

# Introduction

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**D** *Deep Routes: The Midwest in All Directions* starts as a collection of essays, stories, memories, and documents about the Midwest, but soon diverges and spirals outward on several different tracks. Most of the authors live, or have lived in the Midwest, a large ill-defined area in the center of the United States. This region is alternately celebrated and derided in the popular imagination for feeding the country and being home to the more conservative aspects of American culture, but in reality it does and is neither of those things. The Midwest today is home to large swaths of industrial agriculture, producing ethanol and animal feed from corn and soy, both of which produce few edible goods. Fordist industry has long since abandoned the region for cheaper (read: less unionized) labor in other parts of the world. Simultaneously, there are concrete responses to this changing economic and social landscape: the 2010 U.S. Social Forum, which drew activists from all over the country; the uprising in Madison, Wisconsin, in response to a blatant attack on organized labor by Wisconsin governor, Scott Walker; tent communities of the Occupy Wall Street Movement found in small and big towns, alike. These actions have made national headlines, but they are mere referents to the groundswell of long-term struggles and deep organizing that has been, and is happening, all over this region.

This collection looks at that Midwest, a radical Midwest, a Midwest we only hear about in whispers and in fragments. It is written by people who call themselves artists, activists, and academics—sometimes all three at once. We are trying to make sense of a place once known for middle class jobs

and rich soil, which is constantly shifting under the far-reaching tentacles of global capitalism. Making sense of a place as big as the Midwest happens in many ways, through reading histories, long drives, by looking at maps, by visiting abandoned factories, new organic farms, non-profits in run down towns, and through long walks, and long talks. The authors here have employed these strategies and more to explore, pin down, and build hopes on what this Midwest might be.

In 2010, Compass collaborators—a loose network of people interested in the social, political, and environmental structures of the Midwest—visited Detroit, MI, the former Motor City. We convened there to attend the U. S. Social Forum, a week of activist meetings, workshops, and demonstrations. While people from around the Midwest and the nation were coming to Detroit for this gathering, we knew many in our region, doing vital work in their neighborhoods, communities, and ecosystems who could not come. We also knew that getting there, traveling across this territory, would be as important an activity as the conference itself. This sparked the idea to collect articles for a book. Organized through conversations and invitations, the resulting collection serves to report back and weigh in on activities that form and give shape to this place.

This book is organized in two tracks. Interviews between artist Dylan Miner and five different indigenous organizers, scholars and artists represent the first track. Here Miner proposes a post-colonial mapping of the Great Lakes Region. By interviewing these diverse group of thinkers and doers, he proposes a contemporary indigenous geography of the Midwest. These interviews are woven throughout the book.

The second track is organized into a more conventional set of thematic chapters. Here, readers will see overlaps and continuities between articles and sections that might resonate in ways that simple headings cannot completely encompass. Thus, the problematics of disciplines and categories, described in several of these articles, permeate the very structure framing them. Ideas of scale—from intimate conversations to cosmic explosions—are touched on in each section, expanding on the discussions and conversations Compass collaborators have engaged.

The first section, *Searching for Common Ground*, explores modalities of knowledge, ideas of community and methodologies of the “drift,” a form of critical/radical tourism originating as a way to describe research and propose actions under the alienating economic and social constructions of our time. Drifting comes out of the Continental Drift seminars, mentioned in Claire Pentecost’s essays, among others. Subsequent drifts have taken place in Zagreb, the Midwest, and most recently China. The drifts take place over space and time; they are literal journeys as well as metaphoric meditations on scale. The drift framework is used by several of the authors in this collection

as a tool to talk about ways of learning from cultural and activist activities. For some, it is a method to ask questions like how a region can be sustainably connected to a global economy, or how a community in a Midwestern town might be connected to activist struggles, both local and international.

Using the drift as her starting point, Claire Pentecost presents a meditation on industrial agriculture. She examines her own border crossing activities and how they can present new perspectives on what is happening in her local region. Dan S. Wang and Daniel Tucker sit down to hash out the meaning of community. Their meandering conversation takes them from communities in small towns, to church groups, and to independent art spaces in urban Chicago. Sarah Kanouse and Heath Schultz collaborate on a text initially about the journey to the U.S. Social Forum, which ends up describing political depression and questioning the value of drifting, or the kind of radical tourism that is a repeated thread in several of this book's essays.

From drifting, we turn to authors who focus on their memories of, and their current relationships to, small midwestern towns. *How Big is a Small Town?* is organized with the idea that small places have long reach. Authors in this section share stories ranging from micro communities to macro revolution. Abigail Harmon explains her work with the self-organized tent community of unhoused people in Champaign, Illinois. Mike Wolf writes about his recent move to Rockford, IL, and his hopes of finding community in a place facing the impacts of large-scale deindustrialization. Sarah Ross and Ryan Griffis create a glossary whose entries tell stories of a small town through its relationship to the transnational grain and meat trade. Poetically linking the river towns of Cairo, IL and Cairo, Egypt, Sarah Lewison reflects on her community's relationship to global revolution. She starts with the history of industry and oppression in the southern Illinois town of Cairo and ends with accounts from the recent strike on the University of Southern Illinois campus where students and faculty worked in solidarity with the support of local residents. Kristen Schimik recalls her childhood in a Michigan town through the constant presence of coal mining and coal fired power plants. She takes us from her hometown to the edges of the universe into "the burning hearts of stars," where iron sees its tipping point as an element.

Authors in *Moving through Regions* note not just the physical movement of people and resources but the role of movements in making the Midwest. Here readers encounter "report backs" from activist projects around the region. A workshop proposal from Brian Holmes describes Compass collaborators' participation in a Minneapolis conference "Beneath the University," a series of on-going discussions and interventions to current edu-factory politics. A short introduction by Jen Blair describes the context and writing of Dan S. Wang and Nicolas Lampert, both Wisconsinites who participate in the 2010 protests and capital occupations in Madison, Wisconsin. Shiri Pasternak

writes about solidarity work with indigenous people in Canada, and her own subject position as an ally with communities in the Barriere Lake Territory. Rozalinda Borcilă describes her participation in immigrant rights organizing in Chicago, involving a three-day bike ride around Foreign Trade Zone #22, an extra-territorial area created for the purposes of trade and minimally regulated, large scale commerce. In a report back from the coalfields of West Virginia, Bonnie Fortune learns from seasoned organizers about the struggle against mountain top removal coal mining and its impact on the environment. There she connects the Appalachia region to the Midwest through family roots and the country's destructive desire for cheap energy.

Authors throughout this book are, in a sense, looking for the Midwest as much as they are looking at it. In the final section, *Where is the Midwest?*, writers present their version of a travelogue, finding that the deep roots and routes of the Midwest permeate in all directions. Matthias Regan writes an epic account of the slow journey from Chicago to Detroit via a Greyhound bus on his way to the U.S. Social Forum, an evocative story of solidarity between bus riders in an estranged situation. Jenna Loyd tours across the country questioning, through Civil War histories, the boundaries and borders that shape the spaces we live in today. Faranak Miraftab examines aspects of globalization through the lens of Beardstown, IL, home to a Cargill meatpacking plant which employs both West African and Mexican immigrants. Her extensive research reveals how both the American town and the immigrants' hometowns are shape shifted by the transfer of labor from one place to another. Traveling from the agricultural heart of Argentina to rural China, Brian Holmes engages with global capital through a diaristic account of meetings with artists, farmers and local historians.

*Deep Routes: The Midwest in All Directions* is a patchwork of ideas and reflections, spreading out like the expansive croplands that radiate from the middle of the nation. It is a varied compilation of texts that move between the anecdotal and the annotated, the passionate and precise. These stories represent a collective attempt to register dreaming and doing on a regional scale, from stories of migration and resistance, to indigenous visions of place, and struggles, both large and small, for more equitable, shared livelihoods. *Deep Routes* gives shape to the landscape of a radical Midwest.