

# Cartography With Your Feet

## Workshop Proposal for “Beneath the University, the Commons”

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**D**riven by the pressures of corporate competition, Midwestern capital elites envision a network of high-speed trains linking the scattered cities of flyover land into a dense urban grid. Oblivious to territories, histories, and peoples, you whisk your way from center to center like a roulette ball spinning through the global casino. What gets lost in these dreams of power are the connections between the city and the country, the earth and the sky, the past and the future.

What kinds of worlds are installed on the ground by the neoliberal planning processes developed in the technocratic universities? Why do these projects fail even before they begin? How to start building a cultural and intellectual commons that can seep into the fabric of everyday existence?

The Midwest Radical Cultural Corridor is a call for longer, slower, deeper connections between the territories where we live. It's a cartography of shared experience, built up by those who nourish lasting ties between critical groups, political projects, radical communities and experiments in alternative living. Why not help build the commons by overflowing your usual daily routines? Why not make the journey to the US Social Forum into a chance to discover the worlds we can create right here in our own region?

This workshop draws from the inspiration of Grace Lee Boggs and the travels of the Compass Group on our Continental Drift through the Midwest Radical Cultural Corridor. The idea is to propose an act of collective discovery and creation, to be carried out by anyone who's heading to the Social Forum. Multiple caravans each chart their particular pathways and organize

their own activist campaigns, artistic exchanges, skill-sharing sessions, solidarity dinners or whatever else they desire on the roads to Detroit, then converge at the Allied Media conference and the US Social Forum to share stories, images, and artifacts from their detours through the Midwestern labyrinth. Meanwhile, those with different priorities can invent their own forms of travel and exchange, explore diverging temporalities, set up “stationary drifts” in the neighborhoods they inhabit and continue the projects they’re pursuing, while the moving worlds pass through them.

By taking the time for a conscious experience of the territories we are continually traversing, we can build up what Stephen Shukaitis calls an “imaginal machine”: a many-headed hydra telling tales of solidarity and struggle, daily life, and outlandish dreams in the places that power forgets, leaving their inhabitants free to remember living histories and work toward better tomorrows. The Compass Group will present images, narratives, and documents from our Continental Drift in 2008, then open up the concept to input and debate. With the help of anyone who’s interested, we hope to lay the basis for a collaborative process of self-organization and convergence at the Social Forum in Detroit and to sow the seeds of future meetings and projects.

## **OUTLINE OF THE SESSION**

We begin by tacking up an instant exhibition of maps, diagrams, art works, and projected photographs to give a glimpse of the MRCC as a reality and a potential. Group members briefly narrate the 2008 drift through Illinois and Wisconsin, introducing the desire and the concept of a radical Midwest along with a few scattered touch points along the open corridor. Our key idea: “Another critique of the university is possible.” An embodied critique that reverses the imperative to accumulate and master knowledge into a situated practice of perception/imagination/expression within inhabited social spaces.

The technocratic disciplines of the knowledge factory are imperial strategies of scale, imposing instrumental flex-connections between the spheres of economic circulation (global, national, regional) and the target-sites of production/consumption (cities, towns, institutions, businesses, demographic groups, families, individuals). These disciplines come together in the process of “corridor planning” for multimodal transportation networks, first conceived for the megalopolis region of the Northeastern Seaboard in the US and subsequently developed across the world (Trans-European Networks in the EU, the Golden Quadrilateral in India, the Initiative for the Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America, Plan Puebla Panama, and the Trans-Texas Corridor in North America). What the fractured and instrumentalized structure of knowledge-work in the corporate university barely allows us to conceive, let alone resist and transform, is this integrated production of technological “flowspace” for global capitalism.

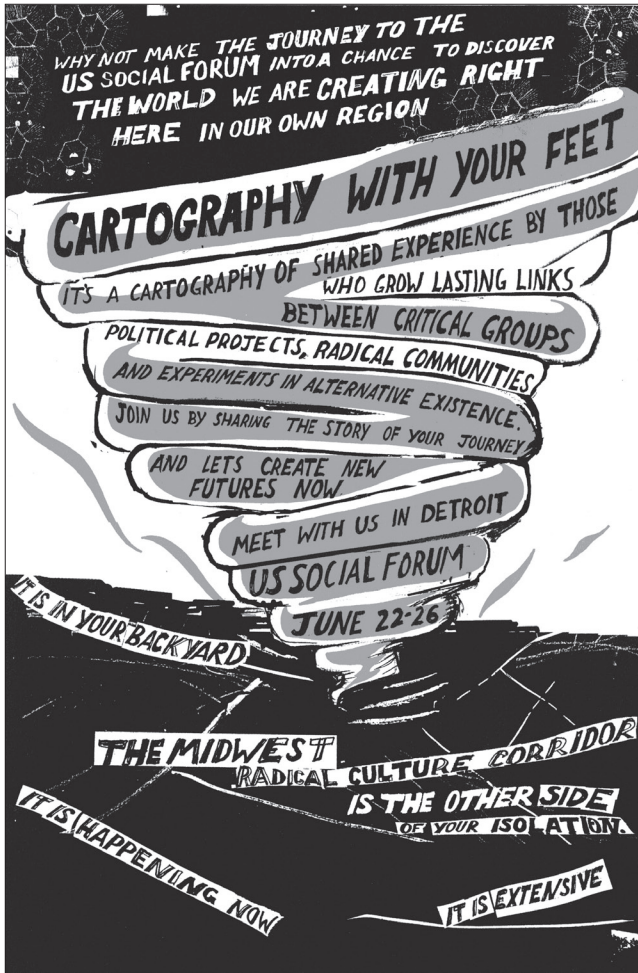


Photo credit/  
caption goes here.  
Doluptus nim nia  
simus sequam quis  
simenda incitatum  
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doluptatum di ipis.

At the heart of our proposal is an ethics of scale that can respond to the modular accelerations of the “Petroleum Space-Time Continuum.” This is not about localism or even the finely demarcated ecotopias of bio-regionalism, but instead about inventing ways to traverse the really existing scales while remembering the lived horizons and temporalities of bodily experience. At best, the encounter with other groups opens up territories of mutual self-recognition.

The trans- or extra-disciplinary connections at stake here include contemporary art and geography. One important reference is the Detroit Geographical Expedition and Institute (DGEI), an anti-racist, anti-capitalist collaborative research project initiated in 1969 by a group of Michigan geographers and African-American residents of Detroit. Another is the Timescapes project by Angela Melitopoulos exploring Corridor X through Southeastern Eastern Europe as part of the B-Zone exhibition in Berlin

in 2005. Like Don Mitchell, one of the founders of the People's Geography Project, we want to "radicalize popular geography and popularize radical geography."

The motif of "drifting" evokes Situationist psychogeography and dozens of contemporary projects, many of them developed in the wake of social movements. But the desire and the need to cross boundaries of class and culture leads to a focus on stabilities as well as movements, and suggests practices of the "stationary drift" used by the Counter Cartographies Collective to begin mapping university labor relations at UNC in 2005.

By presenting these and other elements we want to open up the discussion about possible practices of research, expression, collaboration, and intervention, departing from the sophisticated languages of the university to open up permeable territorial spaces of dialogue, dissent, and alternative living. These, in turn, can connect, not to the university disciplines as such, but to the commons that lie beneath them and make them meaningful.

Right now our contacts with the Boggs Center are pointing toward the possibility of collaborations with local residents in Detroit, as well as possible spaces or contexts to welcome those who take the time to travel through the territory on the road to the Social Forum. Hopefully some ideas for future projects will arise from this meeting—not necessarily with us, and not necessarily in the USSF context, but definitely in the Midwest Radical Cultural Corridor as an "imaginal machine" that belongs to those who live it.

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*The Compass group held this workshop on April 11, 2010, in Minneapolis at the West Bank Social Center, for a conference entitled "Beneath the University, the Commons" (<http://beneaththeu.org>). The conference was great—exactly the kind of breakaway politics that interests us—but the proposal was something more, a way of exploring, communicating, gathering inspirations. In late June, many paths came together at a three-story house we rented in the surreal decay of Highland Park, a residential city nested within the sprawling ruins of Detroit. We held a similar workshop at the US Social Forum, took part in dozens of others, and later on we offered an outdoor picnic for whoever might come, near the old King Solomon's Church and a beautiful community center called the Hush House. Thanks to everyone who participated, in Minneapolis, in Detroit, and on the roads in between.*