

INTRODUCTION

I was delighted to be reminded recently of the fact that the roots of the word essay are French, *essayer*; to examine, to test, embark upon, attempt. In that light, this anthology itself may be seen as sort of an essay on the bioregion lying west of the continental divide, spanning from Cape Mendocino in the south to Mt. Logan in the north. An attempt to discover the cultural mores unique to Cascadia and create greater awareness of them in the bioregion for the express purpose of deepening the sense of place. Part of a cultural investigation by which we learn as we go about the place in which we live so that we may inhabit it as if we knew our lives and livelihoods were inextricably entwined with those of every other being. It is an attempt to resuscitate the poetry culture from the trance cast by the pop/consumer/industry-generated culture—an anti-culture which, as Edward Abbey understood, serves to consume everything, including the biosphere: “Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell.”

And this anthology is assembled with the assumption that it is the poetry outsiders who are forward-looking and have the best chance at deepening that cultural animation. The marginalized (for whatever reason) poets are the harshest critics of conventional wisdom in culture and in bioregional poetry culture; the best of them also serve the poet’s traditional function as prophet. This book’s organizing principles of what is open and outside, with subsets of what is experimental and challenging, are related to George Stanley’s proposition stated at the second Cascadia Poetry Festival in May 2014 in Seattle: that contemporary poetry faces the tyranny of the ironic; so making it new again means responding to the cultural situation in 2015, similar to the way Modernists responded to theirs circa 1912 and the Postmodernists in 1960 with the New American Poetry, and going deeper than the ironic. From the earlier Modernist push (and Ezra Pound) we get our title, slightly paraphrased, Make It True. As a person of Cuban descent, I also resonate with poet José Lezama Lima’s notion that “only the difficult is stimulating,” but difficulty is not easy to communicate and that which appears simple on the surface may have depths a quick reading or two may not reveal.

So bioregionalism, or the effort to reimagine ourselves and the places where we live in terms of ecology, sustainability and harmony with the natural systems, is a huge part of what guides us and what inspired the idea behind the creation of this book. It may be that we can be bioregionalists more easily here. Few places on earth are blessed with the same kind of mountains, volcanos, islands, fjords, waterfalls, hot springs, glaciers, thousands of miles of coastline, rain forests, ancient trees and other natural features. These features are easy to recognize as inspired creations well worth preserving, protecting and venerating, especially,

in George Bowering's words, "in this time of the easily awesome." Threats to basic survival are becoming quite real now that irreversible climate changes are beginning to manifest. The tenets of bioregionalism have gained traction in the forty-plus years since the term was coined, and it is simply a matter of time that we protect the biosphere bioregion by bioregion or face continued extinction, perhaps of the human species. The world of particulars, so well represented in the two previous poetry moments referenced above, begin to trump abstractions like flags and nations. We heed the prophecy of Tu Fu who saw that nations would be destroyed but mountains and rivers would remain. In fact we look to Asia more readily here in Cascadia than we'd look to Europe, as Kenneth Rexroth recognized seventy years ago, while we also take from traditional indigenous cultures the examples of how to best inhabit this place. At its core bioregionalism is about positive action, urban sustainability and restoring watersheds. Modern culture is so separated from the natural world, learning what our watersheds are in most urban areas would be progress.

Bioregionalism is also about opposition to the great corporate monoculture, Disney McWorld some would have it, as expressed in Jared Leising's poem *Keep Portland Weird*, while celebrating the vast wilderness expressed in Sarah de Leeuw's *Skeena*. In fact wilderness itself is an organizing principle of the book, as the editors are open and perhaps partial to the wilderness of the mind as expressed in many of the poems published here. See Lary Timewell's molecular hyperbole in which he suggests poetry is: "the mind already in the afterlife; : an Ipanema of toilsome derivatives; : retrograde expressions still smoking in the shadows; : hybrid music that can now no longer go nameless; : autobiography of the imagination, first draft" and even "a replicated marvel done in slightly more expensive crayons," among other wildly imaginative things.

In fact it is the wilderness of the mind that may need protecting most of all in our industry-generated-culture/gadget-addled society where Diane di Prima's warning that the only war that matters is the war against the imagination and that all other wars are subsumed in it is prophetic. Is the push to violence and the need to resolve conflict via violence a failure of the imagination? Surely. That and an inability to communicate, though, as with abstract expressionist painter Clyfford Still, "Demands for communication are presumptuous and irrelevant." The best art communicates with what it doesn't say, with what it implies and even with the field that it emits, transmission being an ancient way of getting knowledge from one party to another.

But in Cascadia there are other ways that engage and use the imagination, separate and distinct from other bioregions in North America, certainly. How the peaceful joint occupancy of San Juan Island for twelve years before it was decided that it (and several other nearby islands) were to be part of the US and not what would become Canada is a telling example of how the old ways

don't seem to work here as well. A war over the boundary dispute was avoided, and the gut hunch is that there is something about this place that creates an environment where a violent solution is untenable, or rare. Culturally, the San Juan Islands have always been part of Cascadia. Perhaps that aspect of this place is due to the Indigenous presence that had nowhere else to go once the settlers got to the West Coast. Perhaps it is because most of British Columbia (and therefore a huge percentage of Cascadia) was unceded by First Peoples. Maybe it is due to the geographical situation of being on the Pacific Rim and looking west to Asia and being closer to Asian culture than to European culture that is what sets Cascadia apart.

One clear way to begin to reinhabit is to practice of a mode of writing evocative of what Robin Blaser in his seminal essay called the "practice of outside." It is a method born here and still informing the best of Cascadia poets seeking to create a gesture that is from here and taps into forces that surely must still be here, resonances of cultures that once lived sustainably in this place. As Chief Seattle put it, *This place is swarming with the invisible dead of my tribe.*

The accessible Zen push of poets like Jim Dodge and Sam Hamill is included here. Dodge would prefer the phrase "tectonic existentialism." Those who believe there is liberation in learning the proper names for things. Hamill suggests: "When Master K'ung says, 'All wisdom is rooted in learning to call things (including ideas and emotions) by their right names,' the exactitude of a poet's work takes on a new dimension." There is also a generous sampling here of the legacy of the bioregion's most seminal poetry event, the 1963 Vancouver Poetry Conference. George Bowering, Daphne Marlatt, Fred Wah, Jamie Reid and Judith Copithorne are included, along with many poets inspired by their work and experiments. We have worked hard to get as wide a geographical diversity as possible, with poets from Alaska to Arcata, from Nanaimo to Missoula, with the understanding that this is a preliminary effort that will lead to the discovery of other bioregional poets who value the wilderness of the mind and are attempting to go, in Lissa Wolsak's words, more "deeply down their own throats." We included at least one expatriate, Lisa Robertson, who wrote: "I am very pleased to be perceived as Cascadian."

And we give credit to previous attempts to document poets from here, which were formalist in nature, or which preferred references to wilderness more than the wilderness of the mind to which we are partial, or insisted on using the term Pacific Northwest, a phrase which comes across as imperialistic, given that Vancouver and Victoria, two of the main cities in Cascadia, are in Southwest Canada, as George Bowering was happy to shout out from the seats of a panel during Cascadia II, for good reason. *Pacific Northwestern Spiritual Poetry, On Sacred Ground, Long Journey, Alive at the Center* and a recent Cascadia edition of *Manoa Journal* covered ground that we don't have

to cover. There are few poets common to both this book and those previous publications, though the influence of Sam Hamill and Judith Roche especially could not be ignored, influence being another organizing principle of the book.

ATTEMPTS AT AN ARTICULATION OF A BIOREGIONAL POETICS

One take on a bioregional poetics comes from extreme Southern Cascadia. We have endeavored to cast a wide net through networking rather than an open call, and south of Portland the pickings get a little slim. Jim Dodge, one of the long-time figures in the south, has also been part of the bioregional movement since nearly its inception. A lifetime of bioregional thinking and poetry practice resulted in this informal missive he sent with the understanding that he can't claim ownership of all the notions expressed and that ideas and influences "tend to run together":

Bioregional Poetics/Aesthetics: Some Tentative Tenets

1. The bioregional aesthetic is community-based, and yields completely to the central precept that community is not limited to the human, but includes all the flora and fauna, the core "cycles of sustenance" (like the water-cycle, or carbon-cycle), and the larger "figures of regulation" (geological forces like plate tectonics, solar income, air and oceanic currents, and other biospheric forces and phenomena). The overarching principle informing bioregional poetics is sometimes called the "biocentric" or "ecological" view, where life in all its forms and myriad relationships is central to all aesthetic considerations. This paradigm of existence is obviously and staunchly opposed to the prevailing viewpoints of the "anthropocentric" (human centered) or "egocentric" (centered on the individual human psyche, also known as a self). When fossil sea lilies were discovered near the peak of Mount Everest, we started calling bioregionalism "tectonic existentialism," and laughed at ourselves for having the temerity to call it anything.

2. The bioregion is the body of metaphor. To communicate, art requires a shared set of references, sources held in common. In constructing associations where you're trying to embody the ineffable (like love, say, or deep regard), the more familiar the vehicle, the finer the understanding. So if you say love is a bird, most people who have seen a bird sense the associations of bird: flight/freedom; nest/home-safety-nurture; song: joy/peace. Even more precise, of course, is to specify the bird (love is a falcon) or bird and activity (love is a falcon turning in a widening gyre). To communicate completely, it is most helpful to actually KNOW the referent,

to live it. (Love is a ruby-throated hummingbird fumbling the foxglove's flower-heads, the thrum of its wings reverberating in the throats of the pitcher plants along the boggy plains of the Smith River.) Maybe it's flogging the obvious, but the more a reader or viewer shares the creator's references, the higher the quality of communication. In that sense, all poetry is local. Or poetry is all locale.

3. The bioregion is the home of the vernacular. Bioregional poetics conceives of language as a living, wild system, and of poems as similarly dynamic systems of complex associations. Because bioregional poetics is virtually founded on the notion that the power, point, and animating purpose of poetry is high-quality communication, the poetics almost demands a commitment to the vernacular as the primary mode of expression. In the usual sense of "the vernacular," this means a commitment to the "everyday language of the people" as spoken or otherwise used in informal discourse and communication, as opposed to formal or official discourse. It embraces idiom, local locutions, and the common and ordinary style with the same fervor that it eschews the specialized and pretentious. Above all, the poetics values accessibility and inclusion; it wants to communicate with the community and to offer its connections and associations with clarity and grace, leading to understanding, appreciation, and communion.

4. Bioregional poetics serves to mediate human culture and ecosystems/bioregion/biosphere. It is a tool to explore relationships and associations in life as it is lived. Further, it extends individual identity to include "the sum of sustaining relationships"—everything from family genetics to the food one eats, including the modes of subsistence. Since the exploration is communal, bioregional poets and artists display a strong sense of community and cooperation and tend to minimize the scimmages of ego that mark so many literary movements. They hold to Jack Spicer's view that we are all working on the same poem, singing the same song, telling the same story, and that the primary responsibility of community artists is to do their part to the utmost of their abilities, to encourage the best in each other, and to let posterity decide—as it does anyway—who will be remembered. As Spicer admonishes in his "The Future of American Poetry II," citing his grandmother's advice, ". . .when you get in a fight with a dog turd, you only get shit on your fingers."

5. A bioregional poetics in no way supposes a closed, provincial aesthetics. On the contrary, the natural world teaches the importance of being eminently open to all influences, since diversity offers the greatest flexibility in the dance of adaptation, not to mention the surest footing on the Cliffs of Despair. If you live in the Pacific Northwest, for example, geographically you are part of the Pacific Rim configuration, and thus subject to the

influences of Japanese and Chinese philosophy and religion, the Hispanic and Latin American cultures on the southern borderlands, and American culture in general through mass media that are part and parcel of quickly evolving technologies. We have more information than we can know, and what knowledge we think we possess deserves a deeper reflection than time seems to allow. In an age where wisdom may well reside in believing nothing you hear and only half of what you see in the storm of electronic transmissions and babbling bloggers, watching the big maple on a nearby ridge bow to the wind may be information you can build a truth on. The old scout's adage holds particularly dear as we're bombarded with fuzzy claims and distant factoids: "The closer you get to the source, the less likely something has crapped upstream."

Some brief thoughts about Dodge's notes. That he sees bioregional poetics as "biocentric" rings true with me, regardless of the bioregion, but is especially resonant here and is also indicative of the greater appreciation/application of Asian wisdom cultures. I'd single out Hua-yen Buddhism, which has been described as the "interdependent origination of the universe," as a forerunner to the notions of bioregionalism and the biocentric approach. For me this also evokes Blaser's poetics and the notion of the practice of outside. The notion of responses to the Anthropocene also informs the work and activism of Stephen Collis. Collis was arrested and hit with a SLAPP lawsuit for trespassing in a park attempting to prevent Kinder Morgan's field studies to assess the feasibility of an underground tunnel for the last leg of its proposed Edmonton-to-Burnaby pipeline to transport oil from the tar sands project in Alberta. (A suit that was eventually dropped.) Were the biocentric model first in our consciousness, the tar sands project and fossil fuel projects like it would not even be considered, and people espousing it would likely get mental health care.

Dodge's twist on the local, suggesting "poetry is all locale," is a large part of the depth and lasting legacy of the TISH poetry movement in Canada, which was influenced by Olson, Duncan, Levertov and other US poets. Bowering is clear that one of his gleanings from these poets was to make the poetry local, to have it come out of place, which explains why TISH, in large part, did as much as any movement in Cascadia to foment a bioregional poetics. Marlatt also points out that how the poem is laid out on the page is related to locale. How a poet situates each line, or cluster of lines (stanzas) in relation to other lines, although the failure of e-books to properly represent field poetry is still an issue.

That bioregional poetics would employ the demotic and err on the side of inclusion are points I would agree on; the notions of accessibility and communication are points, at very least, I would question, as suggested by the Still quote above. The notion of composition by field assumes that meaning(s)

vary from reader to reader, and the effective capture and conveyance of the energy of events that inspired the poem are just as likely to affect the experience of the poem, if not more so, than any attempt at communicating a specific message. Olson called the poem written this way a “high energy construct.” Regardless, the argument about what a poem should communicate, if anything, is not limited to this bioregion, but inspiration from (or reaction to) Blaser, Duncan and Jack Spicer’s poetics continues to be the mainstream of the radical poetics from Cascadia.

Dodge’s notion of inspiration, ranging from “family genetics to the food one eats, including the modes of subsistence” is critical for many reasons: the depth of the force of personal mythology, the sympathy to projects that can be seen as aspects of bioregionalism—the 100 mile diet; craft beers; regional cuisines (have we mentioned kale yet?)—and do give us a road map away from the extraction economy that is part of the industrial model and the main force destroying the biosphere. This is particularly critical here, because the extraction model continues to wreak havoc (especially in rural Cascadia) and the biomass is less destroyed here than in most other bioregions in the industrial world.

As for Dodge’s last point, open is without question the main organizing aspect of this book. I use that term in the same sense Keats used the phrase “negative capability,” and there is pressure from each political (and social) pole to close things in, cut off debate, limit options and—in general—narrow the bandwidth. His use of the term diversity is also critical from the point of view that envisioned and edited this book, but the main emphasis is geographic diversity, with aesthetic, ethnic and gender diversity all following.

So while we love the notion of a gesture that transcends anthropocentrism, we see the wilderness of the mind as also beyond that. How that quality is recognized is up for discussion. We would also question what we’ve come to know as “accessibility.” One human’s precise clarity is another’s incoherence. Those reading the “inaccessible” poems in this book might find something in them that speaks to them beyond an ability to understand what exactly “they mean.”

In Northern Cascadia, as far as Prince George, where Barry McKinnon has been toiling for nearly that same time period, the notion he expresses comes out of a tradition in which accessibility is not as much the concern and the notion of subject is even less certain. In an essay he wrote about one of his poems:

The composing principle for *Arrhythmia*, and I hope all of my work, was in line with W.C. Williams’ dictum that each poem must sum up the poet’s life to that point. I wrote *Arrhythmia* daily with the sense that if I had anything more to say I’d better get at it. If the word “subject” is still in the post-modern lexicon, I believe the poet’s subject is time—and that language discloses the actualities therein. Emotion is the poem’s fact.

Farther south, Daphne Marlatt would suggest, again going back forty years previous to this writing, that her

first concern is with language, locus for event. That whatever “themes” exist are arrived at through language—recognized in that sense. Since whatever is known (expressible) is known in language, the poem becomes a way of recognizing or realizing the world, both inner & outer. What kind of ground we walk on, whose air we breathe. That the ecological principle in words forming one or many phrases runs whatever lies outside & forms also what we see—to say... Verse (free verse, laid out with spaces indicating pauses) locates.

This does not sound like a poetry that has accessibility as one of its prime directives. That is even less so with a poet like Lissa Wolsak who suggests:

~ Language carries with it a sense of its own descriptive inadequacy and is inspired, when cleavage between active speech and reception of speech merge into unity, however momentary...

while also understanding that “language exceeds speech.” Or as I said to Judith Roche about the kind of poetry we prefer, that it “says something without saying something.” That communicates without being didactic, or through a tone or, in general, a field.

How to merge the backpacking poet’s love of nature expressed through knowledge of the wilderness with the non-backpacker’s love of the mind’s wilderness and its unconventional (inaccessible? less accessible?) maneuvers? This is a simplification, perhaps, but the view here is closer to the center of the bioregion, albeit still closer to the coast than the exact center.

Ultimately the best of the poems herein have an exactness of naming and imagery, the light of the mind Diane di Prima recognized as “intellectus” along with the wildness of the mind Charles Olson would suggest was a use of speech at its “least careless and least logical.” They sing, or they baffle. They inspire and/or they reveal. They are among the best poets practicing here in this place today, as best we could gather as a starting point for discussion and for the effort to remember (or imagine) what it is to BE somewhere. To live here as if we again venerated this place and all its marvelous interconnected systems.

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