



Mapping Justice with Letter Press Printing: The Bold Type Work of Amos Kennedy

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Introduction to the work of Amos Kennedy

In 2008, a documentary film was made about letterpress printer Amos Paul Kennedy. The film's title, *Proceed and Be Bold*, is a reference not only to Kennedy's style of letterpress work but also to his commitment of emboldening issues of social, political, economic, and racial inequalities across multiple geographies in twenty-first century America.

Kennedy's chosen medium, the letterpress, has a long history of activism. Letter presses early on printed handbills, political flyers, manifestos, pamphlets, and other materials meant for fast and accessible uptake by marginalized communities with few resources at their disposal. They also printed newspapers and books, which means that the letterpress has, for hundreds of years, been at the



centre of making knowledge accessible to broad groups of peoples. The multi-sized and weathered wood type Kennedy prints with is the same basic technology-principle of Johannes Guttenberg (of the Guttenberg Press) from the mid-15th century, a technology that transformed to circulate messages to peoples and places beyond the elite.

The wood carved letters Kennedy inks up might be decades old, transferring a cracked and chipped materiality to the letters that compose the statements he prints. The typeface itself, then, conveys both a kind of raw urgency, an immediate need for attention, in conjunction with a deep sense of history and narration. The font's grain, its structure and visual presence, channels an insistence of mass production: a viewer can almost feel a press moving at a lumbering and weighty speed, churning out timely messages for mass uptake.

Much of Kennedy's work centers on letter press posters printed on chipboard, a rough pulp-based poster-paper that looks and feels a lot like cheap cardboard. Chipboard emanates a kind of laboring mass-production, an anti-fine-art material with industrial-grade (as opposed to gallery-grade) roots and references. The inked wood type impresses the paper grounding in ways antithetical to high-end printing: in printing envisioned as perfect, the typeface 'kissed' the paper as delicately as possible, never leaving an indent (embossing) or a scratch. Kennedy's letterpress work intentionally breaks the surface of the paper, mashing and hammering forcefully onto and into the chipboard ground with which he works. The letters leave impressions, materially marking the message he is commutating. He is not shying away from the truth that words break, they have the force to tear and scar.

Kennedy does not, in other words, adhere to the customs of what would have been, despite its anti-elitist efforts, a White and colonial technology. Instead, he cracks and breaks convention, coupling the physicality of the craft with the messaging he is conveying. Quiet vernacular invocations by Rosa Parks that feel incidental but, filtered through history and conveyed with the authority of Kennedy's printed word, become profoundly affecting. Calls of anti-racist labour activist Robert "Fighting Bob" LaFollette whose words, when smashed against maps and geographies in which he struggled, become visual and literary geographies with intense resonance in Trump's America.

The geographic echo of Kennedy's prints is evident in the audacious roughhewn sanserif fonts and words emboldened across everyday road maps of Wisconsin, the kind that before Google Maps became ubiquitous you would find in ordinary and everyday highway gas stations, maps you would unfold from accordion shapes in the front seat of your vehicle. Across these maps are massive letterpress rendered quotes by LaFollette: "There never was a higher call to greater service than in this protracted fight for social justice". LaFollette called for an end to American imperialism in Latin America, a lessening of corporation and government relationship, more protection of civil liberties, a referendum before a

president could declare war, and government support of capital infrastructures like roads and railways.

The letterpress work of Kennedy is socially, politically and racially charged in great part because, as a Detroit-based Black American, he is using readily available content and materials and is repackaging statements of the past to highlight the enduring violences and inequities facing all but a very select few in the United States of America. Kennedy is interested in stirring up controversy: he quit his job as a corporate analyst with AT&T to produce industrial printing for the masses; he refuses the moniker ‘artist’ and instead places his work within a letterpress printing ‘plant,’ underscoring his commitment to the industrial and, as he puts it, “putting messages in the hands of the people.”

Curators with New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) observe “Kennedy memorializes and venerates the individuals who sacrificed their lives in the fight against racial segregation, disenfranchisement, and economic inequality in this country.”¹ Printing on maps provides another layer of content to Kennedy’s work— a juxtaposition in which the map contextualizes the words while, simultaneously, the words (re)contextualize the map.

Kennedy’s works work through layering, through producing an underlying palimpsest of context in which text and image, map and word, place and ideal, all become elements building on one another in efforts to destabilize –to break the surface of– comfortable readings of taken for granted mapped histories and geographies.

*Links to each print in higher resolution are below

¹ <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3650?locale=en>

PEOPLE DIED FOR YOUR RIGHT TO VOTE

JIMMIE LEE JACKSON

BEATEN AND SHOT TO DEATH

MARION, ALABAMA

ON 26 FEBRUARY 1965.

FIGHTING FOR YOUR RIGHT TO VOTE!

Alabama Department of Transportation

Alabama Two-Year Colleges

Alabama's Natural Resources

SOMEONE DIED FOR YOUR RIGHT TO VOTE

JONATHAN MYRICK DANIELS

SHOT TO DEATH

HAYNEVILLE, ALABAMA

ON 20 AUGUST 1965.

FIGHTING FOR YOUR RIGHT TO VOTE!

[LINK]

SOMEONE DIED FOR YOUR RIGHT TO VOTE

REV. JAMES REEB BEATEN TO DEATH SELMA, ALABAMA ON 11 MARCH 1965. FIGHTING FOR YOUR RIGHT TO VOTE!

Alabama
Official 2007-2008 Highway Map

Alabama Two Year Colleges

Alabama Historical Site Program

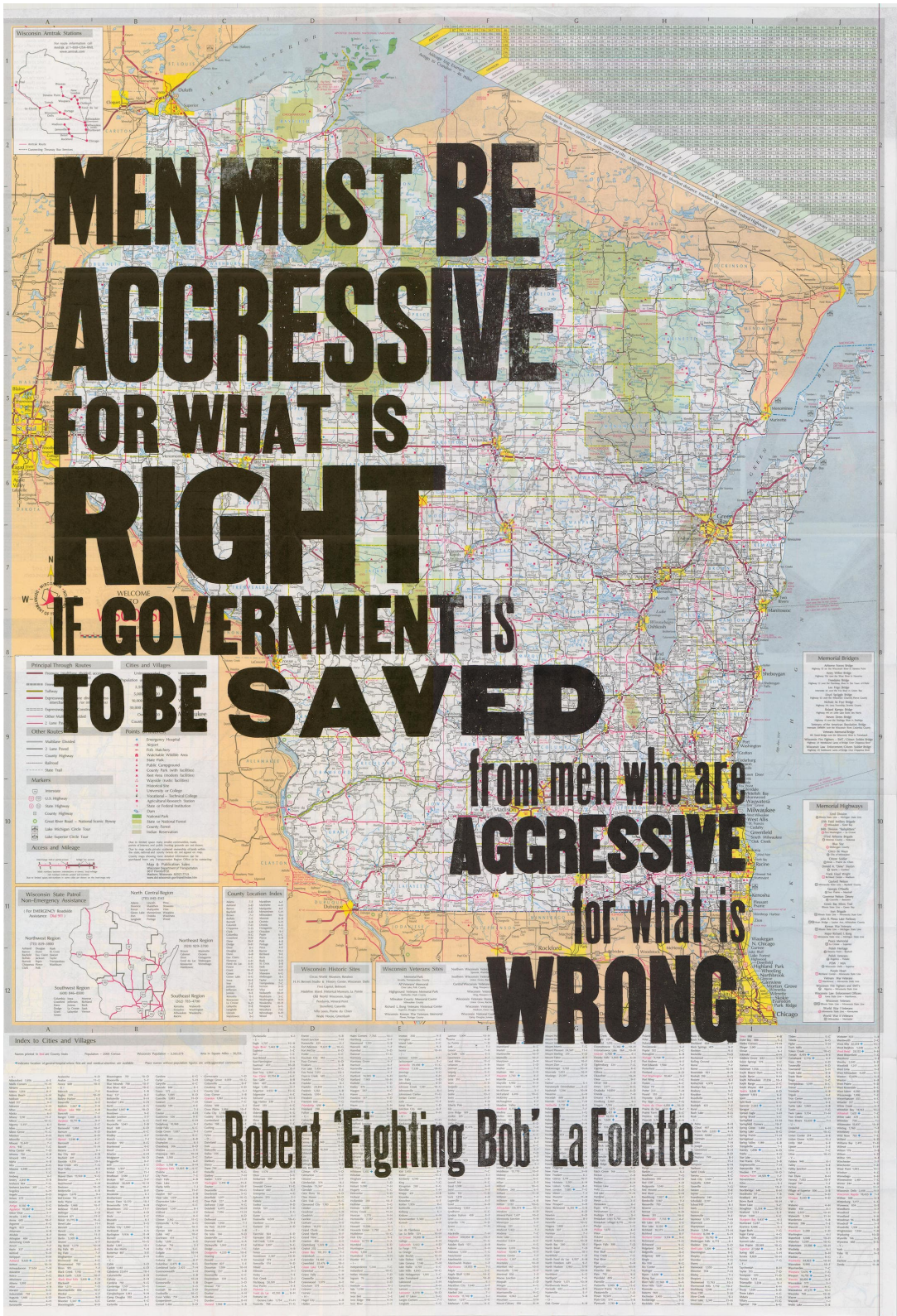
Emergency and Weather-Related Expressions VMS Rules

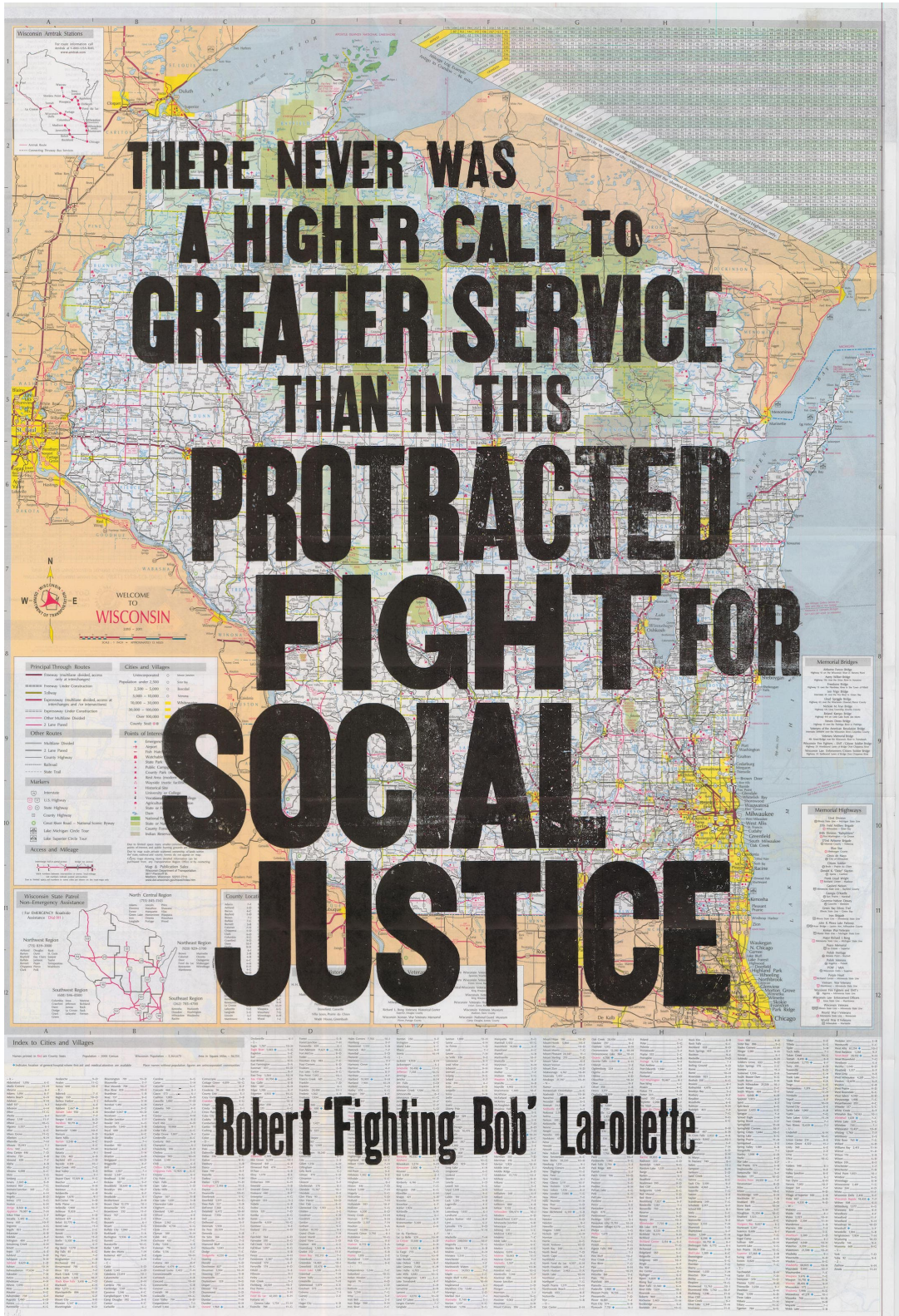
Covered Bridges in Alabama

Index of Locations

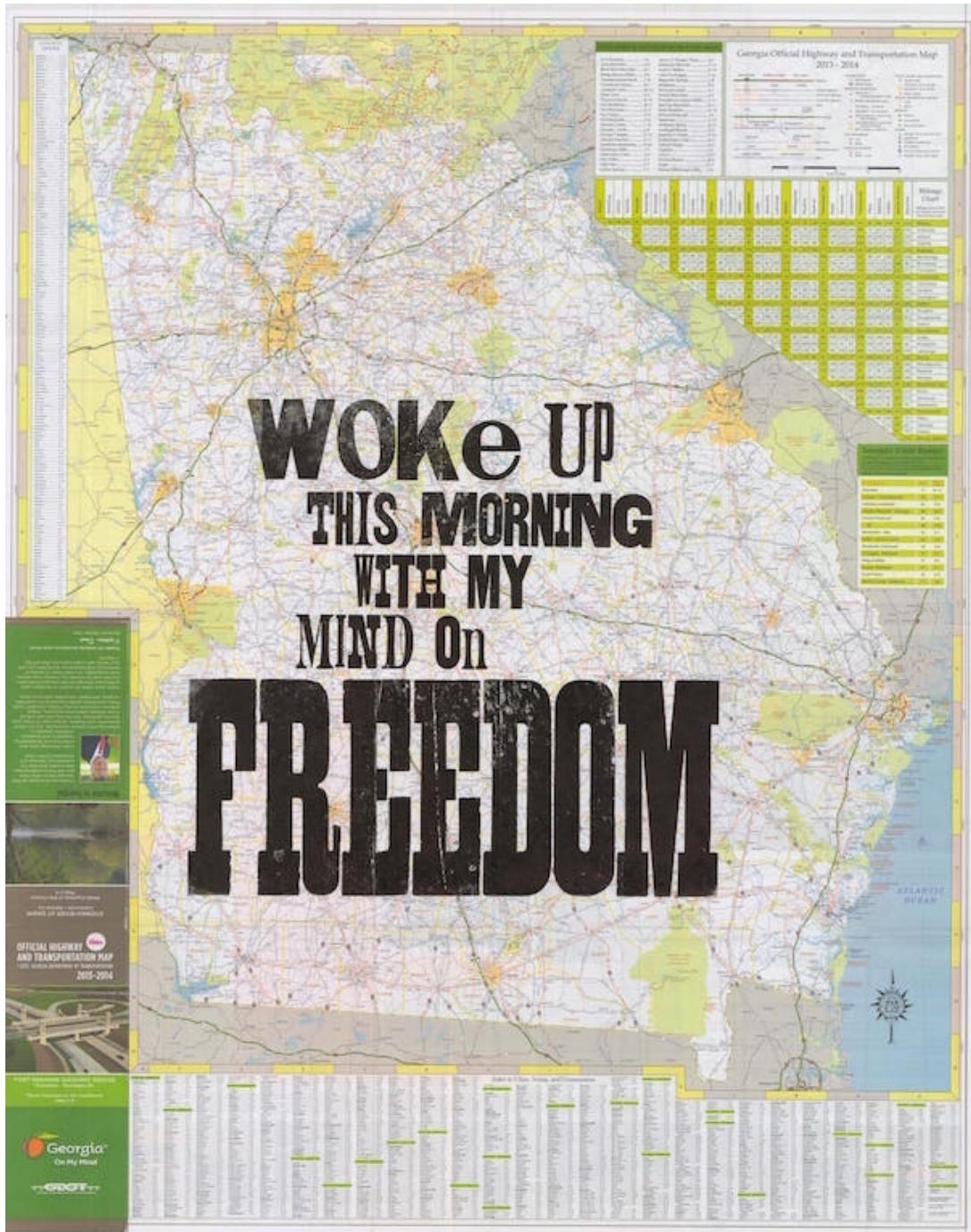
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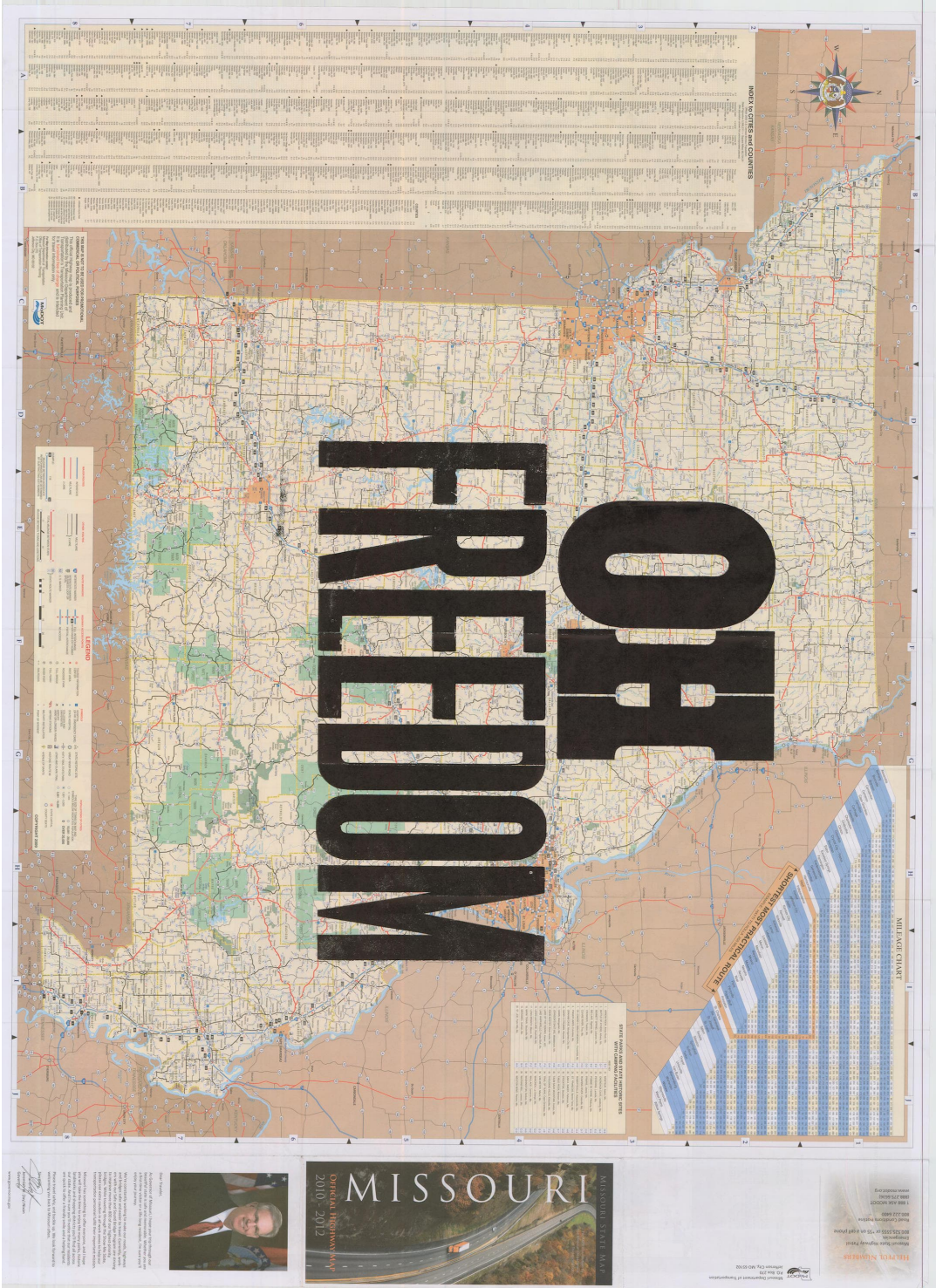




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