

What I didn't say, what I wanted to say, what I probably should have said, (and what very few seemed to pick up on) was that P.G.S. was about how far an art audience is willing to be led.

We were not suggesting that every gallery had the responsibility to demonstrate high-mindedness all the time. Some gallerists are just dealers, plain and simple, and that's not a problem until they start pretending that they are something else. And there will always be people in the visual arts that are incapable of leadership, anyway. Small city art worlds are a huckster's paradise, rife with empty walls, clueless money, and make-believe hierarchies. And while no one wants these charlatans to lead anyone anywhere, there are those who take their audience's lack of sophistication about contemporary art as a license to steal. I always hear the same rationalizing, gallerists essentially apologizing for their shows and the subsequent diluting of their city's art life by blaming their clients. "I know it's terrible, but this is what they buy," they say, and the cycle continues. But how can a gallery be a slave to the taste of their patrons, when their patrons have no discernable taste? Visitors to art galleries extend a lot of credibility to galleries, and it's unfortunate when that is abused. If P.G.S. demonstrated that a fake gallery could convince hundreds of people to be physically assaulted in the name of an art experience, it seems safe to assume that a real gallery could persuade people to do something as painless as think about more relevant types of art than they might be used to.

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## ***TRANSLOCAL MOVEMENT ENERGY FROM THE UPPER MIDWEST***

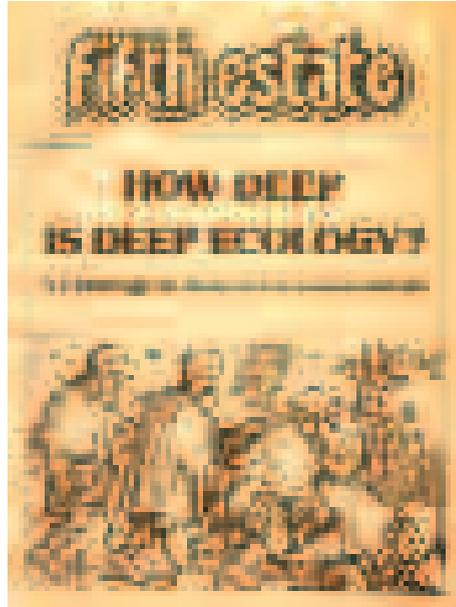
Dan S. Wang

### **Go (Mid) West, Young Man**

My political education was shaped in parts large and small by what I discovered in the local and state environments of my young adult life—first in the industrial and suburban worlds of Michigan where I grew up, and then later in a sojourn through the urban, northern, and southeastern parts of Minnesota, where I went to school and later lived independently for the first time. Directionally speaking, my story is classically American, moving from east to west, but with qualifiers. For one thing, it was a truncated westward movement. To wit, I moved from the *east* of the upper Midwest to the *west* of the upper Midwest. For another thing, as real as it was, my experience was the product of a social order that rewards wealthy families with the opportunity to provide their offspring with a purchased lifestyle as an education. In other words, from Michigan I headed west, to grow up if not with the country, then at least with my classmates at an elite college in Minnesota.

Like other children I was something of a blank slate, but maybe more so than most. My parents came to this country in the early sixties ready to shed their Oriental ways and be American, which to them meant adopting a fondness for cars, hot dogs, and Jerry Lewis. No church, no deep identification with place, too recent to have a family immigration mythology, no sophisticated understanding of American history—they were clearly the newcomers. Given the holes in their cultural programming and despite the love for hot dogs they bequeathed me, my parents housed me in a veritable pop culture vacuum. For a kid in central Michigan in the 1970s looking for clues to other worlds, the Alternative leaked through in the form of an enormous pot leaf drawn in black outline on the side a white cinder-block utility building next to the high school bleachers I walked past on my way to school everyday; the tough older kids, working class, who wore tight Levis and grimy Black Sabbath T-shirts on hot days; and the mysterious back room at the Rock-a-Rolla Records store, separated by a bead curtain and rumored to be where the dope was sold.

By the time I was packed off to a private school bastion of privilege in the leafy auto executive suburbs of Detroit, I was more than ready to take part in the Reagan-era pseudo-rebellions of my fellow dormitory deadheads. What I happened upon instead—or, rather, in addition to—were local nodes of radical politics and activism. I studied to *Nightcall*, a weekly talk radio show hosted by activist journalist Peter Werbe; devoured a Detroit publication called *Fifth Estate*, which had survived its colorful phase as a '60s underground paper and morphed into a dedicated project of antiauthoritarian inquiry; and followed in the newspapers a then-unfolding local crime story, proceedings against two laid-off white autoworkers who beat to death



Cover, *Fifth State*, Detroit, 1987

with baseball bats a young Chinese-American engineer, Vincent Chin, whom they took as Japanese and blamed for their unemployment.

Leaving Michigan for a bucolic college town on the prairie, in a car loaded down with clothes in laundry baskets and boxes of books and records, was a westward movement of a modest sort. Part of it was the distance. The places I lived in Michigan and Minnesota are only one long day's drive apart, separated by a single Great Lake and one medium-size state. And part of it was the comfort. Being received into a college meant that the experience would be predetermined to a degree. Still, beginning with the first time I paid for a pizza with a

personal check—a possibility unheard of anywhere in the Eastern Time Zone—I understood Minnesota was a different world, one where civic trust had not yet been irrevocably eroded, where homogeneity had its benefits, where scandal still held power, and where economic news was not all bad, all the time.

There were insurgent and progressive subcultures in Minnesota, and they drew my youthful and earnest attention. Having only my Michigan experience for comparison, I saw in Minnesota aesthetics, applications, and conditions of political struggle that were new to me. The more I learned, the more intriguing were the perceived parallels. For example, socialist Meridel Le Sueur wrote of the hardscrabble existence and appalling impoverishment of the farmers and mill workers of the northern plains and lake country, while contemporaneously in Detroit, Walter Reuther led the fight for the industrial unions by facing down the violence of Henry Ford's private security forces. I was surprised to find that the color line in Minnesota was indigenous/settler, as opposed to the prevailing black/white line of antagonism in Michigan. Ann Arbor holds a special place in the lore of the modern cooperative movement, but throughout Minnesota, natural foods co-ops thrived in practice and number like in no other place. When the documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* was screened on my campus nearly eight years after Chin was murdered, I saw in the audience a group I had never known in Michigan—a mix of Vietnamese, Hmong, and Korean adoptees, all identifying as Asian American.

Noticing and absorbing these kinds of differences gave me a vague consciousness concerning the question of political education in relation to milieu. I began to see that, on levels informing political possibility and imagination, what is around you matters. Over the years, in my mind this question splintered into a whole set of related problems. They include, just to name a few, how the place-specific elements of

a counterculture and political resistance mesh with the information and large-scale organizing potential delivered by the place-flattening mass media; how the constantly changing but always class-riven flows of people throughout a region both subvert and reinforce dominant features of place; and how to translate experiences particular to local occurrences and conditions for the benefit of potential comrades and fellow travelers in other places.

### Transnational Capitalism Meets Translocal Resistance

As humanity ever more aggressively pushes itself into a geoculture of monetized data and fossil-fueled growth, the movements of resistance and productive alternative reassert the indispensability of the local, but as *translocal*. That is, promising experiments in economic democracy, social justice, and environmental responsibility are rooted in particular places—a neighborhood, town, city, or county—but belong to more than one such place, and generate additional viability in the circulation between such places. Over the decade of the 1990s, various translocal subcultures and political movements, all resistant to the status quo, wove themselves together, sometimes loosely and sometimes tightly, forming a broad tide for which there is no single adequately descriptive name. This aggregate movement—a movement of movements, as it were—was only noticed by the corporate media on November 30, 1999, when world elites were faced with mass and militant demonstrations against the World Trade Organization in Seattle, an event referred to in short form as N30.<sup>1</sup>

After the windows of trendy retailers were smashed by radical elements during the protests, the corporate media pronounced the town of Eugene, Oregon, the incubator and exporter of politicized vandals, and a hotbed of ancient forest preservation activism; further, the noted anarcho-primitivist writer John Zerzan was known to reside there. Forest defense campaigns and the ideas of Zerzan, as part of a Pacific Northwest tapestry of radicalism, were undoubtedly important to a small segment of the throngs marching in Seattle. But I like to think of those campaigns and ideas as existing within translocal networks of exchange and mutual awareness. As a matter of fact, they link nicely to some of the nodes I found around me in Michigan and Minnesota.

It went something like this. For over a decade a good number of Zerzan's influential writings were first published in *Fifth Estate*, often accompanied by sympathetic but critical responses from the Detroit-based staff writers. Likewise, in the late 1980s an antiauthoritarian critique and intense follow-up debate over deep ecology, a branch of environmental philosophy that advances biocentric ethics and a radically enlarged sense of self, and its political incarnation as the radical environmental movement Earth First!, took place in the pages of *Fifth Estate*. That debate marked a turning point in the connection of city-based radicals—in this case, people who came to anti-technology positions from their experience in the urban environment of North

America's grittiest city, Detroit—to the subculture of militant American environmentalism, which first emerged as a phenomenon of the Southwest and Mountain West.

A string of developments links Minnesota phenomena with N30, putting episodes of local direct action in dialogue with local direct action elsewhere. It stretches back a full generation to the Bolt Weevils, an anonymous decentralized resistance that emerged in the late 1970s in rural Minnesota, so named for its achievement in shooting down glass insulators, cutting high-tension electrical lines, and most dramatically, toppling high-voltage transmission towers. The Bolt Weevils were the product of local discontent and a dysfunctional Minnesota political system that drove ordinary citizens to take extreme measures. But their story—meaning both the narrative *and* the tactics—was influential enough to be included in a conspicuous dedication in the book *Ecodefense*, first published in 1985 and an essential work for would-be eco-saboteurs.<sup>2</sup> The Earth First! movement itself migrated outward from the American West to many other places, including Britain. There, in the early 1990s, the Earth First! movement merged with anti-road campaigns, helping to spawn new activist subcultures like Reclaim the Streets. All of that would seem entirely remote but for the fact that the first militant urban anti-road campaign in the United States, whose obstructionist encampment was named the Minnehaha Free State, took place in south Minneapolis. The effort to preserve a natural area brought into complex cooperation a coalition of radical environmentalists and Native rights activists. In part inspired by the carnivalesque anti-road campaigns in the UK, the Minnehaha Free State blocked the state's Department of Transportation from rerouting a highway for over eighteen months by means of a series of illegal land occupations. This was only less than a year before Seattle, and was one of N30's most important precursors in North American activist circles.

Just these few links—and there are many more, going in all sorts of directions—demonstrate the functional networks that substantively inform and are informed by thought and action from different places. The whole of autonomously cultivated networks produce the interchange of inspiration, ideas, tactics, and people necessary for a global resistance of a new sort. Context and contingency dictate the limits of any initiative or project, radical or otherwise. But contingency, far from a narrowing of options, opens possibilities for the productive pooling of experiences among fellow travelers and parallel efforts.

### **Trans-Love Energies or, Fly Over at Your Peril**

For the past few years I have traveled around the upper Midwest with frequency enough to know that I live in a single territory, linked from east to west by the Great Lakes chain. I continue to look for inspiration and instruction in the constructive alternatives and campaigns of resistance that occur around my home, now writ large and including more than Michigan and Minnesota. Translocally speaking, more is

happening all the time. Food justice and responsible food production, prison reform and abolition, land rights and native claims—these are only some of the concerns around which creative action happens, and have me thinking about the positive possibilities, even (or maybe especially) as parts of the region teeter on the brink of an economic abyss.

As my own consciousness has grown and become more regional in orientation, my thoughts often return to the Vincent Chin slaying and its role in the subsequent raising of Asian American consciousness. Members of groups that had never identified with one another suddenly did. Common threat and common interest broke down walls that once seemed as natural as any other. The economic pressure of the times crossed with patterns of ethnic settlement, making way for acts of violence and injustice on the one hand, and the acceptance of shared identity on the other. And yet, the question nags: must we always wait for violence and travesties of justice to remake our consciousness? Today humans face conditions of economic and environmental duress that defy the old social categories. We are back to the universal threat of nuclear war, only this time with the additional revived threat of pandemic, water shortage, and the generalized crisis of a single world economic system. What would it mean to preempt with love, not simply (or only) to avoid the violence, but to remake our understanding of ourselves on a global level, as urgently as the Chin travesty affected Asian Americans? It might start with the admission that most every place has something to do with most every other, that the walls of state lines and social boundaries are neither false nor permanent, and that we often have family in other places but just don't know it yet.

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1. The sites of related mass-participation events both before and after Seattle, either demonstrations or constructive forums, read as a string binding the world together. The incomplete list: Chiapas, London, Quebec City, Porto Alegre, Genoa, Mumbai, Rostock.

2. The book was coedited by Dave Foreman, one of the cofounders of Earth First! and for a number of years, that movement's most public voice. Foreman and Haywood, eds., *Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching*, 2nd edition (Tucson: Ned Ludd Books, 1987).