

# **Communities of reinhabitation : bioregionalism, biogeography, and the contemporary North American reflection on sustainability**

Autor(en): **Arnsperger, Christian**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature**

Band (Jahr): **35 (2017)**

PDF erstellt am: **30.06.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-737593>

## **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Inhalten der Zeitschriften. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern.

Die auf der Plattform e-periodica veröffentlichten Dokumente stehen für nicht-kommerzielle Zwecke in Lehre und Forschung sowie für die private Nutzung frei zur Verfügung. Einzelne Dateien oder Ausdrucke aus diesem Angebot können zusammen mit diesen Nutzungsbedingungen und den korrekten Herkunftsbezeichnungen weitergegeben werden.

Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Die systematische Speicherung von Teilen des elektronischen Angebots auf anderen Servern bedarf ebenfalls des schriftlichen Einverständnisses der Rechteinhaber.

## **Haftungsausschluss**

Alle Angaben erfolgen ohne Gewähr für Vollständigkeit oder Richtigkeit. Es wird keine Haftung übernommen für Schäden durch die Verwendung von Informationen aus diesem Online-Angebot oder durch das Fehlen von Informationen. Dies gilt auch für Inhalte Dritter, die über dieses Angebot zugänglich sind.

# Communities of Reinhabitation: Bioregionalism, Biogeography, and the Contemporary North American Reflection on Sustainability

Christian Arnsperger\*

The 1960s and 1970s saw the birth, in the United States and in particular in California, of a movement called bioregionalism. It was rooted in a both backward- and forward-looking ethic of “reinhabitation,” linked to the rediscovery of Native American perspectives on living within landscapes seen as coherent biomes – as opposed to the administrative borders inherited from Anglo-European colonization and land grabbing. Bioregionalism emerged in the wake of the countercultural contestation already begun by the hippie movement. It offered the possibility to rethink North America as a potentially more sustainable civilization venture anchored in what key authors in the movement called “applying for membership in a biotic community.” Community in America should have a cultural as well as a natural core, so the idea goes; humans should live in harmony with each other and with nonhuman species, in ecologically and biogeographically delineated areas experienced as “native life places.” This essay draws on the thoughts of key thinkers of the movement and uses California as a critical example, in order to argue that bioregionalism constitutes one of North America’s most in-depth theoretical and practical contributions to creating new foundations for a notion of community that is informed by the contemporary necessities of sustainability.

---

\* The author is grateful to the editors of this volume, Julia Straub and Lukas Etter, as well as to an anonymous referee for being of invaluable assistance in improving both the form and the argument of this article.

\*

Bioregionalism emerged in the United States in the 1960s as a worldview and movement rooted in a both backward- and forward-looking ecological ethic of “reinhabitation.” As this essay argues, comprehending bioregionalism is essential in order to understand how a notion of community based on ecological and biogeographical elements can make sense in modern North America. It serves as one crucial element forming the backdrop for many initiatives that have sprung up since the 1960s, such as alternative intentional communities (see e.g., Bernard and Young; Boal, Stone, Watts and Winslow; Campbell) or movements towards economic re-localization (see e.g., Shuman; Estill; Wicks). These initiatives will not, in themselves, be the object of this essay; rather, a general framework is offered here that will be useful in understanding how “biotic community-making” rooted in ancient remnants of a native “sense of place” has served, and continues to serve, as an important building block of many of these *community-based sustainability practices* in postwar North America.

### 1. Addressing North America’s “Un-sustainability”

At a time when both the civil rights movement and the Vietnam war were in full swing, generating levels of division and uncertainty unheard of in the postwar United States, a small collective of Californian countercultural activists – some of whom, like Peter Berg, had been key actors in the Summer of Love and the Diggers movement while others, like Gary Snyder, would go on to become highly influential poets – sought to explicitly connect community with local geography as well as biodiversity. It was an attempt at wresting the notion of community from the political conservatives as well as the religious communitarians by looking to land and landscape, as well as fauna, flora, and ancestral culture as the defining domains of American communities.

Appearing to take their cue from, among others, the *Port Huron Statement* published in 1962 by Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) (see Hayden), the collective I am speaking of espoused a radical critique of American imperialism, militarism, and capitalism, along with their combined catastrophic social, political, as well as environmental impacts. They used this critique to argue that US society needed to reinvent itself deeply through a rediscovery of its citizens’ lost connection to the soil and to the ecological web of life. Neither place nor landscape nor

nonhuman species were to be viewed as mere supports and “resources” for instrumentalization and objectification. Rather, reaching back to a partly historically accurate and partly mythologized Native American perspective on human settlement and ecology, this small countercultural group sought a concrete, workable, and spiritually attractive alternative to what they identified, already back then, as the key drivers of America’s lack of sustainability: the massive overextension of the US’s globe-spanning military and economic domination enterprise, the gigantism of many of its core institutions and of many of its major cities, and the resulting ecological destruction and tenacious blindness to social inequality and – to borrow the title of Rob Nixon’s recent book – to the “slow violence” being inflicted both on humans and on nonhuman species (see Nixon).

These countercultural thinkers and activists ultimately argued that the pathologies in question were rooted in a process of deep existential loss – namely, the loss of a *sense of inhabitation*. In the name of progress, growth, and the “American dream” of limitless material prosperity, the United States had gradually destroyed what had ensured the sustainability and endurance of most indigenous cultures on the American continent before the several waves of Spanish and Anglo invasion and occupation. The nation-state had fast become an entity of both internal and external predation. Just like older states such as France or Spain, the United States had attempted to homogenize local domestic cultures in the name of “nationhood.” Seeming to merely emulate older colonialist models such as Spain’s or England’s, the United States had also attempted to colonize and dominate foreign cultures in the name of “internationalization.”<sup>1</sup> Borders, so the argument went on, were political and, even more so, economic in nature. They were generated by the increasing abstraction brought about by the requirements of both internal and external extraction and production.

The task of critiquing capitalist abstraction was made somewhat more complex in the context of the 1960s civil rights movements. The Reconstruction and its reverberations all the way into the Jim Crow laws and the persistent racial segregation in US society had demonstrated the ability of American capitalism to integrate and metabolize the structural injustice bequeathed by conflicts of the antebellum period. Roughly a century after the end of the Civil War, the US was facing the fallout from never truly having dealt with the “original sins” of how its economy, its political system, and its cultural values emerged out of a racist

---

<sup>1</sup> On these aspects of “nationhood” and “internationalization,” see e.g., Lopez.



and militaristic sacralization of materialism and imperialism (see Baptist; Beckert and Rockman).

The hippie movement, for all its multiple facets, fundamentally saw itself as the polar opposite of such a retrograde worldview, and promoted an ethic that sought to overturn and transcend it (see Miller). Therefore, merely reaching back to inherited historical and political post-1865 categories in order to promote “localism” and “rootedness” would have been unthinkable for those who sought to combine civil rights, anti-capitalism, the liberation of sexuality and the broadening of consciousness with a critique of what American culture had become. The racist and colonial “good old times” needed to be overturned and transcended – and in this case this meant looking back, in a creative and forward-looking way, to *even older* “times” when it had been neither racist segregation nor extractive greed that would drive the American people’s community-building. Part of this was rethinking who the “American people” were in the first place.

## 2. The “Old Ways”: Seeking Timeless Wisdom

Much has been said and written about how influential the partial blurring of boundaries between white Anglos and African Americans was in giving birth to the counterculture of the 1960s. Less has been said and written until now about how the allure of what Gary Snyder called “the Old Ways” of the original Native American settlers impacted the whole back-to-the-land movement, the communes movement of the 1960s, and especially the rediscovery of landscapes, biotopes, basins, and watersheds as relevant entities of a form of “natural,” and therefore simple and peaceful, existence within self-contained, non-imperialistic, regional entities.

In a striking book entitled *Tribe*, the contemporary cultural and political critic Sebastian Junger has documented how, at the very heart of the brutal destruction of Native American nations and tribes in the mid-nineteenth century, there lay a paradoxical denial of the sheer fascination that tribal belonging and the “Indians [who] lived communally in mobile or semi-permanent encampments that were more or less run by consensus and broadly egalitarian” (1-2) exercised on Anglo “settlers.” What surprised and infuriated early anti-Indian propagandists was that quite a number of new settlers chose to join Native American tribes and live with them permanently (and were mostly welcome to do so) whereas not a single native willingly espoused the “modern” way of life

imported from Britain and continental Europe. Early on in the colonization process, quite a few new “settlers,” so Junger argues, developed a deep attraction of Native American community-building and the associated ways of inhabiting the land.

A century later, quite a number of hippies sided with the Native Americans both existentially and politically – a fraternization which was treated with scorn by those who coined the derogative term “red hippie.” One case in point was Jake and Susanne Page’s detailed account, published in the early 1980s, of how they were invited by the Hopi Indians in the mid-1970s and sought, as journalists and photographers but also as “children” of the 1960s, to understand and document in a meticulous but fundamentally positive light the Hopi way of living and seeing the world (see Page and Page). A certain naïve idealization of Native American ways of life by ecologically-minded Americans has occasionally been pointed out and criticized (see e.g., Krech). With or without idealization, it is clear that what was perceived as Native American gentleness, nobility, frugality, and cosmocentrism played a central role in shaping the rules of certain hippie communes, their views of the world, and even their habitats (see e.g., Bosk). The Indians were admired and also envied by the average white bourgeois kid of the mid-1960s – much like the enthusiastic cultural appropriation of African American culture in 1960s white-dominated popular culture. And much like what occurred in the case of African Americans, the cause of Native Americans was espoused by a large number of young people (both white and black) who rightly pointed to the oppression of the Native American nations alongside that of slaves from the African continent. Even before the full extent of the actual “parallel” enslavement of the Indians was rigorously documented (see e.g., Reséndez), the “Red Power” movement had gained adherents in many strata of American progressivism (see Smith).

There was clearly a political dimension to all this, but just as clearly a cultural and ecological one. In fact, the two were not completely distinct even though emphases differed. The countercultural activists I mentioned at the beginning were convinced that overturning and transcending America’s contemporary violence and gigantism, which was in large part rooted in its dark past of colonialist slavery, required returning to pre-colonial ways of settling, using, and inhabiting the land. This “return,” however, was never viewed as a form of backtracking. Rather, it was seen as a way of criticizing the prevailing, naïve notion of progress and linear growth and the American cult of “prosperity” – by showing that progress and prosperity had better be approached through a striving for knowledge and spiritual resources that were “outside of history,”

as argued by Gary Snyder with the now classic phrase in August of 1976:

Mankind has a rendezvous with destiny in outer space, some have predicted. Well: we are already traveling in space – this is the galaxy, right here. The wisdom and skills of those who studied the universe firsthand, by direct knowledge and experience, for millennia, both inside and outside themselves, are what we might call the Old Ways. Those who envision a possible future planet on which we continue that study, and where we live by the green and the sun, have no choice but to bring whatever science, imagination, strength, and political finesse they have to the support of the inhospitable people – natives and peasants of the world. In making common cause with them, we become “reinhabitory.” And we begin to learn a little of the Old Ways, which are outside of history, and forever new. (“Reinhabitation” 28)

This notion of timelessness was central in the group’s critique of American progress. Around the same time (the mid-1970s), the architect Christopher Alexander was working – also in California, which is probably not coincidental, as I will argue further down – on what he called a “timeless way of building,” rejecting modernist notions of progress and claiming to have uncovered a “pattern language” whose elements get repeated and recomposed in any *genuinely livable and enlivening* community – building, neighborhood, or city (see Alexander, *A Pattern Language*, and Alexander et al., *The Timeless Way of Building*).

Both the countercultural hippies and the anti-modernist architects have, at various times, been labeled as primitivists. Their naïve glorification of timeless patterns – whether it be patterns of settlement or patterns of construction – is predicated, so the standard critique goes, on a regressive and “artificial” existential stance because it is rooted in nostalgia for what can never return, and was not even so wonderful to begin with. Critics routinely point to the brutality of certain Indian tribes and to their ecological ineptitude, only concealed by the low technical means they possessed for doing any extensive harm to their environment, just as they point to the oppressiveness of the traditional village square and to the squalor and non-functionality of Renaissance Venice or pre-Haussmannian Paris. On another note, one of the eminent thinkers of Anglo-American neoliberalism, Friedrich August von Hayek, presented “tribalism” as the core flaw of all anti-liberal societies, in which the free flow of goods and humans across regional and national borders is hampered by tradition and parochialism, and in which free thought – seen mainly as the financially and economically competitive exercise of

instrumental rationality – is stopped in its open tracks by sentiments of belonging and community (see Hayek).

Here is not the place to delve at length and with any degree of nuance into the pros and cons of Hayek's and the anti-tribalists' positioning. No analysis of pre-modern groupings and traditional values should be borrowed without the crucial and critical question whether it contains glorifications and the pitfalls of the "noble savage" discourse, to be sure. But neither can a blanket defense of (neo)liberal subjectivity and anti-communalism be valid in the face of what the countercultural activists I am speaking of here were witnessing: the piecemeal "destruction," as they called it, of their landscapes and communities by ruthless urban growth, commercialism, and war. Americans had become destructive, they claimed, because they had lost their native ancestors' sense of how to live within the broader community of mineral, vegetable, animal, and human species, supported in myriad ways by the entire biosphere.

### 3. Reinhabitation: Toward a Notion of Biotic Community

Crucial to Snyder's point about the timeless ethic of the Old Ways are the concepts of "inhabitation" and "reinhabitation." It is around these concepts that the so-called "bioregional" movement was born by the middle of the 1970s.<sup>2</sup>

With regard to its roots within the 1960s counterculture, bioregionalism was never a homogeneous or centrally governed movement. Nevertheless, it relied on a relatively unified field of physical and metaphysical orientations concerning the deeper qualities of human settlements – with reference to the figure of the *peasant*, whose etymological roots refer to the land (*pays*, *paese*) and to the landscape (*paysage*, *paesaggio*): the peasant is he or she who knows how to dwell in the land, how to *genuinely be a part of the land as part of a broad and deep biotic community*. This includes Native American tribes who were nomad or semi-nomad hunter-gatherers and, therefore, not agricultural agents in modern terms – but who were, in a very deep sense, "native to their places" and, therefore, peasants. This capacity for place-based, multispecies community – this cultural trait gradually lost in modern Americans' relation to their lands – is what "inhabitation" mainly refers to, as two of bioregionalism's main thinkers wrote around 1978:

---

<sup>2</sup> For relatively recent, detailed as well as critical articles on bioregionalism, see Aberley, "Interpreting Bioregionalism" as well as Parsons.

Reinhabitation involves developing a bioregional identity, something most North Americans have lost, or have never possessed. [. . .] The term refers both to geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness – to a place and the ideas that have developed about how to live in that place. Within a bioregion the conditions that influence life are similar and these in turn have influenced human occupancy. A bioregion can be determined initially by use of climatology, physiography, animal and plant geography, natural history and other descriptive natural sciences. The final boundaries of a bioregion are best described by the people who have lived within it, through human cognition of the realities of living-in-place. [. . .] [T]here is a distinct resonance among living things and factors which influence them that occurs specifically within each separate place on the planet. Discovering and describing that resonance is a way to describe a bioregion. (Berg and Dasmann 82)

One of the authors of this passage was Peter Berg, a New York native who grew up in Florida and in 1964 hitchhiked to San Francisco, where he later became very active during the Summer of Love and was a prominent member of the Diggers, even making an extended appearance as an arrogant and much maligned young hippie agitator in Joan Didion's abrasive 1967 essay about the Summer of Love, "Slouching Towards Bethlehem." Berg became one of the main – and most vocal – thinking heads behind the bioregionalist Planet Drum Foundation, which emerged in San Francisco in 1973 and exists to this day.

The other author of the above passage was Raymond Dasmann, a professional conservationist and, at the time, chief ecologist at the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), then based in Morges, a few miles from Lausanne in Switzerland. Dasmann, who was born in San Francisco, had previously authored numerous articles and books about the unraveling of wildlife in his native California and had, in 1965, published a landmark book entitled *The Destruction of California*, in which he observed and predicted the trends of sprawling urbanization, resource deterritorialization, and massive ecological overshoot that are nowadays a hallmark of Los Angeles in particular, and of much of the rest of California as well, especially in its southern part.

The essay co-authored by Berg and Dasmann was, in fact, entitled "Reinhabiting California." It breaks with the growth obsession that, as they argue, has been driving California's development since the incorporation of Los Angeles as a US city in 1850, and offers a radically *regenerative perspective* on being an inhabitant of the California landscape:



[R]egardless of the “endless frontier” delusion and invader mentality that came to dominate in North America, removing one species or native people after another to make-a-living for the invaders, we now know that human life depends ultimately on the continuation of other life. Living-in-place provides for such continuation. [. . .] Once California was inhabited by people who used the land lightly and seldom did lasting harm to its life-sustaining capacity. Most of them have gone. But if the life-destructive path of technological society is to be diverted into life-sustaining directions, the land must be reinhabited. *Reinhabitation* means learning to live-in-place in an area that has been disrupted and injured through past exploitation. It involves becoming native to a place through becoming aware of the particular ecological relationships that operate within and around it. It means undertaking activities and evolving social behavior that will enrich the life of that place, restore its life-supporting systems, and establish an ecologically and socially sustainable pattern of existence within it. Simply stated it involves becoming fully alive in and with a place. It involves applying for membership in a biotic community and ceasing to be its exploiter. (81-82)

Direct aim is taken, here, at the myth of the United States as a community with a “manifest” destiny rooted in a shared drive by rugged individualists to push back the Frontier and possess as well as exploit ever-expanding tracts of land for agriculture and industry. What supposedly makes America a mythic capitalist, market-driven community of anonymous participants in the greatest wealth accumulation project in history was portrayed by the bioregionalists as the very thing that destroys genuine biotic community: the sharing of space, resources, and time with many human generations and many nonhuman species. What hard-nosed scientific ecologists such as Dasmann brought to the table is the incontrovertible fact of ecological interdependence, showing that any “manifest destiny” can only make sense if the humans who pursue it protect and regenerate, or even venerate, the life-support systems that make any community possible.

The connection between such hard-nosed ecological science and the Native American ethic of reinhabitation, the “Old Ways,” was explicitly made by Gary Snyder in a talk given in 1993 at the University of California at Davis. In this talk, entitled “The Rediscovery of Turtle Island,” Snyder begins by reaching for the insights of ecology:

We human beings of the developed societies have once more been expelled from a garden – the formal garden of Euro-American humanism and its assumptions of human superiority, priority, uniqueness, and dominance. We have been thrown back into that other garden with all the other animals and fungi and insects, where we can no longer be sure we are so privileged. [. . .]

Ecological science investigates the interconnection of organisms and their constant transactions with energy and matter. Human societies come into being along with the rest of nature. There is no name yet for a humanistic scholarship that embraces the nonhuman. I suggest (in a spirit of pagan play) we call it “panhumanism.” (236-37)

Thomas Berry, in his essay “Bioregionalism: The Context for Reinhabiting the Earth,” similarly embraces ecology as a framework for creating regenerative communities in which nonhuman beings are viewed as full members:

A bioregion is an identifiable geographical area of interacting life systems that is relatively self-sustaining in the ever-renewing processes of nature. The full diversity of life functions is carried out, not as individuals or as species, or even as organic beings, but as a community that includes the physical as well as the organic components of the region. Such a bioregion is a self-propagating, self-educating, self-governing, self-healing, and self-fulfilling community. Each of the component life systems must integrate its own functioning within this community to survive in any effective manner. (166)

The panhumanistic foundations of a new sense of American community are to be found, Snyder argued later, in the Native American view of the renewal of North America – a view both forward-looking and rooted in a past when the continent was called “Turtle Island.” Recalling a conversation in 1969 with a representative of the Navajo nation, Snyder ties directly into the connection between bioregional reinhabitation and the regeneration of community:

It was instantly illuminating to hear this continent renamed “Turtle Island”. [. . .] I was reminded that the indigenous people have a long history of subtle and effective ways of working with their home grounds. [. . .] The landscape was intimately known, and the very idea of community and kinship embraced and included the huge population of wild beings. Much of the truth of Native American history and culture has been obscured by the self-serving histories that were written on behalf of the conquerors, the present dominant society. (242)

As we will see in the next section, it is precisely because the intention of bioregionalists was to root community within the limits and synergies of nature that their approach was organically opposed to territorial expansionism and economic growth.



#### 4. Questioning Borders, Re-mapping the Life-world, Limiting Expansion and Growth

The cultural/ecological critique of America's empty and aggressive "national community" rhetoric was accompanied by a radical questioning of political borders. In two papers published with IUCN in 1972 and 1973, Dasmann "discussed the need for a combined ecological and biogeographical approach to the classification of natural regions of the world" and suggested a "scheme based on the concept of biotic provinces" ("Defining and Classifying" 1). This meant essentially discarding political and administrative borders when it came to conserving species integral to biotic communities that spread across these borders. Considering it was the middle of the Cold War, Dasmann was undoubtedly provocative from a political viewpoint when he asserted, on biogeographical grounds, that "[b]oth North America and Eurasia share the same biomes" and that "[t]he similarities between northern North America and northern Eurasia have long been noted by biogeographers" ("Defining and Classifying" 2).

A few years later, in 1975, still at IUCN – and in not less of a politically provocative, ecologically grounded gesture – Miklos Udvardy published a now classical memorandum in which he redrew the map of the Earth according to what, drawing on Dasmann, he called "biogeographical provinces of the world" (Udvardy). Twenty-six years later, a team of conservation scientists and ecologists published an updated version of Udvardy's and Dasmann's initial effort at reconfiguring the planet's borders through ecological and biogeographical, rather than historical or political, criteria: "Ecoregions [. . .] are classified within a system familiar to all biologists – biogeographical realms and biomes. Ecoregions, representing distinct biotas (Dasmann, 1973; Dasmann, 1974; Udvardy, 1975), are nested within the biomes and realms and, together, these provide a framework for comparisons among units and the identification of representative habitats and species assemblages" (Olson et al. 933). It is these assemblages of habitats and species which, ultimately, function as *effective community generators* – as the biotic communities to which we humans need to apply for membership. Reinhabitation, so Dasmann and his successors argue, is to be defined on the basis of knowledge about "biogeographical realms and biomes" (Olson et al. 933). When it comes to the biogeographical bases of American communities, bioregionalism views geographers and biologists as the contemporary purveyors of an actualized version of the Native American's "Old Ways."

So bioregional thought was, from the onset, a politically and culturally as well as ecologically critical endeavor. David Simpson wrote as much in 2015 in his recollections of Berg, entitled “The Mechanics of Reinhabitation: Remembering Peter Berg along the Bioregional Trail”:

Behind us [environmentalists in the late 1960s], casting a long shadow, sat a history and a dominant frame of reference haunted by the archaic politically drawn boundaries upon which nation-states have been founded. There as a strong need for this established geographical and psychological perspective to give way so that the underlying shapes of the biosphere and the realities of the natural world might be felt. This task was almost feverishly political. We sought a perspective that transcended anything resembling the artificial geopolitical boundaries within which we had grown up. We saw ourselves working in the service of an emerging consciousness based in planetary reality and the terrain of our own psyches. This budding perspective pointed at how humans might reclaim an appropriate place in the natural world, something other than that of [an] industrial leech sucking on the tender flesh of the mother planet or brute creatures that, left unregulated, could not help but desecrate the last remnants of the “wilderness” heritage – while all the time reproducing without measure. (231)

This ecological, or biospheric, cosmopolitanism coexisted in bioregionalism with an acutely localist orientation. In keeping with Simpson’s idea of “reclaim[ing] an appropriate place in the natural world,” Doug Aberley has called bioregional mapping an act of “mapping for local empowerment,” creating what he calls the “boundaries of home” (see Aberley, *Boundaries of Home*). As contemporary scholars like Mitchell Thomashow and Christopher Uhl have shown, global ecological consciousness remains largely abstract without a local anchoring in a landscape one can explore, know intimately, and become “native” to – which is precisely what bioregionalism aims for (see Thomashow; Uhl).

In his well-known book *Becoming Native to This Place*, the agricultural and localist philosopher Wes Jackson argues against the abstractions of cultural erudition and in favor of making our cultural references and our educational institutions much more inhabitation- and thus community-centered. In line with Jackson’s warning, it has been of paramount importance to the bioregionalists from the very beginning to root human community neither in an abstract collective project of economic growth and prosperity, nor in an equally abstract collective project of ecological cosmopolitanism, but in a concrete collective project of regional reinhabitation. This is a politics of place that emphasizes ways in which the proverbial American tendency to esteem only the individual and the national but nothing in between can be healed, so to speak, by reintro-

ducing two facts which that tendency has led modern Americans to ignore: the fact of a biotic community between humans and non-human species and the fact that many Native American traditions honor this biotic community deeply. In this way, bioregionalists argued, the collective can re-enter the American culture in a manner akin to the ethos suggested by the hippies (see Miller) and radically different from forms of Marxist collectivism or communism.

Bioregionalism never presented itself as economic regionalism, in the sense of a project for localities and regions to center themselves on their own growth and development at the expense of the regional biosphere and the majority of the regional human population. In other words, bioregionalism never colluded with the ideas – now becoming popular in certain circles of economists and territorial planners – of regional development through economic growth. In fact, from a bioregional viewpoint, *economic* growth is incompatible with *biological* growth and with the basic finiteness of the biosphere. Globalization is a contest between nation-states – and, within them, between regions – to attract capital from other parts of the globe and to buy and sell products in other (and potentially *most* other) parts of the globe. Put together, all these competing national and regional attempts to participate in globalization add up to more material flows than what the Earth is able to supply and metabolize, and this generates a pressure on the global biosphere as well as, disproportionately, on certain regional biospheres.

Because the sum-total of material flows is increasing over time, that pressure on the biosphere bears the name “economic growth.” By design, bioregions are envisioned as relatively self-sustaining entities that seek self-nourishment and homeostasis – and therefore function, as all ecosystems do, through cycling, recycling, and regeneration – rather than expansion. Biological growth exists in ecosystems, but it is limited in time and space. According to Thomas Berry, the bioregional function of self-nourishment

. . . requires that the members of the community sustain one another in the established patterns of the natural world for the well-being of the entire community and each of its members. Within this pattern the expansion of each species is limited by opposed lifeforms or conditions so that no lifeform or group of lifeforms should overwhelm the others. (166-67)

“Reinhabitation” essentially means recognizing these very basic insights coming from biotic homeostasis and considering the model of “Old Ways” to be re-integrated into principles of social organization. They need to be recognized – according to the bioregionalists – at a depth

where they will actually re-shape political communities and their fundamental aims. And this, Berry argues, flies in the face of modernist views of nation-building in terms of competitive expansion and growth:

The massive bureaucratic nations of the world have lost their inner vitality because they can no longer respond to the particular functioning of the various bioregions within their borders. A second difficulty within these large nations is the exploitation of some bioregions for the advantage of others. A third difficulty is the threatened devastation of the entire planet by the conflict between bureaucratic nations, with their weaponry capable of continental, and even planetary, devastation. To break these nations down into their appropriate bioregional communities could be a possible way to peace. (169)

When applied to the United States, Berry's discussion implies a bioregionalist critique of (a) the US's internal expansionism during its whole colonial past; (b) its external colonialism and imperialism, including its attempts to turn Europe and Asia into its markets, and the Middle East into its source of fossil fuels so as to remain growing economically; and (c) the overall globalized growth model the US has been promoting through international institutions and treaties. The angle of critique here is that, were the United States to recover and actualize its bioregional heritage, its citizens would discover an alternative way of community-building no longer centrally based on the problematic couple of individual and nation.

The bioregionalists of the 1960s and 1970s realized that this alternative to expansion and growth was part and parcel of American culture but had long been hidden from sight by the manner in which, for at least a century and a half, the US had built on the myth of a conquering, expansionist Frontier people.

## 5. California and its Bioregional Inhabitation

California was clearly a hotbed of bioregionalist sensibilities. Northern California – notably San Francisco, the whole Bay Area, as well as Santa Cruz – evidenced intense intellectual and political activity around issues of environmental conservation and countercultural critiques of capitalism. To a significant extent, the image of a resource- and wealth-guzzling Los Angeles metropolis in Southern California echoed the deeper pathologies of the Frontier – it became the epitome of destructiveness towards nature and native peoples, of shallow materialism, and

of a growth-obsessed gigantism, a gigantism rooted in the myth of “perpetual growth in the land of abundance” (Mackin 19). Northern Californians sought to set themselves apart from the culture that prevailed in LA – as many still do today – by offering a seemingly mellow, more organic, and more spiritual perspective on inhabitation. Ecological as well as cultural specificities, it can be argued, made California the container of two separate regions: the North and the South. Symptomatically, a now famous collective volume from the Planet Drum Foundation, in which Berg’s and Dasmann’s “Reinhabiting California” essay was republished in 1978, was entitled *Reinhabiting a Separate Country: A Bioregional Anthology of Northern California*. Edited by Berg, it sported on its cover a color drawing of Northern Californian wildlife but also of the physical region as delimited by the state’s main mountain ranges, making Northern California appear like a watershed-defined biotic community in its own right. This self-fashioning is brought to the fore in the volume’s introduction:

There are countries that can’t be found in a World Atlas although they can be seen at a glance out the window, countries whose soft borders remain invisible to governments even though travelers easily sense crossing them. They are the natural countries founded on specific soils and land forms, exposed to a particular climate and weather, and populated by native plants and animals which have endured since the last Ice Age. Each is a separate living part of the unified planetary biosphere; tissues and organs in the current manifestation of Earth’s anatomy. They exist as a live geography more distinct than the nations and states whose borders shift to arbitrarily include or divide them. One separate natural country is at the western edge of North America bounded by the Pacific Ocean, Tehachapi Mountains, Sierra Nevada, and Klamath-Siskiyou Mountains to the Chetco River. It lies almost wholly within California reaching into Oregon only as far as the Chetco. [. . .] Whether it’s called “Northern California” by everyone living here isn’t important (and another name isn’t the most critical issue), but recognizing its wholeness as a living entity is imperative. Only a bare survivor of the place before statehood remains now, a sketchy outline of the rich portrayal given in early accounts, and it can no longer withstand the extractive demands put on its life in the past. The country needs people who share its life to begin acting in its behalf; their behalf. The heaviest demands are likely to come from outside, and people need a form of agreement or culture-of-place to withstand them. (“Introduction” i)

The North-South division, which makes for two rather large separate “communities” in the form of separate “countries,” can be and has been refined in many ways. Gary Snyder addressed the California Studies



Center at Sacramento State College in 1992 in a talk entitled “Coming into the Watershed” where he offers a striking description of the ambiguities of administrative borders that override bioregional ones. From a bioregional standpoint, Snyder argued, California should not be viewed as one or two, but rather six different regions:

I am not arguing that we should instantly redraw the boundaries of the social construction called California, although that could happen some far day. But we are becoming aware of certain long-range realities, and this thinking leads towards the next step in the evolution of human citizenship on the North American continent. [. . .] With the exception of most Native Americans and a few non-natives who have given their hearts to the place, the land we all live on is simply taken for granted – and proper relation to it is not considered a part of “citizenship.” But after two centuries of national history, people are beginning to wake up and notice that the United States is located on a landscape with a severe, spectacular, spacy, wildly demanding, and ecstatic narrative to be learned. Its natural communities are each unique, and each of us, whether we like it or not – in the city or countryside – lives in one of them. (222-24)

This fascinating collision of citizenship and the natural community is, in Snyder’s case, more than merely ideological. It bases itself, as we saw earlier, on a penetrating recognition and cultivation of ecological consciousness – making American bioregionalism and its idea of the human membership in a biotic community an eminently important stream of thought and practice<sup>3</sup> through which to (re)connect community with ecological impact and biogeographical cohesiveness.

## 6. Redefining Community on the Basis of a One-planet Ecological Footprint

Bioregionalism is not eco-fascism, although some critics have suggested as much in the wake of Ernest Callenbach’s controversial 1975 novel, *Ecotopia*. This novel portrays the Pacific Northwest – of which the region that Berg calls “Northern California” is a part – seceding from the United States and establishing an ecologically radical republic strongly suggestive of a network of regenerative ecovillages. The novel suggests

---

<sup>3</sup> This essay has, admittedly, not been focused on practices. The cited survey articles by Parsons and by Aberley, as well as Kirkpatrick Sale’s *Dwellers in the Land* and Robert Thayer’s *LifePlace*, can provide the reader with ample information about groups that practice bioregionalism and campaign for it at the everyday, political level.

that bioregionalism is fundamentally reconstructive, and more resolutely utopian – or, rather, *eutopian* (in search of “good places”) – than dystopian. It uses biogeographical awareness and cartographical representation in order to *provide an imaginary map of the life-world humans share with other species and the elements*: “imaginary” in the strong sense of a territory based on images and desires that generate a creative impulse. Bioregionalism, in this sense, is an exercise in the reimagination of community on the basis of territory. It is territorial community-making. It gives territory and its reinhabitation a central place in re-mapping boundaries of belonging. Thus it is *an imaginary re-writing of territory as a performative gesture of ecologically informed identity renewal*.

Bioregions do not exist officially or administratively, they do not confer legal rights or duties, but they might elicit deep loyalty and an “underground” attachment that through its imaginative potency surpasses the force of legal and administrative bonds. The prefix *bio-* in bioregionalism refers to the biotic coherence of a region – to a region delineated by the invisible boundaries born of what systems theorists call its “operational closure”: the myriad ways in which ecosystems bond to generate a perpetual, permanent, and specific flow of life-support. Bioregionalism is part of an existential biogeography. The bioregion is therefore a “domain of rule” (*regio* stemming from Latin *regere*, to rule) where the “rules of the domain” – the etymological roots of the word *economy* – are dictated by the “*bios*.” As such, bioregionalism may well be North America’s most significant contribution to a movement of thought and practice that seeks to redefine community on the basis of a one-planet ecological footprint. This refers to the idea that any collective needs to organize according to the following criterion (cf. Merkel; Thorpe): If everyone else lived in the same fashion, the overall ecological footprint of humanity would be one single planet. In a sense, this notion of “one-planet living” connects bioregional practices with a concern for the whole planet, hence with the fate of humanity as a whole. But it does so through a hypothetical, not a categorical, imperative: Each biotic community – and, within it, each household and possibly each individual – needs to find ways to adopt a *universalizable* way of life, that is to say, a way of life which, if universally adopted, would lead to a one-planet footprint.



## References

- Aberley, Doug. *Boundaries of Home: Mapping for Local Empowerment*. San Francisco: New Catalyst, 1998.
- . “Reinterpreting Bioregionalism: A Story from Many Voices.” *Bioregionalism*. Ed. Michael Vincent McGinnis. New York: Routledge, 1999. 13-42.
- Alexander, Christopher. *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- , Sarah Ishikawa, and Murray Silverstein. *The Timeless Way of Building*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- Baptist, Edward E. *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*. New York: Basic Books, 2016.
- Beckert, Sven and Seth Rockman, eds. *Slavery’s Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.
- Berg, Peter. “Introduction.” *Reinhabiting a Separate Country: A Bioregional Anthology of Northern California*. Ed. Peter Berg. San Francisco: Planet Drum Foundation, 1978. i.
- and Raymond Dasmann. [1977]. “Reinhabiting California.” *Envisioning Sustainability*. Ed. Peter Berg. San Francisco: Subculture Books, 2009. 81-88.
- Bernard, Ted and Jora Young. “What We Have in Common is the Salmon: The Mattotle Watershed, California.” *The Ecology of Hope: Communities Collaborate for Sustainability*. Ed. Ted Bernard and Jora Young. Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 1997. 128-47.
- Berry, Thomas. “Bioregionalism: The Context for Reinhabiting the Earth.” In Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1998. 163-70.
- Boal, Iain, Janferie Stone, Michael Watts and Cal Winslow, eds. *West of Eden: Communes and Utopia in Northern California*. Oakland: PM Press, 2012.
- Bosk, Beth. *New Settler Interviews: Vol. 1 – Boogie at the Brink*. White River Junction: Chelsea Green, 2000.
- Callenbach, Ernest. *Ecotopia: The Notebooks and Reports of William Weston*. Berkeley: Banyan Tree Books, 1975.
- Campbell, Brian. “Growing an Oak: An Ethnography of Ozark Bioregionalism.” *Environmental Anthropology Engaging Ecotopia: Bioregionalism, Permaculture, and Ecovillages*. Ed. Joshua Lockyer and James Veteto. New York: Berghahn, 2013. 58-75.

- Dasmann, Raymond. *The Destruction of California*. New York: Macmillan, 1965.
- . “A System for Defining and Classifying Natural Regions for Purposes of Conservation.” *Morges: IUCN Occasional Paper 7* (1973).
- . “Biotic Provinces of the World: Further Development of a System for Defining and Classifying Natural Regions for Purposes of Conservation.” *Morges: IUCN Occasional Paper 9* (1974).
- Didion, Joan. [1967]. “Slouching Towards Bethlehem.” In Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem: Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968. 84-128.
- Estill, Lyle. *Small Is Possible: Life in a Local Economy*. Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2008.
- Hayden, Tom. *The Port Huron Statement: The Visionary Call of the 1960s Revolution*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2005.
- Hayek, Friedrich August von. *Law, Legislation and Liberty*. 3 volumes. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1973-1979.
- Jackson, Wes. *Becoming Native to This Place*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994.
- Junger, Sebastian. *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*. New York: Twelve, 2016.
- Krech, Shepard. *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History*. New York: Norton, 1999.
- Lopez, Barry. *The Rediscovery of North America*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1990.
- Mackin, Anne. *Americans and Their Land: The House Built on Abundance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016.
- Merkel, Jim. *Radical Simplicity: Small Footprints on a Finite Earth*. Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2003.
- Miller, Timothy. *The Hippies and American Values*. Second ed. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2011.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013.
- Olson, David, Eric Dinerstein, Eric Wikramanayake, Neil Burgess, George Powell, Emma Underwood, Jennifer D’amico, Illanga Itoua, Holly Strand, John Morrison, Colby Loucks, Thomas Allnutt, Taylor Ricketts, Yumiko Kura, John Lamoreux, Wesley Wettengel, Prashant Hedao, and Kenneth Kassem. “Terrestrial Ecoregions of the World: A New Map of Life on Earth.” *BioScience*. Vol. 51 (2001): 933-38.
- Page, Jake and Susanne Page. *Hopi*. New York: Abrams, 1982.
- Parsons, James. “On ‘Bioregionalism’ and ‘Watershed Consciousness’.” *The Professional Geographer* 37 (1985): 1-6.

- Reséndez, Andrés. *The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2016.
- Sale, Kirkpatrick. *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision*. Second ed. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000.
- Shuman, Michael. *Going Local: Creating Self-Reliant Communities in a Global Age*. New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Simpson, David. "The Mechanics of Reinhabitation: Remembering Peter Berg along the Bioregional Trail." *The Biosphere and the Bioregion: Essential Writings of Peter Berg*. Ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Eve Quesnel. New York: Routledge, 2015. 228-47.
- Smith, Sherry. *Hippies, Indians, and the Fight for Red Power*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Snyder, Gary. [1976]. "Reinhabitation." *Earth First!*, 23 September 1987. 28.
- . "The Rediscovery of Turtle Island." In Gary Snyder, *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Watersheds*. New York: Counterpoint, 1995. 236-51.
- . *The Old Ways*. San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 1977.
- . "Coming into the Watershed." *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Watersheds*. Ed. Gary Snyder. Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 1996. 219-35.
- Thayer, Robert. *LifePlace: Bioregional Thought and Practice*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.
- Thomashow, Mitchell. *Bringing the Biosphere Home: Learning to Perceive Global Environmental Change*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003.
- Thorpe, David. *The "One Planet" Life: A Blueprint for Low-Impact Development*. New York: Routledge, 2015.
- Udvardy, Miklos. "A Classification of the Biogeographical Provinces of the World". *Morges: IUCN Occasional Paper* 18 (1975).
- Uhl, Christopher. *Developing Ecological Consciousness: The End of Separation*. Second ed. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013.
- Wicks, Judy. *Good Morning, Beautiful Business: The Unexpected Journey of an Activist Entrepreneur and Local Economy Pioneer*. White River Junction: Chelsea Green, 2013.