BIOREGIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Gary Snyder

"The Region is the elsewhere of civilization." — Max Cafard

The little nations of the past lived within territories that conformed to some set of natural criteria. The culture areas of the major native groups of North America overlapped, as one would expect, almost exactly with broadly defined major bioregions as A.L. Kroeber noted in *Cultural and Natural Areas of North America* (1947). That older human experience of a fluid, indistinct, but genuine home region, was gradually replaced—across Eurasia—by the arbitrary and often violently imposed boundaries of emerging national states. These imposed borders sometimes cut across biotic areas and ethnic zones alike. Inhabitants lost ecological knowledge and community solidarity. In the old ways, the flora and fauna and landforms are also *part of the culture*. The world of culture and nature, which is actual, is almost a shadow world now, and the insubstantial world of political jurisdictions and rarefied economies is what passes for reality. We live in a backwards time. We can regain some small sense of that old membership by discovering the original lineaments of our land, and steering—at least in the home territory, and in mind—by those rather than the borders of arbitrary nations, states and counties.

Regions are "interpenetrating bodies in semi-simultaneous spaces" (Max Cafard, "The Surre(gion)alist Manifesto," *Mesechabe*, Autumn, 1989). Biota, watersheds, landforms, elevations, are just a few of the facets that regions are defined by. Culture areas, in the same way, have subsets such as dialects, religions, sorts of arrow-release, types of tools, myth-motifs, musical scales, art-styles. One sort of regional outline would be floristic. The Coastal Douglas fir, as the definitive tree of the Pacific northwest, is an example. (I knew it intimately as a boy growing up on a farm between Lake Washington and Puget Sound. The local people, the Snohomish, called it *Lukta tciyats*, "wide needles.") Its northern limit is around the Skeena River in British Columbia. It is found west of the crest through Washington, Oregon, and northern California. The southern coastal limit of Douglas fir is about the same as that of salmon, which do not run south of the Big Sur River. Inland it grows down the west slope of the Sierra as far south as the north fork of the San Joaquin River. That describes the boundary of a larger natural region that runs across three states and one international border.

The presence of this tree signifies a rainfall and a temperature range, and will indicate what your agriculture might be, how steep the pitch of the roof, what raincoats you'd need. You don't have to know such details to get by in the modern cities of Portland or Bellingham. But if you do know what is taught by plants and weather, you are more in on the gossip and can truly feel more at home. The sum of a field's forces becomes what we call very loosely the "spirit of the place." To know the spirit of a place is to realize that you are a part of a part and that the whole is made of parts, each of which is whole. You start with the part you are whole in.

As quixotic as these ideas may seem, they have a reservoir of strength and possibility behind them. The spring of 1984, a month after equinox, Gary Holthaus and I drove down from Anchorage to Haines, Alaska. We went around the upper edge of the basin of the Copper River, skirted some tributaries of the Yukon, and went over Haines summit. It was White and Black spruce taiga all the way, still frozen up. Dropping down from the pass to saltwater at Chilkat inlet we were immediately

in forests of large Sitka spruce, skunk cabbage poking out in the swamps; it was spring. That's a bioregional border leap. I was honored the next day by an invitation to Raven House, to have coffee with Austin Hammond and a circle of other Tlingit elders, and to hear some long and deeply entwined discourses on the responsibilities of people to their places. As we looked out his front window to hanging glaciers on the peaks beyond the saltwater, Hammond spoke of empires and civilizations in metaphors of glaciers. He described how great alien forces—industrial civilization in this case—advance and retreat, and how settled people can wait it out.

Sometime in the mid-seventies at a conference of Native American leaders and activists in Bozeman, Montana, I heard a Crow elder say something similar. "You know I think if people stay somewhere long enough—even white people—the spirits will begin to speak to them. It's the power of the spirits coming up from the land. The spirits and the old powers aren't lost, they just need people to be around long enough and the spirits will begin to influence them."

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Bioregional awareness teaches us in *specific* ways. It is not enough to just "love nature" or to want to "be in harmony with Gaia." Our relation to the natural world takes place in a *place*, and it must be grounded in information and experience. For example, "real people" have an easy familiarity with the local plants. This is so unexceptional a kind of knowledge that everyone in Europe, Asia, and Africa used to take it for granted. Many contemporary Americans don't even *know* that they don't "know the plants," which is indeed a measure of alienation. Knowing a bit about the flora, we could enjoy questions like: where do Alaska and Mexico meet? It would be somewhere on the north coast of California, where Canada Jay and Sitka Spruce lace together with manzanita and Blue oak.

But instead of "northern California" let's call it Shasta Bioregion. The present state of California (the old Alta California territory) falls into at least three natural divisions, and the northern third looks, as the Douglas fir example shows, well to the north. The boundaries of this northern third would roughly run from the Klamath-Rogue River divide south to the San Francisco bay, and up the delta where the Sacramento and the San Joaquin Rivers join. The line would then go east to the Sierra Crest, and take that as a distinct border and follow it north to Susanville. The watershed divide then angles broadly northeastward along the edge of the Modoc Plateau to the Warner Range and Goose Lake.

East of the divide is the Great Basin, north of Shasta is the Cascadia/Columbia region, and then farther north is what we call Ish river country, which is the drainages of Puget Sound and the Straits of Georgia. Why should we do this kind of visualization? Again I will say: it prepares us to begin to be at home in this landscape. There are tens of millions of people in North America who were physically born here but who are not actually living here intellectually, imaginatively, or morally. Native Americans, to be sure, have a prior claim to the term native. But as they love this land they will welcome the conversion of the millions of immigrant psyches into fellow "native Americans." For the non-Native American to become at home on this continent, he or she must be *born again* in this hemisphere, on this continent, properly called Turtle Island.

That is to say, we must consciously fully accept and recognize that this is where we live, and grasp the fact that our descendants will be here for millenia to come. Then we must honor this land's great antiquity—its wildness—learn it—defend it—and work to hand it on to the children (of all beings) of the future with its biodiversity and health intact. Europe or Africa or Asia will then be seen as the place our ancestors came from, places we might want to know about and to visit, but not "home." Home, deeply, spiritually, must be here. Calling this place "America" is to name it after a stranger. "Turtle Island" is the name given to this continent by Native Americans based on creation mythology. The United States, Canada, Mexico, are passing political entities; they have their legitimacies to be sure, but they will lose their mandate if they continue to abuse the land. "The

State is destroyed, but the mountains and rivers remain."

But this work is not just for the newcomers of the western hemisphere, Australia, Africa, or Siberia, a worldwide purification of mind is called for—the exercise of seeing the surface of the planet for what it is—by nature. With this kind of consciousness, people turn up at hearings and in front of trucks and bulldozers to defend the land or trees. Showing solidarity with a region! What an odd idea at first. Bioregionalism is the entry of place into the dialectic of history. Also we might say that there are "classes" that have so far been overlooked—the animals, rivers, rocks, and grasses—now entering history.

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These ideas provoke predictable and usually uninformed reactions. People fear the small society and the critique of the state. It is difficult to see, when one has been raised under it, that it is the state itself which is inherently greedy, de- stabilizing, entropic, disorderly, and illegitimate. Cities cite parochialism, regional strife, "unacceptable" expressions of cultural diversity, and so forth. Our philosophies, world religions, and histories are biased towards uniformity, universality, and centralization—in a word, the ideology of monotheism. Certainly under specific conditions neighboring groups have wrangled for centuries—interminable memories and hostilities cooking away like radioactive waste; it's still at work in the Middle East. The ongoing ethnic and political miseries of parts of Europe and the Middle East sometimes go back as far as the Roman Empire. This is not something that can be attributed to the combativeness of "human nature" per se. Prior to the expansion of early empires, the occasional strife of tribes and natural nations was almost familial. With the rise of the state the scale of the destructiveness and malevolence of warfare makes a huge leap.

In the times when people did not have much accumulated surplus, there was no big temptation to move in on other regions. I'll give an example from my own part of the world (I describe my location as: on the western slope of the northern Sierra Nevada, in the Yuba River watershed, north of the south Fork at the 3,000 foot elevation, in a community of Black oak, Incense cedar, Madrone, Douglas fir, and Ponderosa pine). The west slope of the Sierra Nevada has winter rain and snowfall, with a different set of plants from the dry east slope. In pre-white times, the Native people living across the range had little temptation to venture over, because their skills were specific to their own area, and they could go hungry in an unfamiliar biome. It takes a long education to know the edible plants, where to find them, and how to prepare them. So the Washo of the Sierra east side traded their pine nuts and obsidian for the acorns, yew bows, and abalone shells of the Miwuk and Maidu to the west. The two sides met and camped together for weeks in the summer Sierra meadows, their joint commons. (Dedicated raiding cultures, "barbarians," evolve as a response to nearby civilizations and their riches. Genghis Khan, at an audience in his yurt near lake Baikal, was reported to have said, "Heaven is exasperated with the decadence and luxury of China.")

There are numerous examples of relatively peaceful small-culture coexistence all over the world. There have always been multi- lingual persons peacefully trading and travelling across large areas. Differences were often eased by shared spiritual perspectives or ceremonial institutions, and the multitude of myths and tales that cross language barriers. What about the deep divisions caused by religion? It must be said that most religious exclusiveness is the odd specialty of the Judaeo- Christian/Islamic faith, which is a recent and (overall) minority development in the world. Asian religion, and the whole world of folk religion, animism and shamanism, appreciates or at least tolerates diversity. (It seems that the really serious cultural disputes are caused by different tastes in food. When I was chokersetting in Eastern Oregon one of my crew was a Wasco man whose wife was a Chehalis women from the west side. He told me that when they got in fights she would call him a "goddamn grasshopper eater" and he'd shout back "fisheater!")

People already sense, in some way, that they live in geographic regions comprising natural systems, of water, air and land. Now they are becoming aware of them, and seeing if we are overstressing these systems and rhythms. At the scale of the bioregion, people can understand the flow of natural systems, whereas at the global, or national, levels, the mind boggles. The systems are so varied, the climates so different. But the bioregion is something that people *do* understand.

So you have the region, and that's the right scale; and you have the sense of systems, that's the right philosophy. If you put the two of them together, you get ecological consciousness.

— **Kirkpatrick Sale**, *from an interview in* **The New Catalyst**, *Spring 1987.*

Cultural pluralism and multi-lingualism is the planetary norm. We seek the balance between cosmopolitan pluralism and deep local consciousness. We are asking how the whole human race can regain self-determination in place, after centuries of having been disenfranchised by hierarchy and/or centralized power. Do not confuse this exercise with "nationalism" which is exactly the opposite, the imposter, the puppet of the State, the grinning ghost of the lost community.

So this is one sort of start. The bioregional movement is not just a rural program, it is as much for the restoration of urban neighborhood life and the greening of the cities. All of us are fluently moving in multiple realms that include irrigation districts, solid-waste management jurisdictions, long distance area code zones and such. Planet Drum Foundation, based in the Bay Area, works with many other local groups for the regeneration of the city as a living place, with projects like the identification and restoration of urban creeks. There are groups worldwide working with third and fourth world people revisualizing territories and playfully finding appropriate names for their newly-realized old regions. Three continental bioregional congresses have been held on Turtle Island.

As sure as impermanence, the nations of the world will eventually be more sensitively defined, and the lineaments of the blue earth will begin to re-shape the politics. The requirements of sustainable economies, ecologically sensitive agriculture, strong and vivid community life, wild habitat—and the second law of thermodynamics—all lead this way. I also realize that right now this is a kind of theater as much as it is ecological politics. Not just street theater, but visionary mountain, field, and stream theater. As Jim Dodge says, "The chances of bioregionalism succeeding...are beside the point. If one person, or a few, or a community of people, live more fulfilling lives from bioregional practice, then it's successful." May it all speed the further deconstruction of the superpowers.

"Regional politics do not take place in Washington, Moscow, and other *seats of power*. Regional power does not *sit*; it flows everywhere. Through watersheds and bloodstreams. Through nervous systems and food chains. The regions are everywhere and nowhere. We are all illegals. We are natives and we are restless. We have no country; we live in the country. We are off the Inter-State. The Region is against the Regime—any Regime. Regions are anarchic." (Cafard)

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