

# Little Egypt

-----

SARAH LEWISON

## CAIRO, ILLINOIS

*... history doesn't work by putting things behind us forever. It puts things behind us for a while, and then they resurface in some non-archaic form suited to the new conditions. Who really thought that pirates would return as a major threat to the world, for instance?<sup>1</sup>*

—Graham Harman

*And all countries came into Egypt to Joseph for to buy corn; because the famine was sore in all the earth.*

—Genesis 41:57

For nineteenth-century European-descended settlers who knew their biblical geography, the Y-shaped delta where the Ohio River flows into the Mississippi resembled the forks of the Nile that wrap around Cairo. This geographical similarity is said to be partly why the lower region of Southern Illinois came to be known as “Little Egypt.” There were also giant pyramid-like mounds that had been long abandoned by prehistoric Mississippian peoples, and in 1830-32, the moniker was used again when disastrous weather destroyed two years of crops in Northern and Central Illinois. There was not even grain left for farmers to plant by the second spring and as in Genesis, farmers from the North headed, they said, down into Egypt, to buy precious grain. Traders came too, for wood, salt, oil, and coal. Skidding across time, one could say that Biblical stories of social reproduction in Egypt provided metaphors for

the profit, plenitude, and exploitation that settlers and their descendants experienced here. Two merging rivers and an artificial mountain built by an ancient civilization unleashed a meta-concept that runs like a background script in the history of this place, a faint melody one can't get out of one's head.<sup>2</sup>

These traces of an imaginary Egypt also offered metaphors for human bondage in Southern Illinois, an abolitionist state surrounded by three slave states. Cairo, Illinois was a busy trading port and riverboat town, and for blacks escaping the south, Cairo was where the North began, where one could make Underground Railroad connections to get north. There were both free and enslaved blacks in this region, and counting the Ohio and the Mississippi as the boundaries, there were two River Jordans to cross to freedom, or to be dragged back across if you were caught. In *Huck Finn*, when Jim and Huck's raft floats past Cairo, Jim's narrative is so poignant because he loses his chance to become a free man, which is the only way he can save his family.<sup>3</sup>

Egypt today signifies less as metaphor for struggle and plenty and more as a regional brand that reminds us where we shop. There is a Little Egypt Veterinarian, Tax Service, Janitorial Service, and the Egyptian power cooperative, all small businesses addressing daily needs. My favorite is the Egyptian Revival Day Spa,<sup>4</sup> which has replicas of Egyptian tomb guards affixed to its façade, and I surmise from the website that despite our regional median income at sixty percent of Illinois', some can afford a \$100 facial. What Egypt might mean to the people who have inhabited this environment over time plays out in processes and patterns that continue to carve the landscape in slow rhythms; some become Pharaohs and some Josephs, while others are subjugated and exploited for their labor. I want to know what burdens my neighbors are carrying. My interest in rummaging around in local history is fueled by the discovery of its patterns and their relevance to today.

## LOCAL CULTURES

*And there came a famine in the country; and Abram went down into Egypt, to sojourn there: for the famine was very grievous in the land.*

—Genesis 12:10

There is a cultural and biological contiguity between Southern Illinois, Appalachia, and the Ozarks that I imagine as bands of codependent human and non-human micro-ecologies (birds, trees, medicines, migration patterns), strung along the ridges and rivers. It is a true bioregion, formed by distinctive ecological systems. In the early 1800s, hill people from Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, Georgia, and the Carolinas migrated into Southern Illinois and started small farms, growing fruit, vegetables, grain, and livestock.<sup>5</sup> Free

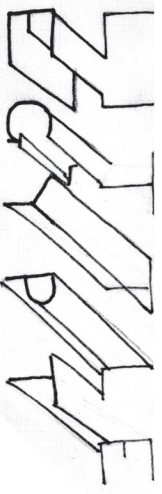
blacks established communities too. These settlers were upland southerners, sharing traditions of cooperative work in an extended family, diversified cropping, hunting, and wild crafting, as well as the use of wood for building.<sup>6</sup> Cooperative self-sufficiency connected them to this place, and as people continued to stream in from the upland south, they worked as tenants on other people's farms, or in frontier industries of primitive accumulation: logging, charcoal making, and mining. Tenants and landless laborers became part of the family, and were given places to live, frequently for generations. Hardships overcome and patterns of mutual care provided identity and security based on extended clan structures and land tenancy. A friend who was raised on a hog farm said the economic distinctions between owner, tenant, and laborer were muted through a sense of mutual need, de-emphasizing class differences. Exchanges were accountable to a certain degree to social relations, rather than to profit, and many transactions did not and still do not involve money. These ancient connections continue to offer locals a plentitude of community and access to land and jobs. Not everyone has the same access, but when things change slowly, one can often return home to live inexpensively among one's people. Social networks and loyalties to the place become stronger as there is less to be had.<sup>7</sup>





When the railroad penetrated the region in mid-century, it brought more commercially-oriented people from Europe and New England, who set the process of capitalism into motion. These professionals and business people (including farmers) assumed positions of prominence in the new towns around the railroads and wrenched the economy into modernity. The process continues today in new iterations, but then, as now, it was based on orienting production toward external markets, accelerating the economic pace, increasing reliance on wage labor and the use of money, enforcing standards that augment commodity market integration, and consolidating and automating production. The differences between these two societies, one "modern," the other "backwards," was pronounced and a language of difference was used to rally sympathies. Between 1873 and 1892, Southern Illinoisan farmers and craftspeople joined in the populist effort to repulse the economic influence of monopolists and corporate entities; this was not because they were anti-capitalist per se, but because they wanted an economy that respected their social needs.<sup>8</sup> In 1891, in a narrow election, a nearby county voted to require the fencing of livestock and the commons were thus summarily enclosed; the land had fully entered the modern privatized economy.

Semi-isolated social groups also can conceal cronyism and political entitlements. One historic case of corruption is the use of slave labor in Saline County salt mines in the pre-Civil War era even while Illinois was a free state.<sup>9</sup> How else did this happen? The past of Southern Illinois is full of colorful figures and neo-Darwinian brutality; populated with enslaved workers,



ILLINOIS  
 LITTLE EGYPT  
 OZARK PLATEAU  
 APPALACHIA



-  Mississippian mounds
-  Honeywell facility
-  TOWN
-  coal mine (1936)

Base map and topography from  
 Bier, J.A. 1956, *Landforms of Illinois*:  
 State Geological Survey, URBANA  
 Mine data from State of Illinois,  
 1936, *Map Shows Location of Shipping Mines*  
 which produced coal during 1936...

Hand copied by Bodray I. Drum

bounty hunters, river hucksters, tavern owners murdering their wealthy customers, clan grudges, and shootouts. In the twentieth century, the region filled up with bootleggers, booze-runners, and coal agents who bought rights to the abundant seams beneath the ground, many of which are still being reclaimed from under ancient farms. A vernacular expression—“that’s how those people are”—implying that *we* are not like *them*, suggests people took a live-and-let-live attitude if they were not directly victimized. This attitude of tolerance could also be a mask to save face, if one was powerless to change the situation. A journalist I recently met reminded me of a contemporary iteration of this dismissal: “That’s the way things are and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

### **NATIONALIZED COERCED MODERNITY**

Across time, the different stakeholders’ claims on the place had diverse traction, and state and federal policies had contradictory impacts. By the 1900s coal mining was a key industry that integrated the region’s wealth and labor with the nation. With its high value, coal offered a way for workers to collectively assert a need for dignified lives and local control over economic conditions through unionization, but when the Depression hit and demand slumped, mines closed and many people were put out of work. While the ups and downs were straining, many benefited from the Federal New Deal projects, which were a mixed blessing. Through the FSA, subsistence farming was once again encouraged, but only for the short term, not to rebuild a sustainable economy. Under the Rural Electrification program, farmers could not get electricity for simple needs like a bulb in the milking barn. They were required to modernize the entire house, even if it meant taking out loans. This national dedication to growth became salient in post-World War II agricultural subsidy and transportation policies (highways) that led to the failure of many white-owned smallholdings and the remaining African American-owned farms. These policies forced more people into wage labor (mining or factory work) or out of the area altogether. Federally mandated civil rights laws put yet another process into motion that still founders here: to fully include African Americans in the economic life of the region. For some, the migration of people and ideas from elsewhere into the region continues to be met with ambivalence and sometimes resistance.

If you are from here, people might know some of this because they know who is on your mother’s side, your father’s side, and they place themselves and you in relation to a rich, friction-filled network of ranked and marked economic activities and histories. Such demarcations of clan relations are opaque to an outsider. If you are new in town, you are an outsider, even if you are here for twenty years. Locals help me understand how boundaries are maintained between insider and outsiders, and that there are many micro-identities.

A coworker from here tells me that her family's Texan ancestry is enough to make her a perpetual outsider. To demonstrate, she holds out her arm and describes, "all the people who are from here are in the hand, and I am perched somewhere on the wrist." In the small town of Carbondale, locations friendly to some are uncomfortable to others, making it a challenge even to find a neutral meeting ground for a group meeting.

## **CARBONDALE, ILLINOIS**

In the doldrums of midwinter I began to measure Little Egypt against its namesake. This was about my own loneliness as much as anything else. Little Egypt is where I live, and watching videos of the masses of people in Tahrir Square, I was mesmerized by the crowds, having grown accustomed to a sparse population, where gatherings of a hundred or more people for anything other than sporting events is heady. But also it seemed impossible that this unremitting financial crisis, with its privatizations, factory closures, layoffs, and deliberate economic exclusions, would bring groups of people in this hungry, poor, dispersed region together in unified outrage and action. I had worked with a couple of groups trying to organize projects that would introduce new ideas, but even these small meetings were difficult to sustain. It was frustrating. I found myself asking questions such as, "what does it mean to be rural?" and "why do things change so slowly here?" I began to ask coworkers and acquaintances to help me understand this place. The more I learned, the harder it was to imagine people expressing solidarity, in spite of historic struggles for civil and workers' rights in which sides were decisive and battles protracted and often violent. When four bargaining units of the institution where I teach recently prepared to strike, the question of creating a common cause in our region emerged as a real problem rather than an abstract one.

## **UNIVERSITY AS INDUSTRY**

Carbondale began as an easement on the Central Illinois Railroad that transported the region's riches of fresh produce, nuts, and coal to the big city markets.<sup>10</sup> Southern Illinois Normal College was founded in 1869 to train schoolteachers for the children of farmers and miners and it was also a progressive influence advocating for African American civil rights.<sup>11</sup> After World War II, the school changed its name to Southern Illinois University, and its mission, expanding from 3,500 students to 23,000, by adding schools of Medicine, Law, Dentistry, Agriculture, and Business. Fueled by Veteran's Administration grants and student loans, these expansions reflected new ideas about the region's relationship to the outside, rationalizing education as an integrated part of national economic growth. The Communication College I teach in was added most recently, in 1993. This seems pertinent,

as the university is a kind of switchboard for the exchange of ideas and experience, through a mix of rural and urban students, and for the faculty who enter in from outside. Outsiders bring new concepts and different approaches to political subjectivity; we are really strangers here. Dropped in, as if by parachute, we experience a foreign land. A black student from Chicago tells me she feels uncomfortable visiting the town because it feels unreadable, perhaps reactionary. My colleague in the Department of Dental Hygiene, who is a local, suggests that one reason Southern Illinois is not very progressive is because progressive people tend to leave. The students and teachers who come here from other places stay for a while to study, teach, and party—and then we leave. Someday I might leave. In an essay about communities of former miners in the played-out coal fields of eastern Pennsylvania, geographer Ben Marsh makes a useful distinction between one's *means of living* and the *meaning of a place*. Although R. and I both get our *means* from the university, R.'s experience of *meaning* in this place is enriched by a multi-generational habitus. What is the meaning of this place for me? And as regards our strike, what does it mean for us to labor in this region, and how is it like or unlike other regional work?

### **WE DON'T NEED ANOTHER PHARAOH**

In 1996, a newly formed Faculty Association (FA) became our collective bargaining representative. Since then, faculty wages and benefits have edged upward to become commensurate with similar schools. In 2010 our contract expired, shortly after the economic crisis hit Illinois. With negotiations still unresolved, the administration imposed unilateral salary cuts on most employees in the form of non-negotiable furloughs, and then attempted to include this strategy as a permanent fixture in our contract. In March, negotiations over contract renewal failed after the Administration made a “best and final offer,” that gave them power to furlough employees for reasons of “financial exigency.” Our contracts had already lapsed, and we decided to form a coalition with three other units, the Graduate Assistant Union (GAU), the Association of Civil Service Employees (CSE), and Non-Tenure-Track Faculty (NTT) whose negotiations had also failed. During the strike vote, there was intensified attention paid to the university as an employer and to us as workers that made the starkness of the regional economic situation and the isolated position of our research university salient.

In Carbondale and the greater region, many people live on the edge. Twenty-five percent of the population is below the poverty line, and many more (the median household income is less than \$16,000) survive from paycheck to paycheck. The largest employer here is the university, which is also the only large company with union representation. After the university are two health care facilities, followed by Wal-Mart, which together with a

cluster of box stores on the east of town, suck up much of the population's household expenditures. While the many teachers, health care workers and others employed in the town's two main service industries are paid decently, there are many who are unemployed and underemployed. Every year or two another factory that employed two hundred or so people closes, and nothing opens to take its place. People switch to jobs in grocery stores and chain restaurants or one of the eight Illinois State correctional facilities in the region. Government support (state and federal) in the form of Social Security, food stamps, Medicare on through to road repair, is crucial to our economy, and while the safety-net programs are fairly distributed, the jobs that emerge from government-supported projects do not seem to reach all members of the population. At a hearing of Carbondale's Human Relations Commission, I listened to skilled African American road and construction workers testify to exclusion from local jobs. Informal research conducted by driving around confirms that when work is contracted on public property, it is done by small handful of local firms, and there rarely seem to be African Americans on the work sites. In Carbondale, where the African American population is twenty-five percent, the U.S. Census has no admissible data about the percentage of Black-owned businesses;<sup>12</sup> is that because the numbers are so small?

*The Southern Illinoisan* is the region's only daily paper. In editorials, it painted the tenure-track faculty's demand for the protection of tenure as disrespectful to the hard-working, underpaid, and jobless residents of the wider county area. Tenure understandably sounds privileged when there is high unemployment. It probably looks like entrenchment, and makes a good target for all other kinds of entitlement that people do not feel safe to complain about. The faculty could be a convenient scapegoat for the indignities people suffer in a down economy. It is true that we wanted to protect tenure, and further that we demanded transparency, insisting that an independent party audit the university's claims of "financial exigency." There were accusations and cloaked threats. People were scared because they didn't know what would happen; the fear was that we were making impossible demands, and a long strike would devastate the local economy.

*Southern Illinoisan* editor Gary Metro wrote, "Leave the faculty strikers out in the cold. The world soon will lose interest and any courtroom tactics they pursue will consume years. Some won't live to see the end of the legal battle. Maybe they can tough it out with their pickets, clenched fists and tough talk. But don't bet on it."<sup>13</sup> Metro's churlish attitude generated a lot of response in terms of people fighting back. For me it also called up memories of struggles from the past. Little Egypt is marked by extreme demonstrations of antagonistic social relations. Two incidents stick out. One occurred in 1922 when a nearby coalmine was closed in a national UMWA strike. After 10 weeks out, with coal prices soaring, the owner brought in guards and scabs to move



out the coal, leading to days of violent confrontations. As scab workers were chased out of town and attacked, some fatally, it seemed that law enforcement looked the other way. People take strikes very seriously here.

The other story that haunted me prior to the strike was about a prolonged boycott by black residents of Cairo against that city's Jim Crow practices. Although Cairo blacks constituted over a third of the population after World War II, they were systematically denied employment and illegally banned from public infrastructures, such as pools. In 1967, after the suspicious death in police custody of a young black serviceman home on leave, blacks in Cairo rebelled, joining in the outrage shared by other black communities around the nation that year. In 1969, to address continuing discrimination and police violence, they formed a group called the United Front, which targeted white-owned businesses that refused to hire blacks with boycotts and picketing. By 1971, there were no businesses left; owners preferred to close their doors.<sup>14</sup> Resistance to integration led many local towns to enforce sundown laws well into the twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> As we got ready to mount our own strike, it was this strange obstinacy in the face of all reason that I was most worried about. Would the administration actually isolate us and lock us out?

At midnight before the designated strike day, the university's Board of Trustees struck agreements with three bargaining units, while refusing to negotiate further with the FA. We had been singled out as a unit, and would strike alone. The next morning we began picketing stations on the roadside and entrances circumscribing the university. Employees from other units joined in; their contracts permitted them to picket if they also went to work. Now that the strike had begun, the earlier sense of tension and antagonism was lessened and it seemed that the actual visual presence of people on the picket lines provoked a softening in public sympathy. I imagined this was because peoples' own family memories of striking and struggling against management were triggered. Locals honked their horns, stopped to visit and dispense advice, and brought apples and thermoses of coffee. A union electrical worker told us he would not cross the line, even if the campus lost power. Journalists from local news affiliates accurately reported our demands for accountability.

Gary Metro, who had correctly predicted faculty would be isolated in this battle, had also revealed his pro-management bias by suggesting that "economic crises" means that "collective bargaining is dead." In an October 1 editorial, he wrote, "When was the last time you heard of a strike by ironworkers, carpenters, electricians or others who rely on muscle and blood—as well as their smarts?" In fact, quite recently, within Metro's own beat, workers represented by the United Steelworkers settled with Honeywell management after a yearlong lockout. Disturbingly, management had brought in substitutes untrained in the dangerous work being done at Honeywell, which was

processing raw uranium into uranium hexafluoride, a kind of yellowcake. While substitute workers were outright hazardous at Honeywell, the notion that appropriate substitute teachers for our classes could be found in a down economy was the subject of many jokes, as faculty are always hired for specific contributions. Administration insisted classes would be normal, and actually used the phrase “business as usual.” While faculty did go to work, our numbers were sufficient enough to disrupt classes. It was not possible, as management claimed, to find local substitutes who would fill our positions; students went to class and reported that administrators took attendance and dismissed them. Some students went back to their dorms for down time, while others joined the picket lines and rallies. One sign said, “We don’t need another Pharaoh,” referring to the Chancellor, Rita Cheng.

Picketing is physically demanding. On the lines some faculty met each other from across the campus for the first time, sharing long hours and the many developments of a day. We experienced a sociality that rarely occurs on campus. I picketed with two professors who teach dental hygiene in the School of Dentistry, whose students came out the first day to see their teachers. These were thirty young white women who understood the need for their teachers to strike and their need for solidarity, even if they did not have an analysis about worker-management relations and profit. They said they loved their teachers and that’s why they came out. Picking up signs, they marched around the administration building, and their shrill chants—“We want our teachers back!”—must have reached the Chancellor’s window. These women and their teachers are largely from local families, and the dental care they are training to do is socially necessary. They will find jobs, and if we ever manage to create more equitably distributed health benefits in our society, they will be beneficiaries. The solidarity and trust these students offered us is a densely complex part of our hopes for a people-centered economy in this region.

After two days, a Federal mediator was brought in, and as the week reached an end, a tentative agreement accommodating our key demands was produced. On the ground, however, we agreed we would not have won without the sustained support of the other units, of the many from the area who supported us, and especially the students. What the dental hygiene students began on the first day of the strike continued throughout the week. Students who had never raised their voices together in public before joined in large marches through campus. On the last day, a scheduled meeting of the University’s Board of Trustees was surrounded by a boisterous rally at which students and faculty made statements about the value of education and teachers, as well as the need to separate business from education. That evening a tentative deal was signed and although we had returned to our classes, we rallied again—a group of fifty gathering in a circle near the

Administration Building to express our thanks to each other for the past days, and to commit to continued solidarity. Some students brought up the proposed tuition hikes expected in the spring, and suggested actions to address them and student debt.

In this year, a movement of awakening that started in Cairo, Egypt has brought many in our own country to question not only our economic system, but also the meaning of our lives. Within the greater Midwest, the ongoing struggle in Wisconsin over rights of public employees to collective bargaining is of essential relevance to our own. The national preoccupation with these uprisings, and the way they have changed the direction of public conversations, is one of the background scripts that ensured our strike's positive outcome. Touched by the connections between region and university that emerged during the strike, I intend to pay more attention to the features looming close in our landscape, such as regional labor struggles and local economic exclusion. In this sparse region, people are hungry and inadequately housed just as they are in New York City or Cairo, Egypt. And yet, there are many small businesses that seem to sustain families and micro-communities and perhaps these are the promise of another kind of future. There are young people who are learning to farm by meeting with the elders who have clung to the hills all these years. Here we have ample public land, a forest, water, knowledge, and patterns of tenacity and cooperation humming in the background, ready to resurface in non-archaic forms. Is there anything left here that makes this place like Egypt? As one friend says, Egypt is here because we are trying to live with dignity, with access to the wealth that we produce, and with the right and ability to protect our communities in a way that ensures their futures.