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Cascadia: Examining Eco-Spirituality, Globalization, and Purpose in Cascadian Bioregionalism

*ABSTRACT*: *Presently, the bioregionalist Cascadia movement is more vibrant yet misrepresented than ever. Since the Pacific Northwest bioregion serves as a vital technological, environmental, and cultural hub for both United States and Canada, the ecosystems, collective culture, and cooperation of these coastal states and provinces bears importance on local and international scales. The possibility of Cascadia becoming an independent nation is minute, but the ongoing efforts to build cooperation and maintain ecosystems in the region remain beneficial. By examining past scholarly literature and the current informal online communities of pro-Cascadia groups, this research will investigate the complex origins and development of the Cascadia movement with regards to eco-spirituality and globalization, and Cascadia’s current role in Pacific Northwestern culture.*

Skies, waters and forests are rulers of the United States’ Pacific Northwest. They define our skylines, climates, and economies—and they remind us to pause. On the white, blue, and green “Doug Flag” designed in 1994, these three symbols, together with a Douglas Fir represent the Pacific Northwestern bioregion otherwise known as Cascadia. As a traveler, inhabitant, and human being, I feel immersed in the collective value of our natural landscape, which has found its means for expression and societal change through bioregionalism. Rather than linking groups by politics, ethnicity, or religion, bioregionalism focuses on what every person in an area shares in common: place. But the factors that spur bioregionalism in an area are complex, and the Cascadia movement’s identity and reputation are both mutable enough to warrant further investigation.

Cascadia, an amalgamation of Pacific Northwestern ecosystems, has, since its conception in the late 1970s, been a cultural movement of fluid borders: both in terms of its debated geographical boundaries and in terms of its own identity and values. At its roots, Cascadia is a continuation of the sociopolitical climate of the region as created by historical factors, while globalization played a supporting role in reinforcing Cascadia’s identity. In order for Cascadia to exist, some level of globalization was a prerequisite, as it necessarily demanded means for interconnectedness across nation and state borders. However, the movement does *react* to globalization as well. While fringe subgroups portray and polarize Cascadia as a solely secessionist movement, Cascadian bioregionalism places more emphasis on its internal togetherness and the environment than on independence from Canada and the U.S. With the nonprofit group CascadiaNow establishing chapters—in Seattle, Bellingham, Vancouver, Portland, and Salem thus far—and over 9,000 subscribers in the Cascadia community on the popular social media website, Reddit, Cascadia proves its growing presence as a movement. In addition to a view of Cascadia through the lens of Raymond Williams’ dominant, emergent, and residual components of culture, this paper will shine light on spiritual and environmental movements as origins of Cascadia, the effects of globalization on the movement, and the current, more-nuanced character of Cascadia as a result of this development.

The Cascadia movement is a more focused continuation of the cultural climate in the Pacific Northwest that formed from 1970 through the 1990s, when environmentalism and spirituality began to overlap and become mutually supportive emergent elements of Pacific Northwestern culture. In her thesis “The Last Eden: The Development of a Regional Culture of Eco-Spirituality in the Pacific Northwest,” Mara K. Eller explains that “Today‘s Pacific Northwest was formed by an intricate web of events, both local and national, that laid the groundwork for the eco-spirituality revolution of the 1980s and 1990s” (5). It was this revolution, with tree-sitters, ecofeminism, and the radical Earth First! group, that created an ideal atmosphere for the Cascadia movement’s conception (Eller 56). Similarly, Ingeborg Aarsand’s thesis, “Imagining Cascadia: Bioregionalism as Environmental Culture in the Pacific Northwest,” reminds us that “Central to bioregional thought is the idea that modernity created a spiritual crisis in which humanity has lost touch with ‘place’ and therefore nature” (6). This core belief of bioregionalism is also a central premise of the eco-spirituality movement that preceded Cascadia, and this connection indicates the causative nature of the relationship between eco-spirituality and Cascadian bioregionalism. From eco-spirituality, Cascadian bioregionalism branched out and grew as an emergent cultural thread. While the term for Cascadia was coined in the 1970’s, and therefore the movement may seem to have paralleled the development of eco-spirituality, Cascadia only recently experienced a spike in self-proclaimed members—largely as a result of social media. CascadiaNow’s jump from 1,780 Facebook supporters to 8,473 from 2014 to 2015 is illustrative of how sudden—and recent—this change is. The Cascadia concept existed at the same time as the eco-spiritual movement, but its followers came afterwards, when pieces of the eco-spiritual movement had already drifted into the mainstream culture of the region.

It was this eco-spirituality and value of “place” that built the foundations of Cascadia—not globalization. Instead, globalization helped Cascadia define itself in terms of ideology and goals. While Cascadia could not have formed without some degree of interconnectedness between the west-coast states and British Columbia, the values of Cascadian bioregionalism exist in opposition to globalization. The 1999 Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization, or the “Battle for Seattle,” reflected a spike in Pacific Northwestern opposition to globalization and an opportunity to express regional values that conflicted with globalization—“among the most prominent” of these values were “workers' rights and the environment,” writes Kimberly Elliott in her contribution to Jeffrey J. Schott’s book *The WTO After Seattle* (187). The WTO protests were a vivid example of how reacting to globalization solidified the Pacific Northwest and Cascadia’s environmental values.

The relationship between Cascadia and globalization seems simple: According to Don Alexander in his article “Bioregionalism: The Need for a Firmer Theoretical Foundation” in the *Journal of Ecosophy*, bioregionalism’s tenets include favoring “locally and regionally diverse cultures as guarantors of environmental adaptation, in opposition to the trend towards global monoculture” (2). Elaborating on Alexander’s claim that bioregionalism opposes this “global monoculture,” Aarsand argues that “Bioregionalism as a movement wants to reorganize and decentralize the United States into ecologically sustainable regions” (8). Thus, beyond simply opposing globalization, Cascadian bioregionalism proposes an alternative way of organizing societies that contrasts with globalized societal structures. Still, the cultural homogenization often induced by globalization, while not a value held by bioregionalism, has contributed to many of Cascadia’s core principles, including the region’s lack of religion (Eller 57), its identity as the “Left Coast”—explained by Dimitri Neyt in his dissertation “West Coast Ecotopias”—and its emphasis on environmentalism. Globalization facilitated the spread of these regional traits which ultimately cleared a space for bioregionalism to find a foothold (66). In this way, globalization has become a co-creator of the Cascadia movement via its influence on Pacific Northwestern culture, but also a sounding board against which Cascadia can react and strengthen its own core ideology of grassroots activism, sustainability, and life on a local scale (Aarsand 18).

Cascadia as a movement, however, is not presented to or perceived by outsiders as a grassroots movement for environmental and cultural vibrancy in the bioregion, but as an oversimplified independence movement. This misunderstanding leads many to forget that Cascadia was born of bioregionalism, and—by proxy—the eco-spirituality movement. Still, Neyt reminds us that Cascadia is, to some activists, a “very sincere striving for autonomy.” Unfortunately, the media overemphasizes this image. In 2011, *Time Magazine* published an article by Kayla Webley delineating the “Top 10 Aspiring Nations,” and the relatively-obscure Cascadia was listed alongside entities like Tibet, Quebec, and Scotland as potential independent nations. More recently, in November of 2014, Laura Secorun Palet published an article titled “Secessionist Movements In America Refuse To Die” in the *Huffington Post* that listed Cascadia as a “a wannabe-nation” along with Texas and Puerto Rico. Before diving deeper into the Cascadia movement, I myself believed that Cascadia’s main goal was secession. While the brief flickerings of secessionism—the failed Cascadian National Party website in 2001 and attempts to establish an independence-oriented party in Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia—*did* correspond to increased public support of secessionism in the following years, for many Cascadia supporters, succession is now seen as a lost cause. CascadiaNow, recently recognized as a nonprofit organization in Washington and source of the highest-traffic Cascadia website, no longer states secession as a goal. CascadiaNow’s vision is listed as “a unified Pacific Northwest with a recognizable culture of bioregional sustainability.” But in general, Cascadia is still seen as a political movement for independence by many people who are not at the heart of the movement. In his book *Creating New States: Theory and Practice of Secession*, Peter Radan explains that “In many cases, even those of peaceful secession, the secessionist movement presents its secessionist endeavor as a struggle against the resistant and oppressive host state” (38). CascadiaNow and other groups, aside from the radical Cascadian National Party—whose website has not been updated since 2006—have not, thus far, placed any emphasis on a “struggle” against an oppressive United States or Canada. The extreme secessionist portion of Cascadians is vocal, but it must not been seen as representative of Cascadia’s core of bioregionalists, whose values are changing the dominant culture of the Pacific Northwest without any word of secession.

Raymond Williams, a leader and scholar of cultural studies, proposed and supported an explanation for the mechanisms behind cultural change in his book *Marxism and Literature,* where he identifiedthree components of culture at play: the dominant, the residual, and the emergent. The dominant culture reflects the mainstream set of beliefs and attitudes, while the residual, he writes, is that which “has been effectively formed in the past” but remains “an effective element of the present” (122). The emergent is the cultural process that is “alternative or oppositional to the dominant elements,” and it may feed into the mainstream as it is incorporated (Williams 124). Cascadia developed as an emergent component of Pacific Northwestern Culture, but we can see its effect on the dominant already. According to Tom Lynch, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Karla Armbruster in their book, *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place,* principles of “community, sustainability, local culture, local food system, ‘green’ cities, renewable energy, habitat restoration, ecological awareness, grassroots activism” have become widespread in the Pacific Northwest “due to the efforts and example of bioregionalists”(4). I see these principles influencing my community on a regular basis, but it is also important to note how closely they reflect Cascadia’s beginnings in eco-spirituality and reactions to globalization.

The factors driving Cascadia’s development are far more complex than secessionism. When the movement’s members debate the technicalities of a high-speed train connecting Vancouver, Seattle, and Portland on Reddit, or Cascadian hipsters start a woodland “Rainingman” festival in honor of the bioregion, I do not see a cultural conflict with the rest of the United States that would warrant secession, but cultural togetherness within Cascadia. As the movement progresses, it may—like most—branch off into more distinct subgroups or exert greater influence on the region’s mainstream culture. As of today, an in-depth account of Cascadia’s subgroups has yet to be pieced together. As CascadiaNow succinctly put it, “together it [Cascadia] is what we make of it,” and what is ‘being made’ of Cascadia—presently and in times to come—will illuminate the changing attitudes, worries, and values of the unique people of the Pacific Northwest.

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