Beavers, Firs, Salmon, and Falling Water: Pacific Northwest Regionalism and the Environment

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The idea of the Pacific Northwest as region has long been associated with two related phenomena: geographical isolation and natural wealth. The descriptions have changed over time, for isolation and natural wealth have been strikingly affected by historical events, but they nonetheless seem to have maintained an importance that until very recently has been the typology for understanding the Pacific Northwest. Isolation might be translated here into distance from the metropolis and lucrative markets or into an absence of efficient transportation for goods and people. Natural wealth might be defined as the part of the environment that human communities — both resident and alien — have coveted for material gain. It is the second of these characteristics that is the subject of this essay.

The idea of region is contested terrain. At once assumed to be the antithesis of national commonality and the affirmation of the peculiarities of local place, region is measured in ways as important and diverse as language dialect, architecture, cuisine, and even jokes. More important perhaps, as David Wrobel and Michael Steiner recently advised, the idea of region in the West is dynamic. It is an idea “in a constant state of flux,” in which chronology is fundamental. When a region is called “region” is as important as what geography it encompasses. Referring to the Pacific Northwest as a place and region meant different things in 1850, 1880, 1930,
and 1950. Its scope is different, and what the term includes in physiographic and cultural elements is different. In Donald Meinig’s magisterial *The Shaping of America*, the Pacific Northwest in 1850 is a slivered “domain” set near the river in the lower Willamette Valley, remote from the metropolis and hardly the essence of a region as we might understand it today. Yet, in this “Oregon Country,” as Bill Robbins has explained, the newly settled population stood on the crest of a “great divide” of significant ecological change that would soon begin to characterize the place as a region. There was shape to this region, if only in its potential and in the transformative power of subsequent events.2

A century later, in 1948, maps produced by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers presented a dramatically different portrait of the region. The Pacific Northwest looks like a developed metropolis of engineered connections across thousands of square miles, including transportation, communication, and alterations to the landform — the kind of depiction that seems to contradict geography. The flux of change from the Oregon Country in 1850 and the engineers’ Northwest in 1950 is evident in new and increased population, new relationships between humans and the environment they inhabit, and new constructions of place through economic and political mediation. The difference a century made in the definition of region is not surprising, but what should we make of it? This is where we face the most dynamic aspect of change in the definition of region: the role of perception and the assignment of meaning.3

A profound connection between geography and history is embedded in the questions posed about the definition of region. The subjects and perspectives of historical studies change over time, but their most important focus is the study of human actions and perceptions. Without human creativity as a point of focus, philosopher of history Leonard Guelke argues, historical inquiry loses its unique characteristic. Human perception and the meanings people have ascribed to their perceptions is the heart of the historical enterprise. In R.G. Collingwood’s terms, “all history is the history of thought,” and that enormous tent of inquiry includes, as Guelke explains, “human use and habitation of the earth as a function of human thought.”4

Cultural geographers probe this realm, even as they caution us that the construction of place and region are highly contingent and relational. In short, what we call region and place are constructs that describe, as geographer Robert David Sack puts it, relationships among “forces, perspectives, place and space, and self.” Grand Coulee Dam, for instance,
Begun in 1933, Grand Coulee Dam in central Washington went on line in 1941 and immediately became the largest producer of hydroelectricity in North America. At 550 feet high, the dam cut off all salmon migration to the upper Columbia.

would qualify as a place because of its physical action on the Columbia River, its popular image as a great engineering achievement, and the effect it has on the individual. The relationships among these elements, Sack argues, defines what Grand Coulee is as a place and provides the basis for understanding it as a part of a larger area we designate as region. Sack’s calculus helps, because it reminds us that places — and thereby regions — are never defined by one characteristic or element. It also raises more contingent questions. Do forces, perspectives, place, or self dominate in defining place and region? Is it the Columbia River backed up behind Grand Coulee, the complexity of the engineered dam, or the personal experience at the spot that rules our understanding? What difference does

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it make if our fathers worked to build the dam or if we arrived ten years ago as farm workers from Sonora, Mexico? Cultural geographer E.V. Walter provides some help here. What he calls “topistic reality” defines a place as an amalgam of sensory perceptions, moral judgments, passions, ideas, and geographic orientations.

. . . a place is a location of experience. It evokes and organizes memories, images, feelings, sentiments, meanings, and the work of imagination. The feelings of a place are indeed the mental projections of individuals, but they come from collective experience and they do not happen anywhere else. They belong to the place.5

These categorical guidelines on describing and explaining place and region are helpful, but we are still left with what many would call an ethereal, perhaps even a gossamer, set of parameters. John Findlay’s recent critique of Pacific Northwest regional identity in Wrobel and Steiner’s Many Wests collection of essays is a good place to continue this discussion, because it asks some pertinent questions. It is also an opportunity to apply some of the geographers’ analytical tools to the subjects of region and environment.

Findlay calls into question the Pacific Northwest as the “place of the salmon” by labeling it a “fishy proposition.” He has several reasons for questioning the validity of salmon as a regional icon, but his most telling point is his comment on the orientation of the interpreter of region. The Pacific Northwest, Findlay argues, is defined more by the people and groups from outside the region than by Northwest residents. He writes:

The Pacific Northwest has generally not been a place people come from; it has been neither a major source for internal migration within the United States nor a significant cultural hearth. Rather, it has been a destination to which other Americans have gone. This fact looms large for explaining regional identity.6

Migrants to the Pacific Northwest, Findlay maintains, came with ideas about the region already “imprinted” through booster propaganda and other advertisements characterizing the natural and fecund qualities of the place. In short, the Northwest’s regional identity — especially the iconographic representation of the region as the “place of salmon” — fails the legitimacy test, as Findlay sees it, because it is not indigenous.

A survey of hyperbolic descriptions of the Willamette Valley during the great mid-nineteenth-century rush to Oregon, of late-nineteenth-century railroad blandishments on the region’s opportunities in agriculture, fishing, timber, and other natural resource economies, of the beckoning language in recruiting brochures for high-tech industries in Boise, Portland,
Bellevue, Redmond, and Bend make Findlay’s point. The Pacific Northwest has long been promoted — to borrow Ernest Callenbach’s phrase — as “Ecotopia,” regardless of the era. But applying E.V. Walter’s earlier quoted explanation that the identifications of place “come from the collective experience and they do not happen anywhere else,” we might ask — and not rhetorically — where else might such descriptions of a fecund, natural, and intrinsically ecological region that listed its icons as beavers, firs, salmon, and falling waters be placed? What I am suggesting is that Findlay is only half-right about the origins and maintenance of regional identity and that his dismissal of an essentialist argument — that Pacific Northwest regional identity arises from the place itself — is not borne out in the relationships between residents of the region and their environment. In short, Pacific Northwest regional identity is part of the social ecology of the place, and it grows out of and is nurtured by the environment.

The dynamic relationship between people and environment over time leaves telling imprints. No idea of place or experience of place exists beyond this relationship, just as no idea of place is any more free of its temporal setting than it is free of its geographical setting. The interaction between human activity and environment, as geographers Donald Parkes and Nigel Thrift argue, happens continuously, but our idea of place is specific and feels solid and grounded. “Place,” Parkes and Thrift maintain, is “time made visible.” Yet our full understanding of place is cumulative, as poet Wendell Berry and ecologist Wes Jackson have insisted. The power of place is in its deep representation of people on the land, layer upon layer of those grounded understandings that are like historical snapshots. So it is that Grand Coulee is understood from many descriptions and representations through time, from its nascent beginnings in human labor and poured concrete to its promise voiced in Woody Guthrie’s songs and even to its decimation of salmon runs and inundation of Indian places. In search of the reality of region, we must recognize how we have understood the making of places in the past. 7

We should begin our review of the origins of regional identity with the recognition, as anthropologist Richard Daugherty explains in his contribution to Alvin Josephy’s America in 1492, that the Pacific Northwest populations at the time of the Columbian contact with the “New World” were “People of the Salmon.” From the Tlingit on the Northwest Coast to the Nez Perce and interior Salish on the Columbia Plateau, Daugherty
argues, the connective cultural commonalities related to a prime environmental resource: salmonid fisheries. There were enormous differences among tribal groups in the region, but Daugherty and anthropologist Eugene Hunn argue persuasively that in technology, spiritual life, social organization, and artistic expression the centrality of salmon is difficult to miss. In Hunn’s studies of mid-Columbia River groups, the list of sacred foods included more flora than fauna, but salmon stood as “the single food item that is foremost in their thoughts” because of its spiritual significance, its dietary importance, and its power as a metaphor for the complexity of living in the salmon’s environment.8

If geographers are correct about the composition of place, then indigenous people in the Pacific Northwest may have lived out a truly profound sense of regional identity. They lived in what we should understand as an enchanted environment, one that had meaning embedded in interrelationships between humans and the non-human world that included cohabitation with spiritual forces and beings. Specific places lived in the names people gave them, names that functioned in practical rather than abstract ways. They signified, as Hunn puts it, “where things happened,” as contrasted with European place names that function as cartographic markers. Among the Colville and Yakama, for example, the names of riverplaces carried descriptions of salmon’s history on the river and the role Coyote played in bringing fish to the people. At the great Columbia River fishing location — Celilo Falls — names described places where specific families fished from rock ledges and where they later built scaffolds. In what was an enchanted landscape, the identification of the environment and place fused spirit with work, family, history, and social duties. This is a powerful component of an indigenous regional identity.9

Using Robert David Sack’s interpretive guide, it is clear that regional identity in the indigenous Northwest powerfully integrated “forces, perspectives, place and space, and self.” The forces emanated from fishing for salmon, the seasonal rhythms of movement, and the physical power of the river. Cultural perspectives on human purpose and the meaning of the environment were inherent in this enchanted world, where there was no separation of the sustaining flesh of salmon from its spirituality. The relationship of place and space for the “People of the Salmon” focused on the great fishing locations, such as Celilo Falls and Kettle Falls on the Columbia, on the rivers in Puget Sound, and on the Fraser, Okanagan, and Snake rivers. At some of these locations, thousands of people gathered to trade and thereby made connections between places local and distant, the es-
For millennia, Celilo Falls on the lower Columbia River was an economic, cultural, and social place for Native fishers such as those shown here in April 1954.

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During the early nineteenth century, beavers became the target of Euro-Americans’ first extractive economy on the Columbia River.

sence of the linkage between place and space.Digging out the function of self in the indigenous world is difficult, because the cultures were dominantly communal and collective, but vision quests and places that exuded power mixed with sacredness to put individuals in palpable contact with place in significant ways. Tony Garcia of the Nez Perce people described the relationship clearly and powerfully: “I can’t remember historically of ever hearing of a time when the Nez Perce were hungry. The Creator gave them an abundance in this land that perhaps people in other places didn’t have.” The identity of place and the meaning of region in the indigenous Northwest, I would argue, are resident in the environment in profound ways.

The emblem of the region, when the outside world first learned about the Pacific Northwest, came directly from the enchanted environment that so powerfully mediated the world for indigenous people; but regional identity for Europeans and Americans focused on a disenchancing image, one epitomized in the power of exchange. Sea otters and later beavers made the region synonymous with aggressive exploitation of the environment and exorbitant gain. Nearly all historians who have analyzed the maritime and land-based fur trade in the Pacific Northwest emphasize the
relatively single-minded character of the enterprise. As a basis for regional identity, trading for furs is narrow and limited, but it incorporates larger ideas and social mechanisms. It is colonial and imported. As such, it offers a viewpoint on region that is in social conflict with indigenous culture, that diminishes tribal people and represents a distant and absentee force that seeks power and control over the landscape. Cole Harris argues, for example, that the Hudson’s Bay Company melded the commodification of nature with the regulation of time, the construction of work, and the predictability of commercial production. The HBC transformed space in the Pacific Northwest by enclosing landscapes behind post stockades, marking out trade corridors, and extending their sphere of control through brigade incursions that penetrated the entire Columbia River Basin.11

During the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth, the Pacific Northwest carried a mixed identity for outsiders. For HBC and other trading enterprises, the region was a productive source of gain where resources abounded, Natives were tractable, or the land was open for settlement and use. For land-hungry and enterprising American settlers, the environment — as Bob Bunting has explained — offered an Edenic locale for capitalistic development. Although entrepreneurs capitalized on wheat farming, stock-raising, and fishing, timber became the iconographic natural resource economy, a symbol of the region’s environmental wealth. The largest of the timber capitalists to invade the region — Weyerhaeuser — is perhaps the best known symbol of the possessive capture of a distinctive regional landscape. In northern Idaho and in the Washington and Oregon Cascades, Weyerhaeuser and other timber companies brought a powerful transformative perspective to the region that, in Bunting’s words, “culturally and ecologically altered [the] landscape [and] recast life for everyone in the Pacific Northwest.”12

The iconographic geography that the timber industry created — what Robert Michael Pyle calls “The Sack of the Woods” — is a mixture of technologies and perspectives from earlier timber regions and engagement in the Pacific Northwest. The forces inherent in timber economies created new places in northern Idaho’s white pine forest, central Oregon’s ponderosa cutting fields, and the Cascade and Coast ranges’ great fir and spruce conifer stands. Timber towns, river log drives, millponds, and teepee burners became Pacific Northwest symbols. The work of logging and milling created a relationship between place and space through the environmental market that made big nature into big money. In Norman Clark’s Everett, Keith Petersen’s Potlatch, and Bill Robbins’s Coos Bay, no one mistook the region’s identity. It came from the forest, met the saw in the mill, and

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moved out by ship, rail, and truck. The same might be said for fishing towns on the Columbia, in Puget Sound, and along the Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia coasts. There is not one regional icon but several, among them beavers, firs, salmon, and falling water. Regional identity can be particularistic and collective, resonant with an individual or a group. What is significant in the construction of regional identity in the Pacific Northwest is its consistent environmental content, regardless of the era.

In the late twentieth century, the dominant environmental force and identity in the Pacific Northwest was falling water, especially as manifested in the massive generative power and the regional environmental alteration created by the Columbia River Basin’s 250 major hydroelectric dams. Richard White has argued effectively that the “Columbia River dams made the Pacific Northwest a region.” In “making the region,” White means that the dams created a new economic and social reality that literally powered the Northwest into a new era. He
also means that the Northwest would hew to a new vision that New Deal planners conferred on their projected alteration of the river. Specifically, it is Lewis Mumford’s vision of a new Northwest built environment — one with small industrial towns unlike the smokestack cities in the Northeast — that White characterizes as both Promethean and doomed to failure. The seeds of failure are embedded in the federalization of the Columbia, which White correctly marks as the face of a new regional identity. But what kind of identity was it and why did it fail?14

The engineered Columbia became the symbol of the region’s future, a new environmental image that emphasized the human alteration and even the control of nature. The power demands after World War II and the devastating floods in 1948 prompted the Corps of Engineers to speed up their aggressive dam-building program, which transformed the Columbia–Snake system into a gigantic manipulated riverine environment. Clarence Dill, the U.S. senator from Washington who had promoted the building of Grand Coulee, called the Columbia system “the future Eldorado of the Pacific Northwest.” By 1975, the river had become rationalized, its seasonal fluctuations flattened out to provide maximum hydroelectric benefits, and its reservoirs amenable to slackwater transportation to Lewiston, Idaho, making that inland city a potentially significant port.15 It was a brave new world that promised benefits to everyone in the region and parity with other regions in the nation, but with an ironic twist. At last, the historic isolation of the Pacific Northwest would be a blessing, because it would have low-cost electricity and a massive delivery system provided by the Bonneville Power Administration that was second to none in the world. It was an environment wondrously turned to the work of human progress, a region literally plugged into the river. In “Roll on Columbia,” Woody Guthrie wrote:

Now river you can ramble where the sun sets in the sea,
But while you’re rambling river you can do some work for me.16

Guthrie’s songs prosaically rendered the New Deal’s quasi-utopian, new Pacific Northwest identity. His and other hopeful expressions of a new world in the region rested on the combination of three of Robert David Sack’s calculations of place — forces, place and space, and perspective. Impounded and falling water in run-of-the-river dams and storage dams made environmental energy a dominant image of force. The Columbia’s generative power created connections of place and space between region

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and nation that resulted in immense economic and social consequences. An industrialized Pacific Northwest became a demographically different place, transforming, as Carl Abbott has explained, Seattle and Portland from “regional cities” to “national cities.” The Pacific Northwest became nationally known as an “ecotopia” and increasingly as a location of industrial and technological innovation founded on access to low-cost electricity and water.17

In many ways, by 1980 the Pacific Northwest as a region had arrived on the national stage as a recognized place. Its image was environmental,
even as it boasted its transmogrification of a great river. The seeds of failure in that revolutionary remaking of the Columbia became more and more difficult to ignore. More significant than the spotted owl controversy in Northwest forests, the decline of anadromous fish on the Columbia-Snake system and throughout the Pacific Northwest created a new image of the region, one that had dystopian shades and the suggestion of failure. The older images and regional identity associated with salmon crowding up the Columbia seemed to be in a fateful clinch with the brave new world identity of the electrified, technological “organic machine,” as Richard White calls the river. Salmon were again in the spotlight and iconic. And that brings us back to the Northwest as the “place of the salmon.” Although the region has changed dramatically since maritime traders and Lewis and Clark first described the Columbia River for the larger world, the centrality of salmon continues to get our attention in ways we cannot ignore.

Salmon have always been in the Pacific Northwest as a resource and as an object of cultural reference and reverence. There are no other contenders as an icon of the Pacific Northwest. There are none with salmon’s longevity. There are none that exist as both symbol and living reality. Salmon’s power resides in its interactive relationship with people in the Pacific Northwest. The “First Salmon” ceremony among river Indians is an example. Each year the first fish caught in the spring is treated with special care, cooked and eaten in ceremony, and its bones deposited in the earth. From the ritual killing of this first fish and the collection of its blood to its mid-river burial, the ceremony communicates the people’s respect for salmon and counts as insurance that a strong run would ensue and repeat itself in future years. The ceremony, as Nez Perce elder Horace Axtell explains, is a powerful connector of people to environment, an anointment of place:

In our family we had a feast of the first salmon, and the people would tell fishing stories or other stories. My Grandmother would bury the bones in the ground after the feast, which we were taught to do with a lot of things. It was a way of giving things back to Mother Earth.

Among non-Natives, salmon attracted great attention, but for mostly economic reasons. Still, the interaction was important and powerful, because it reflected efforts to conserve and even preserve salmon in the rivers, which documents the importance salmon had on the general population. State legislation in Oregon and Washington and ballot initiatives during
the first four decades of this century, for example, forced restrictions on fishing operations on the Columbia River. The restrictions applied mostly to fixed gear, such as fishwheels and traps, but they also set seasonal and territorial limits to fishing. Like other attempts to block overfishing, the regulations on the Columbia failed, even as these efforts underscore the importance salmon had to the general public.19

The effort to keep salmon plentiful in the region’s rivers has a long history. Early on — even before the certainty of diminishing runs was apparent — salmon canners promulgated hatcheries to artificially rescue a dwindling population. By the onset of federal dam-building, hatcheries had been in business more than fifty years and had become an acceptable means of maintaining salmon, even as engineers constructed salmon-killing dams.20 Since the listing of specific Snake River runs as endangered under the Endangered Species Act, saving salmon has become the region’s most dominating political issue. Millions of dollars have been expended to dodge an unthinkable fate — rivers without salmon in the Northwest. Political polling data document public support for the effort, making clear that these fish have a hold on people. In many ways, the fate of salmon is a living metaphor for a contended regionalism, as it is an example of how history, place, and the layers of meaning we have attached to this animal reflects our broader understanding of where we live. What happens to them matters, and their fate seems to be tied to humans in the region. Along with beavers, falling water, and firs, salmon represent the Pacific Northwest. In this place and in essentialist ways, Salmon R Us.

Notes


