stop the Pipeline" letter-writing campaign. Understory Center Kitchen for Subsistence Research, Carbondale, Illinois, circa 2017. Image courtesy of Sarah Lewison.

The Subsistence Kitchen eased lives in small ways, producing new relationships for people between humans and the beyond-human, and offered a dance step—a glimpse of place as life. We exchanged experiences across differences and learned each other's concerns in a time when the resources that sustain are being withdrawn faster than ever. We reactivated customs of sharing resources, food, and time, which, for some people, had been suppressed or never experienced. Here, we could acknowledge and understand specific ways that oppression is locked into the built environment, and how the energies of the human *within* environment can be released. It is in this sense that I began to imagine the Soft Anthropocene as a way to characterize the psychic and emotional injuries to humans and other life forms that occur as a result of Anthropocene techne and the disconnection of humans from the natural world. This is the unseen bottom of the iceberg.

The Subsistence Kitchen hosted conversations about things like isolation, childcare needs, neighborhood solar and internet networks, and the lack of essential skills among people, such as cooking. The socially isolated experiences of so many begin, under the lens of harm reduction, to look like a public health issue even before the pandemic. Enlisting harm reduction principles might entail first acknowledging the isolation people experience and then finding ways to fill gaps in social services that address psychological dissociation. As a beginning, the Understory Center Kitchen for Subsistence Research opened a portal for acknowledgement, cooperation, and reconnection.

What other figures or tools might reduce the malaise of these disassociations and disconnects? Although restoring the integrity of an ecosystem and devising ways for humans to contribute to that is foundational, there are many layers of human activity that divorce humans from place that might be investigated and reconnected. We live in places that are so fragmented that perhaps forging new connections between life and place can start by following the threads of



Saundi McCain-Kloeckener leads the ceremony for the Free Soil Party. Image courtesy of Wago Kreider.

the anthropocenic practices that first interrupted life-place connections.

Whilst pondering the multidimensional scales of these complexities, I encountered *Free Soil*, a project presented in St Louis by artist jackie sumell and curator Risa Puleo.[36] A pamphlet describes it as a "three-part material intervention in conversation with three moments in the city's history."[37] The project asks us to imagine the city's initial construction, from clay taken from the ground to forming and firing the clay to make bricks for houses. A map marks the quarries where clay was removed and acknowledges the low-paid or enslaved quarry and kiln workers. By the 1970s, legions of buildings made with these bricks sat dilapidated owing to redlining policies that denied their black inhabitants sufficient money for rehabilitation. As the houses fell apart, the bricks were purloined and sold downriver for neo-plantation-style new construction in Louisiana. For *Free Soil*, sumell, who dedicates her practice to the abolition of prison, retrieves bricks from New Orleans, Louisiana, returning them to St. Louis, Missouri. She invites people to smash them back into dust so they may be "rematriated into the soil" from where they first came.[38] A planting mix was made with the brick dust, sand, soil, and wildflower seeds gathered from the ancient mounds of the early Mississippian people. The seeds will grow out into flowers favored by wild bees for pollination.

Jessica Allee is breaking bricks to rematriate the soil at the Free Soil Party hosted by Counterpublic in St. Louis, Missouri, 2023. Image courtesy of Sarah Lewison.

sumell's reinhabitory project relates to harm reduction principles through the acknowledgement of harm and the initiation of a reconciliation or reparative process. It begins with recognizing and linking the destructive acts toward environment and people over time that includes the extraction of clay, the peonage of workers, and the destruction of housing. sumell and Puleo trace this damage for others to see and participate in acts of repair and connective restoration, both physical and symbolic, by returning the bricks to a soil medium for new life. Mapping out complexities of damage makes openings for incremental steps and encounters, much as Berg describes in *Figures of Regulation*. Bioregional indicators are always present in our research about place in the Mississippi River Open School; they share a forensic impulse to track human interventions in the land, carrying the question of what can come next. Bioregional principles can serve as a guide both to inoculate against technologies that sever us even further from natural systems and to move us from economics to "ecologics."

Even though we find our contemporary selves mired in the time of the Anthropocene, there have always been pathways toward reconnection with the natural world. As I reach an end, I feel moved to note the resonances between bioregionalist concepts such as Figures of Regulation, and even Berg's early writing about the commodification of life, that are present in sources I've just mentioned in passing. Toward the end of her essay called "The Gift of Strawberries," Robin Wall Kimmerer acknowledges the challenge of acquiring the self-restraint to wait for berries to ripen to sweetness rather than rushing to eat unripe white ones. It occurs to me that our haste to eat the sour berries is the Soft Anthropocene at work in our consciousness. Kimmerer writes, "Now I am old, and I know that transformation is slow. The commodity economy has been here on Turtle Island for four hundred years, eating up the white strawberries and everything else. But people have grown weary of the sour taste in their mouths."[39] We can hope that Kimmerer is right, but in these passages, she also summarizes our ambivalences and the difficulty of changing. Humans are not simple and addictions are, by their very nature, intractable. Treating addiction requires incremental steps, repetition, and a great deal of forgiveness.

In this essay addressing the Anthropocene through harm reduction practices and a set of poetic and symbolic concepts drawn from bioregionalism, I've drawn together fields and concepts that might seem to jump between subjects or to lean on suppositions about the human consciousness. It is my sense that it is necessary to include poetry, contradiction, and leaps of understanding in order to discover the forms of imagination that make it possible to set such a difficult task as transformation in motion. This is a trying time, one when our capacities to care for our human selves and our beyond-human kin within the context of place are terribly stretched. This makes it even more important that we do not disconnect from the matrix of the earth and of human fellowship. Bioregionalist philosophies opened paths of imagination through social critique and creative practices that addressed this kind of alienation, and it is our turn to carry them forward. As we learned from Jim Rock's ceremony of reinhabitation at the start of this essay, we must declare our affinities out loud and bring them into a shared space with other humans. We must seek community with those who are not human and who have occupied spaces upon the earth for much longer than we humans have. To conjure harm reduction as a path for ecological healing in the human social terrain of the Anthropocene is to acknowledge there is no easy route for finding coexistence within the planetary biosphere. It is also to acknowledge there is no other option than to step, swim, and crawl, humans and beyond-humans alike, into an unpredictable journey toward bioregional belonging.

Footnotes

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About the Author

Sarah Lewison is an artist and writer who looks for transversal perspectives of ecological relation and social kinship. Her participatory and installation works on land use, extraction, care, and commoning include public readings, installations, tours, films, and hearings that invite participants to imagine other ways of organizing society. Through durational projects like the Center for Subsistence Research, a platform for quotidian practices of care and repair, her work joins play, labor, living forms, and community formation to attend to materialities of place, justice, and processes of relationship.