

# Dispatches from The Institute of Incoherent Geography

Volume I



FlugSchriften 

**DISPATCHES FROM THE INSTITUTE OF INCOHERENT  
GEOGRAPHY**

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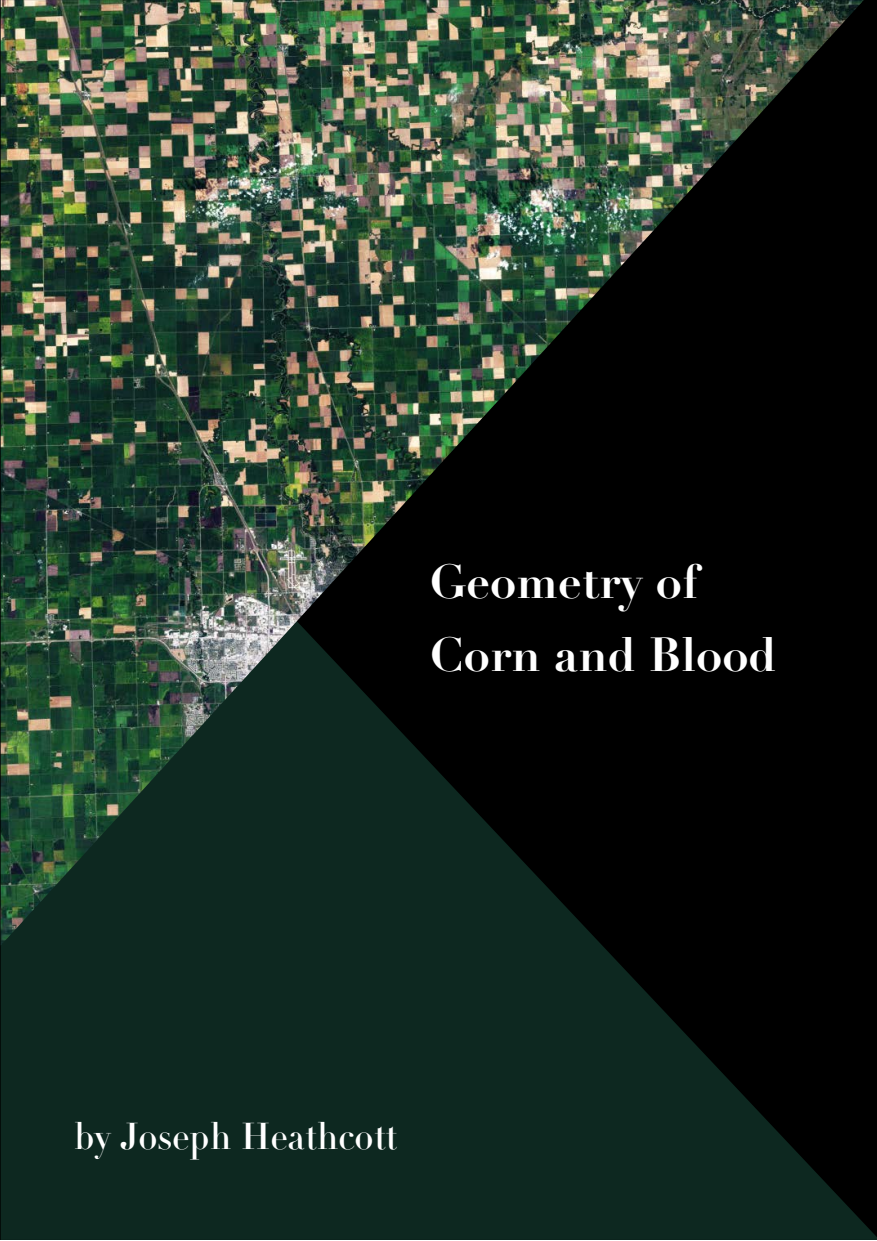
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## Geometry of Corn and Blood

by Joseph Heathcott

9.

As soon as you leave the town behind you find yourself in the corn. Endless rows of Indiana corn. Roads drop to two lanes, intersecting at right angles along regular intervals. If you drive slowly, you catch the glint of sun on the bent leaves, the sway of tassels in the breeze, and the celluloid husks of precious grain hidden in the shadows. If you hit the accelerator, the stalks fly by, merging into a green blur beyond the car window.

Once in a while the corn recedes and an intersection opens up to reveal a grain silo or a feedlot or a gas station or a depot. Sometimes there is a sign to tell you that you are still on County Road 350E or Rural Route 600N. Now and then you slow down to obey the yellow-orange circle that warns of a rail crossing ahead. Occasionally a sign commands you to stop, the bright red octagon standing out against the wall of dark green stalks and leaves. Often there isn't a sign or an opening in sight. Just the asphalt and the corn.

Lost in the expanse, you might be forgiven for taking this monotonous landscape as an earthly purgatory, entered but never exited, a repetitious module laid down in endless iteration, stretching to an always-receding horizon. You feel like you could drive through it forever. But in fact, as you move through this weird Midwestern scene, you are traversing the warp and weft of Enlightenment geography, grounded in ideas and empires forged centuries ago and thousands of miles distant. You are in the Township Grid, a place at once delirious and dread, magical and mundane.

I grew up in this world. This is not to say I lived on a farm; I was a townie born and bred. But it was a town where the corn and the parking lot fought a



continual low-grade battle for supremacy at the margins; I could see the seasonal changes in the fields from my high school. And in a north-south border town like Evansville, the rural and the urban are deeply entwined. Most residents are just one or two generations removed from rural tenancy; many of us returned to places of origin for family gatherings and picnics and cemetery visits. As kids we ate rural foods, spoke with rural accents, listened to rural music. We sat in the cabs of beat up old pickup trucks, breathing in a mix of leaded gas fumes and atrazine and pig shit, watching the corn stalks whir by as we headed to visit Aunt Mary out past Boonville, or to clear the weeds around great-grandma Edna's tombstone. We brought the country into the city and the city into the country.

The Continental Congress established the Township Grid with the passage of the Land Ordinance Act of 1785. In lieu of the power of taxation, the newly formed U.S. government turned to its most abundant resource – land – as a source of income. Spearheaded by architect Thomas Jefferson and approved by former surveyor-turned-solider George Washington, the Land Ordinance codified mathematical methods of property division to apply on a continental scale. Drunk on Enlightenment precepts distilled by Voltaire, Descartes, and Rousseau, and leisured through the enslavement of African people, these gentlemen planters imagined a future where orthogonality provided the basis for civic virtue and moral rectitude.

Of course, this vast expanse was already inhabited by a wide range of indigenous societies, with varied ways of conceiving territory, forging confederations, dwelling on the land, loving and hating each other, and relating to the natural

world around them. However, secure in the notion that God had conferred favor upon them, European colonizers regarded this world as theirs to possess. The extension of the Township Grid, that exemplar of rational Enlightenment thought projected into continental space, would in fact be purchased with blood. Rivers of blood. Through a network of military outposts and the waging of continual warfare, settler colonialists laundered their imperial expansion through the spectral cry of Manifest Destiny. Slaughter, displacement, and subjugation are as much a part of the grid as latitude and longitude.

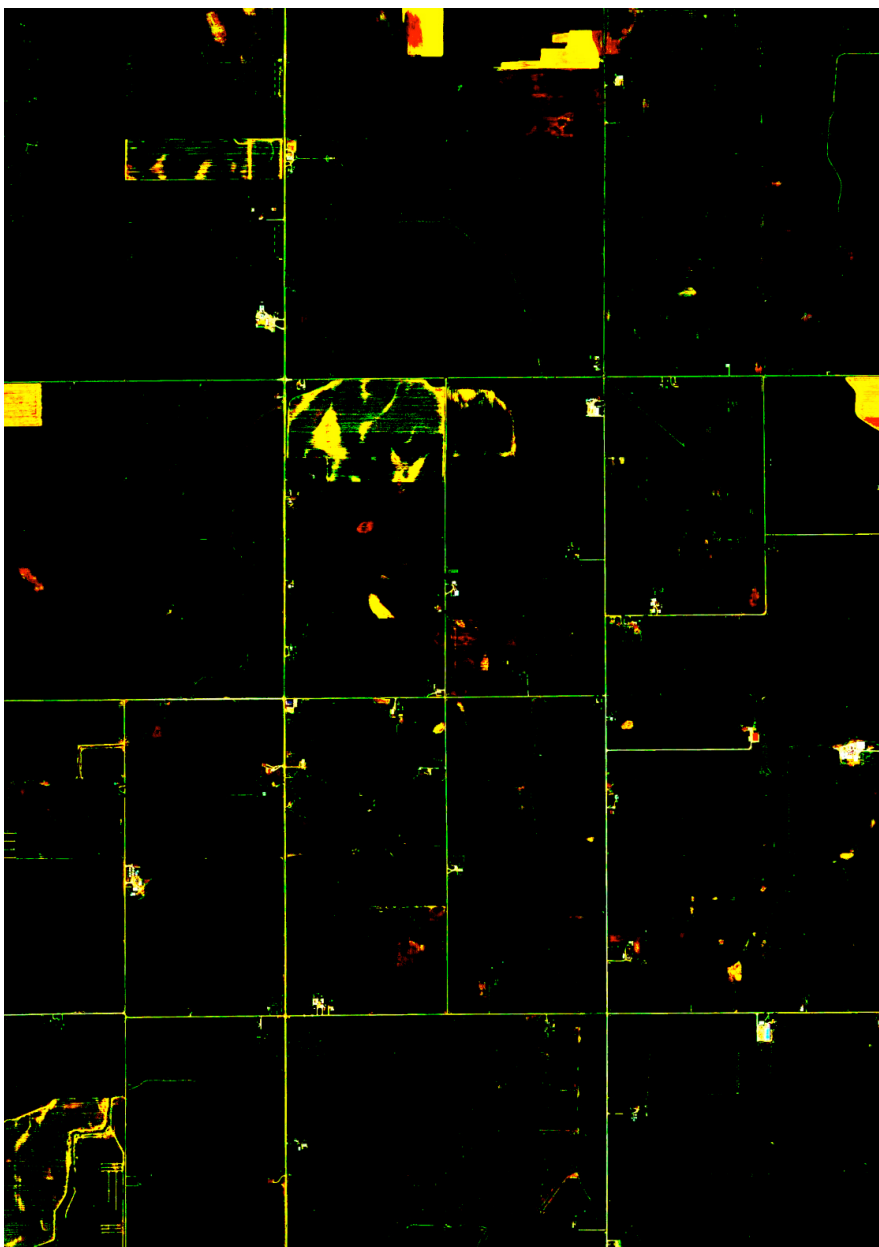
The Land Ordinance stipulated that every county in the trans-Allegheny West would be divided into townships, with each township measuring 36 square miles. Each of these 36 squares could then be subdivided into sections, half-sections, quarter-sections, and so on. This subdivision routine mapped onto a variety of affective geographies, applying as much to the standard 160-acre farm as to the mile-named roads of Detroit, the principal longitudinal line of Meridian Street in Indianapolis, or the Chicago blocks bounded by North, Kedzie, California, and Division--aka Humboldt Park. The "40 acres and a mule" once held out as compensation to formerly enslaved people (and subsequently retracted by federal legislation) was in fact a "sixteenth section" of the grid. The once ubiquitous 60' x 125' urban lot is 1/3,717th of a township section, which is 1/36th of a township.

As a marvelous abstraction, the crystalline geometries of the Ordinance grid subsumed rural and urban landscapes under a common spatial regime. Whether in town or country, the grid abjured the messiness and incoherence of the natural

world, with its intricate web of relations binding together plant and animal communities amid streams, hillocks, sumps, crags, fissures, caves, soil profiles, rock forms, and watersheds. It facilitated the conversion of landscape into property and its subdivision into units to be deeded and traded through markets. Of course, such a settled order could not tolerate ungovernable bodies and flows, and so the long-established migratory and hunting movements of native peoples had to be disrupted, their bodies and minds destroyed or relocated in an unfathomable paroxysm of violence.

This was no mere territorial dispute; it was a struggle over *episteme*. The extension of the grid mooted indigenous knowledge of terrain, geology, plant and animal life. Division of land into property led to the systematic eradication of native landforms, such as the mounds constructed by Mississippian cultures. As new property owners cleared the land for agriculture, they destroyed the rich forest and riparian habitats that had long nourished Native people. They also degraded and fragmented the burial sites, trails, and other touchstones of indigenous memory long present in the landscape. Gridding, flattening, and clearing also facilitated the eventual transformation of agriculture into a fully industrial proposition, where land functions as a cipher within a system of accumulation, open to vertical integration, corporatization, and commodity form.

To be sure, the logic of the Ordinance grid proved a tremendous engine for rural development and agricultural production over the last two centuries, enabling the creation of immense wealth and alimentary abundance. But it also laid the foundations for the very excesses that bind such landscapes into cycles



of boom and bust: financial panic, mortgage distress, unstable commodity pricing, drought, infestation, soil depletion, pollution, and long-term climatic and ecological impact. The agricultural grid of the Midwest may be a machine for making money, but this machine is economically and ecologically fragile, and would cease to function without constant federal priming and management of externalities.

Meanwhile, the same grid also facilitated the making of that quintessential space of loneliness, the American farm. I've wandered through many agricultural landscapes in the world, and have never encountered anything as forlorn as the American farm. In France, I've lingered in rural areas where the farmers cluster together along village roads, their fields extending back in narrow bands separated by low stone walls. In Kenya's smallholder farming regions, I've walked from *shamba* to *shamba* along dirt paths, through undulating terrain thickly interspersed with trees, kitchen gardens, houses, yards, cattle pens, chicken coups, and an occasional shop. The flower farms of Xochimilco in the far south of Mexico City grow in the *chinampas* – a landscape reclaimed from an ancient lake, composed of a series of small, narrow, human-made islands intersected by a complex network of canals.

But the massive square dimensions of Midwest American farms set neighbors at great distances from one another, each homestead pinioned near the center of their property. Single-species commodity crops stretch out from the house and barn as far as the eye can see. Now and then there's a great oak in the front yard, the one tree spared the axe in the days of clearing. Maybe a tire swing

hangs from a branch, blown gently to and fro in the breeze. Nobody plays in the tire swing because children leave and don't return. Today the average age of a farmer in the U.S. is 58 and climbing. Comforting images of wholesome farm families bustling amid scenes of barn raisings and turkey dinners and domestic harmony belie the hardscrabble loneliness and isolation of this life.

So is this a coherent or an incoherent landscape? Really, it is both, and neither, and it changes depending on how you look at it. After all, while terms like coherent and incoherent seem luminous and empirical, they really tell us more about the observer than the thing observed. Rather than conferring fixed meanings onto objects and spaces, the use of the terms signals a particular view, nearly always in tension with other views, where meanings are emergent, unfinished, contested, roiling and fugitive. Things that seem incoherent to an outsider may be perfectly legible to those on the inside. And things that seem coherent to an outsider might be experienced as bewildering and fragmentary by those who dwell there from day to day.

Forged out of the raiment of the Ordinance grid, the rural Midwest is just such a place. It is a grand spatial imaginary, a holograph of Enlightenment ideals, a maze, a cipher, a crop of corn, a quilt soaked in blood. One might say that it is simultaneously the most coherent and incoherent landscape on the planet.

