

North and Northwest: Theorizing the Regional Literatures of Alaska and the Pacific Northwest

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As a theoretical framework for literary studies, regionalism has faced various critical battles over the years. Following its heyday in the 1930s and 1940s, place-based studies of American literature have experienced numerous cycles of interest and moments of decline, as each decade critics and writers debate the problems and possibilities associated with regional studies. The major criticism tends to argue that regional writing is minor work limited by a narrowly focused literary vision. Often thought to be inferior writing that may have proved popular among locals but failed to achieve larger recognition nationally or internationally, regional literature is frequently dismissed as a provincial and conservative reaction against an ever-encroaching and homogenizing modernism. In his anthology of Pacific Northwest literature, Bruce Barcott explains the problem. “Most writers cringe at the ‘regionalist’ label,” he writes. “The tag carries the smell of failure, as if the writer got his or her specifics right but failed to translate them into universals” (Barcott 1994: xiii). Tracing the ways regional studies in literature has gone in and out of fashion over the years, it is worth noting that among American historians, regionalism has not experienced quite the same rollercoaster ride. For many US historians, the study of regional differences serves as a useful corrective to an overly generalized picture of the nation where one region’s identity is typically made to stand for all others. If regionalism has had a stronger foothold among historians for this reason, it might be useful to consider what prevents it from occupying a similar place in literary studies. After all, should the development of more nuanced understandings of national specificities not be an important concern for literary scholars as well?

Perhaps regional scholarship has lagged behind in literary criticism because the field has concerned itself too much with issues of aesthetics and canonicity, with the perceived literary merit of a text or group of texts. Based on humanist understandings of artistic production and reception – that we consume “great works” of art in order to gain social capital, to edify or enlighten ourselves – scholarly concerns about the aesthetic qualities of regional literature often stifle other areas of criticism in the

field. All too often, regional scholars tend to preoccupy themselves with making a case for why this or that writer deserves broader national attention, and often these arguments are based on examinations of the literary merit of their writing. At conferences and in various books and journals devoted to regional studies, literary scholars still tend to apologize for their object of study, making a case for why this text is wrongly considered minor rather than major, on the periphery rather than in the center, locally focused rather than nationally or internationally oriented. By allowing concerns about canonicity and literary value to dominate debates about regionalism, however, literary critics end up narrowing the scope of their study, overlooking other issues that deserve scholarly attention. Rather than letting humanist readings of merit and value shape regional studies, we might instead interrogate the very notion of regionalism itself, asking how American regions came to be in the first place and what function they serve in understandings of the nation as a whole.

It is interesting to note that at a time when many critics are mired in debates about the value and merits of regional writing, there are some indications that place-based literature is gaining increased public attention and a growing spotlight in the literary marketplace. The burgeoning sections of travel writing and regional literature in bookstores across the United States, for instance, say a great deal about how strongly the political economy of travel and tourism influences the production of regional literatures and identities. Historian Ann Fabian has remarked at length on these connections; as she points out, regional literature – linked as it is to a tourist economy – often contributes to the project of designating certain places as desirable attractions, reshaping the local into a national or even international object of consumption for readers as well as a highly lucrative promotional device for writers (Fabian 1992: 235). The travel industry, of course, is not alone in providing regional writing with a captive audience but has instead worked hand-in-hand with developments like the growing environmental movement, which has also created a renewed interest in the local and the regional. In an age of ecology, concerns about the environment often translate into increased attention to once maligned regions and a growing fascination with “other” geographies. From all indications, it seems there is still much critical work to be done in assessing the cultural function of regional discourses. Moving away from the vise grip of aesthetics, studies of literary regionalism can offer important insights about the role of narrative in the construction of place and nation.

The writings of various “New Americanist” scholars who have begun questioning the metanarratives shaping US literary studies are useful in situating regional studies as a tool for theorizing the formation of American identity. Amy Kaplan, for instance, examines nineteenth-century metropolitan responses to local writing, pointing out that the concept of region in this period often emerged “as the projection of a desire for a space outside of history, untouched by change” (1991: 252). Regional differences (typically represented by spaces outside the urban East) served to enhance a sense of national well-being. While some places seemed all too familiar and ordinary to writers, other spaces operated as new, distinct, and full of intrigue. As Kaplan explains, regionalism in this context functioned to help naturalize the nation by

locating the “primal origins” of nationalism firmly within “prenational communities” (1991: 263). At the same time, however, these projections were often challenged by counter-stories and prior histories, as the inhabitants of a given space struggled to assert a voice and presence that disturbed the official account of place (Kaplan 1991: 252). By restoring to history these larger cultural and political uses of regionalism as well as the responses to them, Kaplan and other critics are placing regional studies firmly within larger discussions of US nation-formation. Any account that seeks to historicize literary regionalism and understand its cultural work must move beyond aesthetic discussions about the merit of a given text, taking into consideration the role narrative plays in the incorporation and designation of new regions, as well as the function it serves in the formation of the United States.

In the discussion which follows, I focus on the place-based literatures of Alaska and the Pacific Northwest, regions that have remained largely undertheorized in studies of American literary history. Rather than reading the regional literatures of these places through an aestheticizing framework that dismisses or apologizes for this writing, my aim is to examine how regional discourses about Alaska and the Pacific Northwest function culturally, politically, and nationally. As relatively new regions on the nation’s maps, the Pacific Northwest and Alaska are useful subjects for analysis with a view to what they can reveal about the imperatives of nation-building in the United States. In arguing for a comparative perspective in studies of regionalism, Robin W. Winks points to the ways scholars often do not allow research on regionalism “to ask questions about the nation as a whole” (1983: 15). Yet regionalism, as most scholars would agree, makes sense only as a critical approach within a national context. Indeed, it would be very difficult to understand the form and function of literary regionalism outside a larger national history. A comparative approach such as the one Winks calls for would not eliminate discussions about the aesthetics of regionalism, but would reframe these debates by allowing critics to consider by which standards the literary value of a text is to be assessed, whose definitions bestow artistic merit on a work of literature, and what function these standards serve in the larger national project. In recasting our approach to aesthetics in this way, regional scholars would also be able to assess how literary standards in turn dictate national definitions in ways that often exclude or marginalize certain regions.

Reading the Pacific Northwest

Starbucks and grunge culture, spotted owls and logging disputes, microbreweries and gortex; majestic mountains, glaciers, forests, rivers, salmon, and the Pacific Ocean: such images often dominate understandings of the cultural and natural landscapes that comprise the Pacific Northwest of the United States. Popular as they are, however, these images do not adequately capture the diversity of spaces encompassing the region, which for many critics includes Washington, Oregon, Idaho, parts of northern California, and the northwest corner of Montana, spaces that are varying

and distinct and that often fall out of the geographical stereotype of rainforests and salmon. A region composed of disparate landscapes, the Pacific Northwest tends to resist clear demarcations. Some scholars suggest, for instance, that the Pacific Northwest refers to the land drained by the Columbia River, a definition that would include parts of British Columbia as well. Meanwhile, other critics argue that the Pacific Northwest is best understood as the land located between Mount Hood in Oregon and Mount St. Elias in southeast Alaska. Often used interchangeably throughout the region, the terms Pacific Northwest and Northwest themselves cause confusion. The United States, after all, has witnessed various “northwests” throughout its history, so that the region we consider northwest today serves as only one of several spaces to receive this geographical designation. Culturally and politically too, the Pacific Northwest is divided quite strongly. In various urban centers, for instance, progressive social movements thrive well, while certain rural areas in the region serve as home to some of the nation’s most conservative antigovernment activities. All of this is to say that any attempt to pin down the region either geographically or culturally is necessarily fraught with problems.

In a thoughtful article that examines constructions of regional identity, historian John Findlay traces how understandings of place in the Pacific Northwest have shifted dramatically throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In an attempt to denaturalize perceptions of the region, Findlay points to the ways in which many writers and critics associate elements of nature with the Northwest, situating aspects such as the mountains, ocean, and (especially) salmon as the “heart and soul” of the region (1997: 37). He notes, however, that this sentiment is not actually a “timeless formation” of Pacific Northwest identity, but a relatively new development, an attachment that seems to increase as the region’s natural environment appears to diminish (Findlay 1997: 37–8). Although nature itself shifts and changes as do our ideas of it, the Pacific Northwest is able to appear as an authentic and enduring space because its identity has been linked to an unaltered natural environment. In making sense of how the region is understood today, Findlay argues, it is important to assess the ways in which ideas of nature often function as a powerful way of fixing in place what is in fact a “contingent and constructed” spatial identity (1997: 38).

The work of Washington writer Timothy Egan is useful to examine in assessing constructions of Pacific Northwest identity and recasting the region as a place closely connected to the natural world. As the Seattle correspondent for the *New York Times*, Egan has devoted himself to chronicling the vast changes that have shaped the region in recent years, describing in particular how debates and struggles over the environment might more aptly define the region. His book, *The Good Rain: Across Time and Terrain in the Pacific Northwest*, appeared in 1990 during a period when the Northwest was receiving increased attention from a variety of sources. The growing popularity of the West as a tourist destination and the renewed national interest in outdoors recreation of all sorts, the rise of Bill Gates and the new-tech economy based in part in the Pacific Northwest, the emergence of a hip music scene, and the popularity of prime-time television shows such as *Twin Peaks* and *Northern Exposure* – both

of which were filmed in Washington State, although the latter was set in a fictional town in Alaska – helped redirect the country’s attention toward the Pacific Northwest. Egan’s text traces many of these developments while examining the emergence of a distinct regional response to all this newfound fashionableness. He begins his book describing a popular Northwest bumper sticker that announces to outsiders, “We Ain’t Quaint,” remarking wryly that there seems to be “some kind of revolt under way” across the region (Egan 1990: 23). In the wake of a growing awareness of this relatively belated American region, locals often responded much like the rural folks “discovered” by the Eastern metropolis in Amy Kaplan’s study of nineteenth-century regionalism. In both cases, a refusal to serve as the nation’s quaint Other functions as a means of resisting larger national definitions of identity. Egan’s book devotes itself to countering the quaintness label, showing readers another side of the region’s development. Instead of locating a space whose occupants have special ties to the natural world, he finds a region where land disputes, resource wars, and other environmental struggles reign.

While the Pacific Northwest gained increased national attention in part because of its image as a youthful and undeveloped space, the region, as Egan notes, is in many ways no different from other American spaces in that it too faces many of the same developments that have already plagued the rest of the United States. Rather than regarding the Northwest as a unique environment set off from other American regions, Egan points out that we should understand its close relationship to the rest of the nation. He thus recounts the history of the Northwest’s development in the early nineteenth century, which began in part with the aid of Eastern capitalists such as John Jacob Astor. He tells of the place names originating in the eastern United States that define various landmarks across the region. The map of Oregon, for instance, is graced with cities named Salem, Medford, Springfield, and Portland. Meanwhile, Seattle was first known as “New York-Alki,” the last word deriving from Chinook jargon meaning “eventually,” an apt name for a city in which many boosterists placed their greatest hopes (Egan 1990: 26). Egan continues through the twentieth century, describing how one timber company, Weyerhaeuser, which previously had logged out Midwestern states such as Wisconsin and Minnesota, moved further west, forever changing the history and landscape of the Pacific Northwest. Far from being a refuge from the rest of the nation, then, the Pacific Northwest might be better regarded as a place undergoing forces of development similar to those that have already shaped and reshaped other American regions.

Throughout his book, Egan examines in particular the notion that a relationship to the natural environment accounts for Pacific Northwest identity. Although he falls into this trap himself at times and argues that nature defines the regional character (“Forget the boundary of Canada and America at the 49th Parallel . . . the Northwest is united by landscape, not divided by latitude lines. The regional icons – salmon and trees and mountains and water – spring from the elements. If people here become too far removed from those basic sources of life, then they lose the bond to a better world”), Egan also addresses the ways in which the history of white settlement

across the region might testify otherwise (1990: 11). Indeed, by defining the regional identity of the Pacific Northwest through particular understandings of nature, scholars risk engaging in a kind of crude geographical determinism that overlooks how human cultures themselves have shaped the land. Historian Richard White suggests that perhaps we have gotten it all wrong; by focusing on the ways geography has shaped regional cultures, we often neglect to make sense of how cultures themselves play a role in remaking nature (White 1983: 109). Like White and other scholars, Egan points to the ways in which ideas of nature have shifted over time across the region. In the nineteenth century, for instance, industrial development in the Northwest was often spurred by ideologies that were markedly less reverent toward the environment and presented nature as little more than “a disease awaiting the cure that had yet to cross the Rockies” (Egan 1990: 40). This legacy continues to shape the region’s identity today as the Northwest still fights its status as a national “resource colony” (Egan 1990: 174).

Egan thus devotes much time to addressing the ways the timber industry, previously and for decades an economic mainstay in the region, increasingly faces a dire future as once vast forests now house vast clearcuts. At one point he asks, with a slightly mock-elegiac tone, “[W]here have all the jobs gone? In the last decade, more timber was cleared from the Northwest than ever before, by the fewest amount of loggers ever employed for such volume. Like the big trees themselves, romance and heroism are fast fading from the lumberjack trade.” Even the organizations established to manage and protect the land turn out to be complicit with the environment’s demise. “A curious paradox is at work on the forests of the Olympic Peninsula,” he explains. “[W]hile the American government scolds Brazil for cutting and burning its tropical rain forest, the Forest Service is aiding and abetting the death of the American rain forest.” Likewise, as he notes, across the region the Department of Natural Resources has been popularly renamed the “Department of Nothing Remaining” (Egan 1990: 23, 48, 47).

Far from being a unique space whose enduring power is linked to a timeless natural environment, the Pacific Northwest instead faces a number of transformations as industry, government, and various local populations struggle over the region’s future. Egan writes of the land disputes initiated by various Northwest tribes whose ancestors signed numerous treaties that have since been ignored by the government. He tells of the clashes between members of a growing environmental movement and laborers in the timber and fishing industries. He also describes the environmental transformations that have dramatically remade the urban environments of the region in the short span of his own lifetime.

Gridlock and cocaine gangs rule the valley in the city where I live. Once it was full of small farmers and family merchants, a long, tree-lined boulevard with views straight up to the north spine of Mount Rainier. Now the farmers are all gone, and many Seattle merchants operate from behind bullet-proof windows, and the walls are spray-painted with the slogans of young men who kill one another because somebody is

wearing the wrong-colored hat. . . . I drive through the valley to get to my home; sometimes, stuck in traffic, I daydream off Rainier's distant glaciers. Other times, I'm an urban warrior, adrenalin-primed for combat, even if the only battle is one to beat a yellow light. (Egan 1990: 34)

In Egan's descriptions of the Northwest, it becomes clear that the region's reliance on an enduring sense of nature to provide it with a strong sense of self is in need of rethinking. By adopting a particular sense of nature to give the region an identity, residents across the Northwest overlook the ways in which nature itself has a history, the ways in which ideas of nature shift and change across time and place, and the ways in which groups of people often clash with each other as they struggle to define their relationship to the natural world.

In an interesting move, Egan's book begins with a quotation from Ken Kesey's popular novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion* (1964). With an opening that is marked by as much reverence as irony, Egan pays tribute to one of the region's most celebrated literary texts, a novel that offers a passionate if somewhat confused response to the regional changes experienced during the mid-twentieth century. Telling the story of the Stammers, a long-time Oregon logging family, *Sometimes a Great Notion* chronicles the cost of expansion in ecological and personal terms. The novel traces generations of a self-reliant family who have been forced to confront various changes as the landscape that long provided them with viable livelihoods undergoes rapid transformation. When a labor union threatens to step in and alter the relationship that these independent loggers have forged with the land, figures like Hank Stamper struggle to save their jobs and regional identities. The archetypal independent Western hero, Hank battles his Oregon neighbors, vowing he'll never give an inch. He likewise battles the Northwest environment, as a logger who both loves and destroys the Oregon forests that provide him with a livelihood, and as a businessman who fights the river that serves as his last chance for economic and personal survival. Kesey sets up Hank as a misguided but sympathetic character, indicating by the end of the novel, as the hero loses everything, that stubborn, self-reliant Western figures like Hank ultimately cannot survive in this new West.

In portraying Hank's contradictory attitudes toward the landscape and in showing how survival is an impossibility for him, Kesey works to recast conventions of the classic Western, a genre to which he uneasily pays homage. As critic Elaine B. Safer points out, while Kesey uses the conventions of the quest, a central aspect of the popular Western, he also interrupts the narrative trajectory. In questing literature, the hero leaves his community, undergoes a series of adventures, and returns to his people who reward him for his heroism. In *Sometimes a Great Notion*, however, heroism and its rewards are withheld (Safer 1988: 141). Using another twist of the classic Western, Kesey restores Indian characters and concerns to a genre that is well known for marginalizing or excluding native perspectives. At one point, he describes an Indian elder who rises from his couch "to stop the roll-over in his TV set." As the narrator explains, "[h]e spends a lot of time adjusting his westerns" (Kesey 1964:

203). The image provides readers with an apt description of what American Indians face as they struggle to find themselves in a region and form that have been popularly defined by others.

At times, though, Kesey's narrative is also marked by an ambivalence toward native characters that limits the ways his narrative manages to address alternative perspectives in the genre. The character Indian Jenny, for instance, comes close to providing a counter-view to Western clichés but ultimately ends up functioning within the stereotype of the profaned modern Indian. Portrayed as broken down and often drunk, Indian Jenny serves as the town prostitute, her monthly government checks enabling her to be a frequent presence in the neighborhood bars. When the resistant loggers overhear her muttering something about the moon and the tides, Hank sets into action, devising a plan that will allow him to move timber down the river to the buyers. Although the plan seems to provide him with an answer to his dilemma, the solution turns deadly as the river takes lives and ultimately destroys Hank's chances of survival. As the narrative closes, Indian Jenny is left to the side of the action, a figure largely forgotten and abandoned. Having served as a shadowy Other in the text, her presence needed but not fully accommodated by the rest of the characters, she is considered expendable by the novel's end.

In the years since the publication of Kesey's popular Oregon novel, numerous authors have arrived on the scene who are interested in questioning myths of Northwest identity by restoring other voices and visions to the regional picture; I have room here to discuss only two of them. Both novelist Marilynne Robinson and poet, novelist, and short-story writer Sherman Alexie offer visions of the Northwest that counter popular understandings of regional identity. A former resident of the region, Marilynne Robinson grew up in Idaho, the setting of her 1980 novel, *Housekeeping*. Raised on the Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian reservation, Sherman Alexie has produced volumes of poetry and prose as well as a successful screenplay for the anti-Western film, *Smoke Signals* (1998), directed by Arapaho film-maker Chris Eyre. In different ways, both authors question sentimental understandings of the region. Foregrounding class and gender issues, Robinson recasts the traditional male hero of the Western, featuring instead a community of women who inscribe the region differently. Alexie addresses questions of class and regional identity, linking both to a reading of race and place in the contemporary Indian West.

In an interview, Marilynne Robinson once described an awareness she had while working on her novel *Housekeeping* that she was rewriting the West, restoring in particular women's presence in popular representations of the region (Galehouse 2000: 118). Working against the formula Western, which often consigns women of all races to the margins or else in roles that are peripheral to the real action of the story, Robinson tells the story of Ruth Stone, a young, parentless girl who leaves her sister and community in order to join her Aunt Sylvie in a life of travel. The novel examines Western rural life and the place that white women typically occupy in it. A radical departure from popular representations of white Western women, Aunt Sylvie doesn't move through the world in traditional ways. Sylvie has many odd

characteristics: she collects newspapers that she never manages to throw out, sleeps on park benches in the middle of the day, wears her coat at all times, and tells stories, each of which has “to do with a train or a bus station” (Robinson 1980: 68). Having lost contact with her husband and most of her family at some point, she has spent much of her life drifting through the country, an anomaly of sorts because of her identity as a female transient.

Opting out of the world of housework and domesticity, Sylvie defies the gendered politics of mobility in order to experience the openness of a transient life, recruiting her young niece along the way. By featuring the possibilities of Sylvie’s life, the novel calls attention to the ways in which the classic Western generally presents mobility as the prerogative of the Anglo male hero, a privilege largely withheld from women as a group. Although they are often presented as being closer to nature, white women are frequently depicted as removed from the natural world and are thus restricted in their movement through it. Indians, both male and female, also receive a similar fate, a point that is not directly addressed in the novel. Throughout the narrative, Robinson instead focuses on Anglo female characters who manage to establish a different relationship to place. Defying the codes of the Western that dictate more moderate lives for white women, Sylvie and Ruth set out for parts unknown. Their travels are not part of the myth of the expansive American Adam and his quest to be the first; nor are the two women interested in conquest and ownership. Instead, they venture outside the spatial configurations of white womanhood in order to achieve a different experience of region.

Sherman Alexie has also devoted himself to rewriting the spatial features of the classic Western, revising along the way aspects of Pacific Northwest regionalism that encode Euro-American definitions of place. Questioning understandings of Northwest identity that suggest the region’s character is closely tied to the environment, Alexie shows that the Northwest might be better characterized by longstanding struggles over land between Indians and white settlers. In his collection of short stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), the broken treaties of the nineteenth century exert a presence in the region as land disputes of the previous century take new form, this time characterized by indigenous struggles against utility companies, law enforcement officers, and other representatives of the state. Complete with HUD homes, diet Pepsi cans, 7–11 stores, and commodity cheese, the setting of Alexie’s narrative is an irredeemably modern landscape, a space whose residents struggle for survival and sovereignty, a land marked more by poverty than pastoralism. Images of Custer, forced sterilizations, Mount Rushmore, uranium mining, white sitcom families, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs collide in the text as Alexie works to portray the region from an indigenous perspective.

During a selfconscious re-enactment of the classic Western shootout on Main Street, for instance, the narrator in one story enters a reservation 7–11 during the graveyard shift, confronting a frightened store manager who nervously keeps an eye his every move. When he finally reaches the counter with his purchases, the relieved clerk manages to maintain polite conversation. “‘Will this be all?’ he asked . . . in that company effort to make me do some impulse shopping. Like adding a clause

onto a treaty. *We'll take Washington and Oregon and you get six pine trees and a brand-new Chrysler Cordova*" (Alexie 1993: 183–4). Alexie stages various other showdowns in the text as modern Indians still struggle to claim a rightful place in the region. When an Indian driving in a residential neighborhood in Seattle is pulled over by a white police officer, for instance, he is asked, "What are you doing out here? . . . You're making people nervous. You don't fit the profile of the neighborhood." In a comment that captures quite well the politics of space shaping the narrative as a whole, the character responds, "I wanted to tell him that I didn't really fit the profile of the country but I knew it would just get me into more trouble" (Alexie 1993: 182–3).

Throughout his collection, Alexie features various Indian characters who struggle to redefine the spatial ideologies and regional discourses that effectively remove Indian presence from the land, taking care to show how certain ways of thinking about place operate to exclude or marginalize different populations. In doing so, Alexie often parodies myths of the Northwest as a region whose citizens have forged a special tie with nature, taking on in particular the trite beliefs associated with the mainstream environmental movement. One story, for instance, opens in 1974 with a description of the US exhibit at the World's Fair in Spokane, a display featuring depoliticized and dehistoricized references to Indian culture.

All the countries have exhibitions like art from Japan and pottery from Mexico and mean-looking people talking about Germany. In one little corner there's a statue of an Indian who's supposed to be some chief or another. I press a little button and the statue talks and moves its arms over and over in the same motion. The statue tells the crowd we have to take care of the earth because it is our mother. I know that and James says he knows more. He says the earth is our grandmother and that technology is our mother and that they both hate each other. (Alexie 1993: 129)

Here Alexie calls attention to the tendency of environmentalists in the Pacific Northwest to build their arguments for nature on aspects of Indian culture, including figures such as Chief Seattle, whose famous speech, long a favorite among Euro-American nature lovers, has undergone numerous bad translations that often misrepresent Indian beliefs. Over the years, various Euro-American groups who have accepted such borrowings have been taken to task for profiting and even trivializing a belief-system that they fail to fully understand. The irony here is that the United States, though far from being a force that favors indigenous views of the land, nevertheless appropriates aspects of Indian culture, incorporating decontextualized slogans as a way of representing itself to the world. Even as the country portrays itself as a multicultural space, a nation that includes indigenous people in its definitions of self, Alexie demonstrates how US concerns, whether political, cultural, or environmental, actually operate in a different fashion. Recalling the ways the Pacific Northwest salmon debates and other struggles over nature often centrally impact Indian lives even though input from the tribes is usually not solicited by mainstream environmentalists, Alexie reminds readers: "Ain't no salmon left in our river. Just a school bus and a few hundred basketballs" (1993: 39).

Alexie's visions of the Pacific Northwest landscape show us the underside of dominant regional images that depict the character of the space as tied closely to concerns about nature. His writings demonstrate how, to the contrary, geographical identities, place-based identities, and regional discourses are always situated and contingent, always historically and culturally specific, and always subject to disagreement and debate. Like understandings of the nation, productions of regional identity often have negative consequences for less powerful groups whose experiences and beliefs are not taken into consideration. In Alexie's writings, the Pacific Northwest is not simply the hip, fashionable region it has come to be known as in recent years. Instead, it is a complicated and contested region whose history and future identity are still being worked out and debated.

Alaska and the Far North

As another relatively new region on the national stage, Alaska allows us to uncover aspects of nationalism and regionalism that are not frequently addressed in studies of American history, literature, and culture. Widely regarded as the nation's "Last Frontier," Alaska has often fascinated Americans because of its status as a place set off from the settled spaces of the Lower 48.¹ The region is largely considered to be wild terrain, the quintessential home of North American nature, a land that helps draw the United States' frontier past into the present era. Although it remains far from undeveloped terrain, in the dominant geographical imagination of the United States Alaska is nevertheless considered unsullied, unspoiled, and largely unmarked by culture. In this way, the region functions as "anachronistic space," Anne McClintock's term for geography figured as primitive or out of step with history, where time has somehow disappeared and where progress has long ago been halted in its tracks. Anachronistic space for McClintock is land "perpetually . . . marooned and historically abandoned." Emerging as a colonial response that places cultural and geographical Others outside the Enlightenment time of the European self, anachronistic space figures spatial difference as an historical rupture. Alaska's location *vis-à-vis* the rest of the nation, its position as a northern terrain physically unlinked to the continental United States, allows it to exist in this "permanently anterior time" (McClintock 1995: 40–1, 30). The region's appeal lies in its position as antimodern space, its apparent ability to resist change and the ravages of history, while remaining fully archaic.

Emerging out of a particular set of circumstances, such understandings of Alaska were aided by the regional literature that appeared after the US purchase of Alaska in 1867. Prior to being an American region, Alaska was the site of other nations' national projects. Russian, Spanish, French, and British voyages in the eighteenth century, for instance, made what is present-day Alaska a desired destination for various European explorers in search of seal pelts and the ever-elusive Northwest Passage. As the first voyagers to successfully make claims on the land, Russian

explorers later named the region “Russian America,” keeping the land under colonial administration until 1867. The native people of Alaska – the Eskimos, Aleuts, and Indians – waged several battles against their colonizers (both Russian and American), but were eventually defeated and ultimately had no say in the land transfer.

The US purchase of the region occurred for particular reasons; according to historian Walter LaFeber, after the Civil War the United States became interested in creating an overseas empire designed to address the problems of agrarian and industrial overproduction. As the primary architect of what LaFeber calls the “New Empire,” Secretary of State William Henry Seward negotiated the purchase of Alaska in order to secure a strategic base for the nation’s overseas markets (LaFeber 1963: 25–6, 407–17). At the time, the region was intended to be the first in a long line of territorial acquisitions the nation sought in order to create a “security perimeter” of US-owned lands in the Pacific (Crapol and Schonberger 1972: 136). Much of the early regional literature of Alaska thus appeared in the form of exploration narratives and government reports. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, this new American region attracted other uses as the tourism industry discovered the aesthetic potentials of Alaska. The California naturalist John Muir made several trips to Alaska, and his accounts of the glaciers, mountains, and forests of the region did much to popularize the land as a unique natural wonder in the nation’s popular imagination. Although he would later lament the rapid growth of travel in the region, Muir’s writings helped to open Alaska to other nature tourists and to reposition Alaska as a prime object of interest for the growing preservationist movement.

With the series of gold strikes in the late nineteenth century across Alaska and western Canada, and especially after gold was discovered near Bonanza Creek in the Yukon Territory, Alaska and the Canadian North captured new international attention. Figures like Rex Beach, James Oliver Curwood, and Jack London all contributed to the imaginative production of Alaska by transforming the region into a new setting for their frontier adventure narratives. As the most popular frontier writer of the region, Jack London wrote a series of short stories and novels in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century whose settings continually shift between the Yukon and Alaska to the extent that even today readers and critics misrecognize the Klondike as US terrain. For these writers, Alaska and the Yukon were places to experience outdoor adventures and to test one’s strength and stamina. In an era when Anglo-Saxon males felt themselves overwhelmed by the new immigration and feared becoming emasculated by domesticated life in the cities, the Far North was viewed as a last refuge, a safe haven for beleaguered Euro-Americans in search of invigorating outdoors experiences. This understanding has held such power that today, Alaska is still regarded as a space uniquely set off from the rest of the country, a position that provides the region with much of its symbolic capital in the popular imagination.

Like the nineteenth-century writers Kaplan discussed, who looked to locales outside the eastern United States in search of spaces seemingly untouched by the encroachments of modern life, many Americans today continue to figure Alaska as a vast,



Figure 24.1 Photograph of tourists on a cruise ship in the Glacier Bay National Park, by Susan Kollin.

undeveloped land that helps recapture aspects of the nation's past. Such understandings of Alaska operate in a manner that shares much in common with what Kaplan regards as a central motivation for US regionalism. Positioned as a frontier or wilderness refuge in the national imaginary, Alaska serves as a "prenational" site for locating the "primal origins" of the nation (Kaplan 1991: 263). Yet even as the region has been understood as a uniquely wild space in the nation's geographical imagination, there are many writers who are working to recast these larger perceptions of the region. It is clear, for instance, that such visions of the land do not serve the region's indigenous populations particularly well. Tlingit Indian author, educator, and linguist Nora Dauenhauer is one figure who has sought to redirect popular understandings of the region. In her poetry, plays, and personal essays, Dauenhauer is careful to demonstrate that Alaska is not an empty space awaiting the arrival of Euro-American adventurers or an unclaimed terrain to be used for purposes of self-glorification and self-promotion. Over the years Dauenhauer and other Alaska Native writers have worked at envisioning different ways of understanding Alaska, creating new images and portraits of the land that disrupt the regional discourses serving larger Euro-American national projects.

In her poetry, for instance, Dauenhauer examines how the burgeoning tourism industry that brings nature enthusiasts to "exotic" lands has threatened the integrity of indigenous communities across the state. In recent years, for instance, travelers have been able to take chartered flights to tour Eskimo fishing camps in the Arctic, spending as little as half a day and a few hundred dollars for the opportunity. In the poem "Village Tour, Nome Airport," Dauenhauer writes of a white tour guide with a "glossy smile" who "slides" over to a Native seamstress and asks if she can touch her coat. She does so without waiting for permission, later explaining to the tour group that they "make them by hand." The poem expresses a certain degree of self-consciousness about the tourist gaze, as the narrator is likewise positioned as an outsider and a participant in a travel industry that is disruptive to the Native community. In that sense, the poem questions certain dichotomies between colonizer and colonized. Later, the narrator watches as the seamstress, "[a]s if frozen," sits in silence (Dauenhauer 1988: 27). Here the exotic Other – in this case the Alaskan Native woman – is recontextualized, reconfigured, and revalued in the white tourist economy as a new object of interest and wonder, an object to be touched and even sampled. Although Dauenhauer does not address what the Native seamstress might be thinking, the woman's silence nevertheless says much about the indignities of having her culture and her privacy invaded by these visitors. At the end of the poem, a youth in handcuffs waiting to be transported to California also becomes incorporated into the tour as the guide knowingly tells her group, "They all go to jail" (Dauenhauer 1988: 27).

Dauenhauer also addresses the environmentalisms that shape images of Alaska as a glorified Last Frontier, the staging grounds for particular, exclusive uses of nature. Her often-anthologized poem "Genocide," for instance, tells of the conflicts between subsistence living and wilderness protection. Echoing the form of Japanese haiku, Dauenhauer writes,

Picketing the Eskimo
 Whaling Commission,
 an over-fed English girl
 stands with a sign,
 "Let the Whales Live."
 (1988: 26)

Here the environmentalism of certain outside groups that has long shaped Alaska as a wilderness remove turns out to have quite negative consequences for the indigenous people of the region. Ultimately the poem reveals how new forms of imperialism emerge as antiwhaling campaigns and other preservationist movements become forces contributing to Alaska Native dispossession and displacement in the land. Dauenhauer, like other Alaska Native writers, is interested in questioning the goals and purposes of the mainstream environmental movement. Whose interests are valued and placed in the foreground and whose interests are overlooked and marginalized become important concerns in recasting larger visions and uses of the region.

Tlingit author Robert Davis also writes about Alaska in a way that connects with Dauenhauer's work and recasts what Kaplan argues is the cultural work of regionalism. In his poem, "The Albino Tlingit Carving Factory," Davis writes of the ideology of consumption that radically transforms Tlingit artists' relationship to their artwork, environments, and communities but also ironically provides monetary support for them. The nature tourists who yearn to own a piece of the nation's primitive past they believe they are encountering during their visits to Alaska often seek carvings whose value they do not fully understand. Davis thus describes the necessary shortcuts the Tlingit artists take in their production of tourist arts. They do not spend time searching out the "perfect grained red cedar." They do not "talk to the trees" or properly season their boards. Instead, the materials they use come from "Spenard Building Supply" in Anchorage at "\$2.15 per board foot" (Davis 1986: 23). These shortcuts serve as a form of resistance, a way of countering the encroaching commodification of Tlingit culture in the tourist industry and in certain forms of New Age environmentalism. A century earlier John Muir expressed his dismay at what he witnessed during his cruises through the Inside Passage, when visitors turned away from the majestic glaciers, directing their attention to the sides of the tour ships where Tlingits sold their wares. Muir's consternation arose because he considered the natural world of Alaska's glaciers, mountains, forests, and seas more authentic than the cultural world of the Indians as presented in the tourist trade (Muir 1988: 245). Like many Euro-American travelers in this period, Muir regarded both the natural world and indigenous cultures as largely corrupted by contact with whites, and thus believed that the Tlingits he encountered on his cruises functioned as little more than a debased version of the "real thing."

This dichotomy between genuine and inauthentic Indians, between a real and a false Alaska, operates as a powerful white invention that the Tlingit carvers throw back on the tourists. If the white nature tourists feel anxiety about their encounters

with the native Other and have concerns that they may in fact be duped, that what they are buying may not be the genuine goods they desire, then Davis and the other carvers he describes exploit this opportunity. They give the tourists what they expect – the inauthentic tourist fare. Davis explains:

We do not go to the iron-rich cliffs
for red ochre paint mixed in stone
paintbowl with dog salmon eggs
spit through mouthful of spruce bark.
Nor do we try for the subdued blue-green
of copper sulphate with virgin's urine,
or black from the deepest charcoal.

You want crude carvings?
you want them harsh and vicious?
Okay,
they might be African for all you care.
Hell, we have to make a living too.

(Davis 1986: 23)

Although ever-anxious to encounter authentic Native culture, white tourists in Alaska are often inadequately equipped to distinguish between the myriad cultures that they have deemed “primitive.” For the visitor, in fact, a basic interchangeability exists among all so-called unmodern people. If it is a truism that the oppressed are required to know their dominators more intimately than their dominators know them, then Davis and the other Tlingit carvers he writes about may be said to have more than a strong acquaintance with white desires and yearnings. Delivering what the buyers seem to expect anyway, the Indians at the carving factory give the tourists what they want. After all, they have to earn a wage for themselves in the new cash economy.

Ultimately the presence of Raven, a trickster figure among Pacific Northwest Indians, serves to dislodge the problems imposed by these larger national ecologies, by outside visions of place that are imported to the region. In his longer poem “Saginaw Bay: I Keep Going Back,” Davis envisions the world through Tlingit philosophy, writing of Raven, “[c]ocksure smooth talker, good looker,” and telling of how it all began. Once Raven throws the light,

everything takes form –
creatures flee to forest animals,
hide in fur. Some choose the sea,
turn to salmon, always escaping.
Those remaining in the light
stand as men, dumb and full of fears.

(Davis 1986: 14)

For Raven, the world is so remarkable that even he is amazed at its creation. It is interesting to note that in this piece human beings do not operate as the primary ecological players. Instead, Raven along with the forest animals and the salmon are central figures in the world, while men and women are thought to lack a similar knowledge and thus remain full of fear. This story of beginnings differs from the accounts associated with Euro-American origins and history in Alaska. Davis, for instance, tells of a site near Kake named Hamilton Bay, "This place some European captain named for himself / so it could exist properly. (Go and subdue the earth and / name everything in it" (1986: 22). The author remains clearly critical of the spirit of possession and dispossession, of those who, taking up the task of renaming the land, thus believe they have somehow called the world into being themselves.

Davis recounts the history of the region in the wake of cultural contact, building on traditional oral narratives to recount the arrival of whites.

I've heard of men in black robes who came
 instructing heathen natives:
 outlaw demon shamanism,
 do away with potlatch,
 pagan ceremony,
 totem idolatry.
 Get rid of your old ways.
 The people listened.

They dynamited the few Kake totems –
 mortuary poles fell with bones,
 clan identifiers lost in powder,
 storytellers blown to pieces . . .

People began to move differently, tense.
 They began to talk differently, mixed.
 Acted ashamed of gunny sacks of k'ink;
 and mayonnaise jars of stink eggs,
 and no one mashed blueberries
 with salmon eggs anymore.

(Davis 1986: 16–17)

Davis speaks of the changes thrust upon Tlingits from outside forces and the effects these forces have on the ways his people understand themselves and each other, the ways they comprehend their history and their relationship to the natural world. Ultimately, his response to cultural upheaval involves resisting the genocidal forces that threaten to annihilate Tlingit culture.

When a logging company from Outside moves into his community, the owners bring heavy cables which they erect from the beach to the woods, and later allow bulldozers to leave deep trails in the ground. The upheaval that the Tlingits have

endured under white advancement takes both a social and an environmental form here. The Tlingit community is suddenly invaded by “[r]edneck rejects, tobacco spitters” who get drunk in their bunkhouses at day’s end, harass the Tlingit women, and brag about the loads they carried, “who got maimed / and did they take it like a man” (Davis 1986: 18–19). For Davis, the loggers’ violence is symptomatic of the larger disease of expansion and conquest: “Some men can’t help it,” he explains, “they take up too much space, / and always need more” (1986: 19). The logging company, which provides only a few jobs for the Tlingits, also leaves its marks on the land, violently gnawing away at the forest

till the sky once swimming with branches
becomes simply sky, till there is only
a scarred stubble of clearcut
like a head without its scalp of hair.

(Davis 1986: 19)

As Native groups across Alaska continue to face difficult decisions about development and land use, many of the smaller communities such as Kake are hit especially hard. These communities, already facing a shortage of jobs, are often targeted by large corporations and multinationals as prime sources of cheap labor and raw materials. For Tlingits who are struggling to enter the cash economy, the tradeoff between tradition and economic opportunities complicates matters. In the wake of the congressional passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) in 1971, whereby Native land rights across Alaska were extinguished and replaced by the establishment of landowning corporations, the struggle for economic independence and environmental sovereignty has still not been settled. Davis’s collection of poetry aims to rethink popular understandings of nature that shape the region, dismantling along the way popular stereotypes that depict Alaska as a primordial wilderness region awaiting nature enthusiasts who seek to throw off a confining modernity in favor of a more authentic and primitive world. His work instead introduces the expansion of white culture and capital as central concerns for nature advocacy in Alaska, and reminds us that regional identities are often contested and in need of revision.

Recasting Regionalism

By focusing attention on local geographies and spatial particularities, regional studies enable us to assess the ways in which dominant national paradigms have failed to adequately address the specificity of US cultural regions and often overlooked important regional differences. Because regions such as Alaska and the Pacific Northwest occupy a marginal position in American cultural paradigms, our critical studies have not kept up with the United States’ expansionist activities, nor come to terms with

the consequences of its incorporation of new lands. While regionalism aims to rectify oversights in nationalist visions, such studies face their own problems when certain geographical areas become solidified as constant, unified, or coherent entities. Rather than thinking of American regions as a given, however, we might instead understand them as objects constructed by a whole set of cultural practices. The scrutiny with which we examine national studies must be employed when we conceptualize regional studies; instead of regarding regions as *a priori* zones into which the nation is logically carved or divided, we might examine how regional identities themselves operate as discursive formations. Rather than seek out concrete geographical entities, we might devote ourselves to analyzing what Anne Goldman calls the “multiple interruptions and breaks in the national map” (2000: 9).

In this way, we might want to take seriously the observations about regional identity made by Alan Holt, the frontier adventurer in James Oliver Curwood’s novel *The Alaskan*, who argues that the case of Alaska has tremendous implications for the ways we theorize American regional studies. As Curwood’s protagonist explains, Alaska offers a dramatic transformation of the nation’s contours, repositioning all American regions by pushing the West further toward the Pacific. The incorporation of Alaska resituates the “West Coast,” he argues, by making California the Midwest, the geographical center of the United States. Taking this observation one step further, we may also note that Alaska itself ceases to be West at the point when the Aleutian Islands cross over the International Date Line and become East. If the history of the West is the “story of how the American map came to have the boundaries it shows today,” then the incorporation of places like Alaska cannot be overlooked even as the area moves outside the traditional American trajectory, encompassing not one but multiple regional identities (Cronon et al. 1992: 15).

NOTE

- 1 The discussion of Alaska appearing here is adapted from my book, *Nature’s State: Imagining Alaska as the Last Frontier* (Kollin 2001).

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