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*European Languages*

*زبانهای اروپایی*

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## *Imagining the Pacific Republic*



Cape Cove, Oregon Coast. Photo: Jeffrey St. Clair.

As I sit writing this, I am gazing out my motel room picture window at lines of waves rolling up the long, flat Washington coast beach. White breakers play against dark green-brown water that is also the color of the sand this early evening. The waves fade a few lines back into the bright grayness of a wet, windy, Pacific storm. Between me and the beach are the motel porch, a small grass yard, and a low ridge of sand dunes well secured by golden-green grass. Old floats combed from the beach decorate the fence between yard and dunes. I am watching the ocean through a break in the dunes. Nobody's out on the beach this rainy evening. I am the last person on the western edge. Millions are back there

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on the continent behind me. Out beyond me is nothing but a little bit of sand and an unimaginable stretch of Pacific Ocean.

A brick barbecue in the yard poignantly beckons, but I'm here too soon in the year for that. It's late March, and the willful storm is insistently blowing thick clouds of raindrops north. Needing a break from the room, I braved the storm and walked out on the beach a little while ago. It rapidly soaked through my inadequate jacket. But some like it wet, especially many of us who inhabit the raincoasts along the North Pacific rim of North America. Our thick forests, luxuriant rivers and streams with their rich salmon runs, the snowcaps atop our mountain ranges that feed water to cities and farms year round, all are gifts of the North Pacific and its rain and storms. We might feel some wet discomforts, and suffer cabin fever and light deprivation through the cloudy gray months. But we know which side our iconic bread is buttered on.

I am at a place on the Washington coast that has particular personal significance, the small community of Moclips. In 1984, this was the first place I touched the Pacific after an eventful road trip across the U.S. from Atlanta, where I had been staying with my sister for several months. A week-long transcontinental run brought me to a forest camp by the beach just north of town. After days of jangly winds roaring past my old car, the sound of the waves washed over me as an operatic choir rising and falling in irregular harmonies. The ocean was singing to me on my return. The last of a seven coast-to-coast jumps that took place over a course of 13 years, this return signified a decision to finally settle on the Pacific Coast.

My first journey west in late spring 1971 was a classic hippie hitchhike after a tumultuous freshman year of college in the Vietnam protest cauldron of Washington, D.C. Sticking out my thumb on the Pennsylvania Turnpike just west of my old hometown, I headed for the golden land of California, still bathed in the '60s glow. I wound up living in the beach towns of South Bay Los Angeles, saved from the smoggy, crowding urban mass by the nearby ocean. I walked the beaches many a night, listening to the waves.

I returned to school in LA, and earned a journalism degree. But on graduation in 1976 I was at loose ends. Not sure what I wanted to do, I moved back to the family home in Pennsylvania. Yet each evening I looked west toward the setting sun and yearned to hit the road back to the coast. The draw was magnetic. That I did in 1977, this time opting for the smaller and slower paced coastal community of Santa Barbara. But I was still restless. This somehow still didn't seem to be the place. Then one starry night, standing on a point overlooking the ocean, a vigorous wind whipped up. It felt as if it was blowing through

me, permeating me deeply. I'm not sure if it was literally coming from the north, but somewhere I felt the call in that direction. By fall I was on the road to Seattle.

Young reporters often need to work the farm teams before they make it to the big city dailies. After a few months in Seattle, I found myself working as a county beat reporter in the desert and mountain country east of the Cascades Range, far from the ocean, but still in a discernably Pacific realm. After three years, dissatisfied with conventional journalism and still feeling the pull of the great cities of the East Coast, I quit and went on the road again. I oscillated between east and west in two road trips during 1981 and 1984, living in Portland during the intervening years, as I would later. Both journeys found me in my old hometown on the fringes of the great Northeastern megalopolis, at the gates of the eastern cities but somehow unable to enter in. The Pacific always called me back. Since then, I have confirmed myself as a spiritual citizen of the lands on the western edge of the continent, and in many ways still on the edge of politics and culture. It's what has always drawn me back.

### **Pacific Republics past to present**

Thomas Jefferson, who sent Lewis and Clark to put the U.S. mark on the Pacific Northwest, is commonly regarded as the president who envisioned a coast-to-coast nation. Jefferson had long dreamed of reaching to the Pacific. He had heard tales from John Ledyard, who sailed the Pacific with Captain Cook, and unsuccessfully attempted to promote expeditions decades before presidential juice enabled him to send Lewis and Clark searching for the best path to the western ocean.



Lewis and Clark expedition 1805-6 Credit: National Park Service.

But Jefferson understood that a nation broken up by physical obstacles such as the western mountains would be difficult to hold together. Instead of a continental republic, he thought

an independent Pacific Republic more likely. “Nature herself has marked out Western America for the home of an independent nation,” he wrote. In the west would rise a “great, free and independent empire” allied with its kindred nation to the east. Governing the Pacific Coast from the east would work no better than governing the American colonies from London, the old revolutionary knew. For several decades, until Americans began migrating en masse down the Oregon Trail in the 1830s and ‘40s, it was mostly a theoretical proposition. The U.S. was quite content to manage the Oregon Territory in condominium with Great Britain.

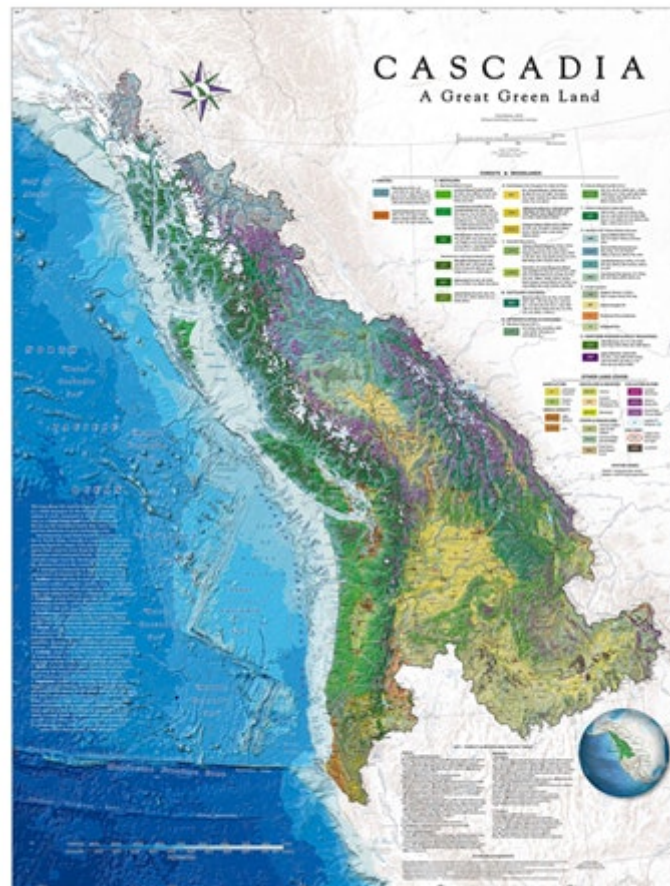
By those decades new technologies were emerging that promised to make governance possible on broader scales than ever before imagined. Rome had highways that cemented its empire, the Mongols a network of horsemen that united theirs. The U.S. was starting to take advantage of far more powerful connectors. A coast-to-coast nation could be linked by railroads which reduced trips from months to days, and the unprecedented revolution in near instantaneous communications, the “Victorian Internet” that was the telegraph. Railroads did not span the continent until 1867. But their growth fed the drive for a coast-to-coast nation, which James Polk consummated during his late 1840s presidency with the Mexican-American War extending the U.S. to California, and Oregon Compromise divvying up the territory with Britain.

When a part of the nation tried to strike out on its own, it was Jefferson’s own south. Anticipation of the bloodiest war in American history made Jefferson, write when speaking of the slavery in which he was so implicated, “I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just.” Pacific states also made noises about going their own way in those days. If the south had been successful, they might well have done so. But settlement was still young and thin, and dependence on eastern markets and resources great. Not much was heard of the Pacific Republic after the Civil War.

Then in the 1970s Ernest Callenbach wrote his novels of Ecotopia, the mythic West Coast Green breakaway republic composed of Oregon, Washington and Northern California. Joel Garreau in his 1981 *[The Nine Nations of North America](#)* portrayed a Chile-like coastal strip of the same name extending from California to Southeast Alaska. Colin Woodward would later map much the same boundaries, calling it The Left Coast, in his 2011 work, *[American Nations](#)*.

In the 1980s, Seattle University sociologist David McCloskey and others began to envision a bioregional identity of Cascadia extending from the North Pacific Coast to continental divide. Bioregional congresses were convened to imagine an alternative

society. The Cascadian vision has taken deep root since, and remains a vibrant element of regional culture with its own flag. (There's more than one but this is the most commonly accepted.) Numerous institutions incorporate Cascadia in their name including a college and museum. A number of websites forward the Cascadian vision such as those here and here. May 18, the day Mt. St. Helens exploded in 1980, is celebrated as Cascadia Day. Cascadia even has its own board game to “create the most harmonious ecosystem.”



McCloskey Map of Cascadia 2015

Also in the '80s emerged Cascadia's evil twin brother, when Richard Butler and his Aryan Nations Church called for a Northwest white homeland. After all, a dark side of Oregon's early history was a ban on Black people living in the state. Butler later pulled the boundaries back to the high mountains of the interior because there were too many “mud people” on the coast. To this day, hardcore right-wingers are drawn to the “redoubt” in Northeast Washington and Northern Idaho. Across the region, genuine bioregionalists struggle with white supremacists trying to appropriate the idea of Cascadia, reminding us we still struggle with the legacies of white settler colonialism.

## **Terra Incognita**

The reception room where you enter the Doge's Palace in Venice is a true expression of a city-state with global vision and reach. Its walls are covered with maps depicting the geographical knowledge of the early age of European exploration, There is China. There is the Levant and Eastern Mediterranean, the density of towns in Palestine and Jordan revealing the ecological abundance for which these lands are still desired and fought over. The East Coast of North America is not too different than today. Cape Cod sticks out.

At the center of the reception room, directly in front of the Venetian sovereign's ornate chair, are two globes measuring six feet in diameter. They reflect the fairly accurate knowledge of the East Coast in the early 1700s. The western side of the continent is a different story. It is fringed by an independent landmass, the Isola de California, floating out in the Pacific beyond the continental coast. To the north an even more mysterious land stretches to the western horizon. Blank except for tiny depictions of several natives, it is Terra Incognita, where I live several centuries later.

While geographically incorrect, one wonders if those early geographers captured some essence of those western lands when they named them. The Isola de California seemed to signify the future mind of California better than any current map. California behaves like an island unto itself, in many ways a virtually independent nation setting its own course on issue after issue. Meanwhile the lands to the north in many ways remain Terra Incognita. Though increasingly a global crossroads, they are still an away place in the global imagination. Cascadia, the North Pacific West, draws to a sense of mystery and the unknown, holding unexplored territories of mind and experience. With a sense of being on the threshold of a de novo meshing of culture, ecology, technology and spirit.

These lands on the western edge are the modern form of the Pacific Republic. And increasingly, they are thinking on their own and imagining their own future.

Gary Snyder, the great Buddhist bioregional beat poet, appeared at Town Hall in Seattle some years back to read from *[Danger on Peaks](#)*, his book of poems about Mt. St. Helens/Loowit. Snyder grew up on a farm a few miles north near Lake Washington, and later lived in Portland. The Cascadian landscape shaped Snyder's ecological muse, from the time he served in fire lookouts on the Olympic Peninsula to summiting Cascade Range mountains including Loowit. He later went on to live in California, becoming an inspiration for Jake in Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*, even serving as a California arts commissioner.

Nowadays Snyder lives towards the north end of the state in the ecotone that crosshatches the Californias and Cascadia. In between his poems about Loowit and all the eras in which he encountered this explosive Northwest icon (I wrote about that [here](#)), Snyder made a profound comment about his lived geographies. It felt inspired by the packed and enthusiastic Seattle house.

“You know I came from the Northwest. And now I live in California,” Snyder said. “But I don’t feel like one or the other. I feel like part of this great radical West Coast spirit,” arms uplifted to embrace the crowd as the prima facie case for his statement.

I feel like part of that too. I have in some way since I lit off for the coast with a backpack and thumb in 1971. I’ve definitely felt it since I set down on that beach north of Moclips several decades ago, knowing I was in the Pacific realm for good this time. There is something different here. Maybe it simply is a matter of distance, the necessarily different perspectives of people who live at different points on the planet.

### **A distinctive sense**

The Pacific Republic never came about as a political unit. But it has a reality as a set of emerging cultural perspectives and political initiatives. While technology links together a continental union, Jefferson may have had the right instinct. People living far apart from each other will develop in different ways. Those centrifugal tendencies produce political and cultural divergences. West Coast states were among the first to legalize recreational marijuana, and will preserve abortion rights even if the Supreme Court rolls them back. They are leaders in climate and social justice policies, and a place where new forms of grassroots activism are innovated. Seattle led the way to the \$15/hour minimum wage, while “thin green line” organizing has defeated dozens of proposed projects aimed at exporting fossil fuels to Asia.

In our continental culture, we have much in common. We share a story of conquest and colonization, lines extending out from East Coast hearths to replicate their patterns to the Pacific. If one reads the ecological histories of New England and the Pacific Northwest, two bookends of white settlement, the same basic patterns repeat centuries apart. First trap out the fur bearing animals while the native tribes die from new diseases brought by the settlers. Drive away the natives that still live. Cut down the richest forests, and after that most of them. Clear land for farms and cities. Overfish rivers and oceans. Dam the rivers and don’t worry too much about the fish that still swim in them. Finally build industries and high tech cities. Then try to achieve redemption by saving a small portion of what was

once there. We have many common legacies and burdens, much historical karma to work out.

At the same time, places and regions develop their own unique histories and cultures. Every place has its own ghosts and streams of inspiration, its own demons against which to struggle, and angels calling to a higher ground. As Gary Snyder evoked that night in Seattle, there is a distinctive Pacific sense of things. It infuses a western coastal culture, a Pacific Republic of the spirit that is growing on the western edge, in the imagination of Cascadia Terra Incognita and the Isola de California.

*This first appeared on [The Raven](#).*

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