

Crossing the Long Northern Border:
Rhetoric and Reality in the Cascadian Region of Western North America

Carl Abbott

In the 1990s, many observers of the northwestern coast of North America began to argue that the region could best be understood as a single transborder region whose similarities outweighed the differences between Canada and the United States. One version of “Cascadia” emphasizes the commonalities of natural environment and the ways in which this environment creates common economic and cultural patterns. A second version emphasizes the emergence of an interactive metropolitan complex that includes Vancouver, Seattle, Portland, and smaller cities along a north-south corridor. The decade saw a number of efforts to develop institutions to serve such a transnational region. Closer analysis, however, suggests that Cascadia is more a dream than a reality. In many ways, the international border was more complexly and tightly regulated in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century than in the nineteenth century. Cascadian economic and environmental initiatives must now take place in a highly bureaucratized context that undercuts supposed similarities. Moreover, Vancouver, Seattle and Portland, which have substantially similar economic roles, are likely to remain competitive rather than complementary during coming decades.

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At the start of the twenty first century, according to many, international borders were fast becoming relics. Germans and Italians were members of the same European Union. Guest workers crossed and re-crossed the borders of Europe, Asia, and the Americas. Transnational corporations sought production sites across dozens of national divides. Global financiers shifted wealth around the world with a few strokes on the computer keypad.

The northwest quadrant of North America has heard the same message as North American Free Trade Area followed the Canada-United States Free Trade Agreement. Shoppers flow from one country to the other depending on bargains and exchange rates, while tourist bureaus target cross-border recreation. Competing for attention are new regional designations that span the long western border—the countercultural Ecotopia, the scholarly suggestions of a Great Raincoast, and, most prominently, the recent idea of an economic or ecological Cascadia.²

The following comments offer historical perspective on this vision of a unified Northwest. Despite the attractions of a Cascadian vision of a region that transcends nations, I propose the counter intuitive suggestion that the national border actually divides Canada and the U.S. more thoroughly now than a century ago. Webs of regulations now belie its physical openness. In the nineteenth century, life in the Old Northwest reflected the international Age of Mobility. In the twentieth, the New Northwest was deeply enmeshed in the Age of Bureaucracy.

Proponents of a transnational region emphasize that similarities of climate and resource endowment from northern California to Alaska have shaped a common regional economy with similar political concerns and community values. They also suggest that the region's position on the Pacific Rim creates parallel economic opportunities on the two sides of the border and invites the construction of transnational institutions.

The core of "Cascadia" is the heavily settled corridor from Vancouver, British Columbia south to Eugene, Oregon. The three metropolitan complexes of Greater Vancouver, Seattle-Tacoma, and Portland-Salem house 59 percent of the 13.4 million residents of British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon. This metropolitan Northwest also contains smaller cities such as Victoria, British Columbia, Bellingham, Washington, and Eugene, Oregon. It is networked internally along the I-5 axis, interfaces with the global economy, and pivots on Seattle. Framing this "Main Street Cascadia" is a larger northwest that may extend inland to Idaho, Montana and Alberta and north to Alaska and Yukon territory.

To provide a European comparison, we might think of Norway and Sweden. Total population is comparable, as are the three major cities of Stockholm, Goteborg, and Oslo. Development and population are concentrated in the south, with vast mountains and forests reaching northward.

Much of the recent rhetoric about the Northwest assumes that borders count for little when wealth comes in bytes rather than carloads. Information is so portable, say the enthusiasts of electronic communication, that national boundaries will erode under a hail of faxes, e-mail messages, and hits on websites.³ The vision is a world reconstructed around direct connections of person to person, people to people, and corporation to subcontractor.

However, historical perspective shows that the U.S.-Canada border has become more important rather than less important during the course of the twentieth century.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the northwestern quadrant of North America was a single arena for resource production. The border was permeable to migratory workers, settlers, and investors. Gold rush prospectors from California treated British Columbia as an American annex. Immigrant merchants and workers traversed the border as members of binational family networks. Aboriginal Canadians provided a migratory labor force for Puget Sound mills. Farmers created common borderland farming regions and lifestyles that straddled the official border.⁴

These examples confirm the interpretation outlined more than half a century ago by Marcus Lee Hansen in The Mingling of the Canadian and American Peoples. The pioneer of historical study of the Atlantic migrations of the nineteenth century, Hansen noted the openness of the continental border through most of its history.⁵

In turn, Hansen's work is a key for placing the permeable forty-ninth parallel in the context of global history. Northwestern America developed as part of the great opening of the world economic system between 1815 and 1914. The nineteenth century was an Age of Mobility for Europeans, North Americans, and Asians. Serfs gained freedom in eastern Europe and slaves in the Americas. Industrializing economies drew farmers and peasants by the millions into Milan, London, Chicago, Shanghai. They also required huge flows of workers across national borders--both permanent immigrants and temporary sojourners attracted by specific jobs. Nations in need of new workers eased international migration at both ends of the journey. Chinese moved to western America and southeast Asia. Indians provided much of the labor force for British colonial Africa. Roughly 50 million Europeans migrated across the Atlantic between 1815 and 1914; perhaps twice that many crossed national frontiers within Europe.⁶ Immigrants flocked from Ireland to England, France to Algeria, Germany to Brazil, Italy to Argentina . . . and Quebec to New Hampshire, Minnesota to Manitoba, and Washington state to British Columbia.

That open economy changed with the Great War in Europe. Four years of devastating war, socialist revolutions, a Great Depression, a second war, and a forty-year Cold War all helped to transform the growing nationalisms of Europe and the Americas into rigid institutional barriers. Nations erected barriers to trade that have taken half a century to remove. The same governments created obstacles to international movement as they sought to hold their pool of workers and soldiers and to exclude dangerous influences. In the United States, scientific racism coupled with economic self-interest to limit Asian im-

migration, problematize Mexican immigration, and curtail European immigration. Control of borders has remained a central theme of U.S. politics and policy—most certainly so after September 11. North of the international border, Canadian nationalism also intensified after 1920, with results apparent in Canadian attitudes toward to the Alaskan border and the Canadianization of European immigrants.⁷

The twentieth century thus became an Age of Bureaucracy characterized by fascist police, Soviet aparatchiks, welfare bureaucrats in social democracies, and organization men in U.S. corporations. Even a relatively underdeveloped nation state such as the United States penetrates daily life in ways unheard of in the nineteenth century, from income taxation to Medicare to automobile safety regulation to neighborhood raids by the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Elaborate border bureaucracies and institutions now regulate the surviving parts of the old resource economy in northwestern America, forcing loggers and salmon fishers to be fluent with words and regulations. Even Indian peoples find that much of their time and energy is devoted to negotiating the intricacies of a tightly regulated border.⁸ The events of September 11, 2001, have also increased the importance of immigration controls.

It is this context of bureaucracy that makes me cautious about the popular idea of "Cascadia" as either a latent or an emergent region that transcends the international border. I worry that in both its ecological and economic versions, Cascadia is too good to be true.

The ecological Cascadia has roots in the idea of a cultural "ecotopia" based on appropriate small-scale technologies. The most eloquent statement has been Seattleite David McCloskey's map of a "great green land on the northeast Pacific Rim." McCloskey's Cascadia is an effort to forge a new awareness of human relationships with the regional landscape. But it also harkens back to the earlier era when resources trumped political borders. McCloskey's evocative map (drawn in 1988) is a picture of water and its flows from northern California to Alaska. Provinces, states, and nations disappear under the imperative of the hydrologic cycle that endlessly links Pacific Slope and Pacific Ocean. Other depictions of an ecological Cascadia emphasize the north-south extensions of mountains and lowlands that link the landscape (and carried early settlers and workers easily north and south).⁹

Ecological Cascadia gains evocative power from the way in which water itself reverberates through our regional literature. Rivers fill titles of our books--The River Why, A River Runs Through It, Riverwalking, River Song. Rainstorms pounding off the Pacific structure Ivan Doig's Winter Brothers, introduce H. L. Davis's Honey in the Horn, and drive the action in Ken Kesey's Sometimes a Great Notion.¹⁰ The first paragraphs of the latter are virtually a prose reproduction of McCloskey's map:

Along the western slopes of the Oregon Coastal Range . . . come look: the hysterical crashing of tributaries as they merge into the Wakonda Auga River . . . The first little washes flashing like thick rushing winds through sheep sorrel and clover, ghost fern and nettle, sheering, cutting . . . forming branches. The,

through bearberry and salmonberry, blueberry and blackberry, the branches crashing into creeks, into streams. Finally, in the foothills, through tamarack and sugar pine . . . and silver spruce--and the green and blue mosaic of Douglas fir--the actual river falls five hundred feet . . . and look: opens out upon the fields.

All this being said, we still find ourselves back at the bureaucratic realization that environments in the waning years of the twentieth century are protected through laws, regulations, and plans. For an example close to my home, the powerful Columbia River is confined and managed by a Northwest Power Planning Council, a Bonneville Power Administration, a Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, a Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, and dozens of other complex organizations that try to balance the conflicting demands of industries, nations, and communities.¹¹

Economic Cascadia is a quite different take on a transnational region, rooted in enthusiasm about the globalizing economy. Proponents argue that residents of the Vancouver-Seattle-Portland corridor share both values and economic interests. The people of this Main Street Cascadia, says Canadian Alan Artibise, share love of the outdoors, a sense of isolation from Ottawa or Washington, D.C., an orientation to Asian markets and immigrants, and involvement in the rise of the information economy. In the most expansive view, this metropolitan corridor carries along as many as five states (Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Alaska), two provinces (British Columbia, Alberta), and the Yukon territory.¹²

However, this conception too invites cautious consideration because of the paradoxical character of the new western economy itself. Even though the economy of "Cascadia" is heavily based on the fluid commodity of ideas, it has still developed in the context of a controlled and regulated border.

The western border is permeable for personal consumption such as shopping and vacationing. Vancouver and Seattle news media depict the other city primarily as a scene for consumption.¹³ The idea of a multinational Cascadian region has been most visible in advertisements for a "two-nation vacation."

Nevertheless, national pride and identity still override efforts to define common agendas for the organization of economic production. NAFTA has loosened trade, but immigration and capital investment still take place within national borders. It makes a difference whether a Korean electronics firm decides to invest its \$2 billion in Oregon or British Columbia. It makes a difference whether someone from Hong Kong decides to move to Vancouver or Seattle. The government of British Columbia blocked the implementation of a Cascadia Corridor Commission (authorized by both national governments) because of fears of subordination to Seattle--a mirror of worries about the Alaska Highway fifty years earlier. Canadian concerns have been heightened by the effects of NAFTA on Canadian branch plant manufacturing. High speed rail links to the southward meet similarly mixed reviews because of their possible erosion of Canadian distinctiveness and Canadian businesses.

Nor is it clear that "Cascadia" is really a natural economic unit that pools the capacity of Portland, Seattle, Vancouver, and their hinterlands into a globally competitive region. Proponents of the idea adapt a

substantial literature that argues that city-regions rather than nations are now the real components of the global economy.¹⁴ On the Pacific coast, the often-cited model is the San Francisco Bay area where high finance San Francisco, high tech San Jose, thoughtful Berkeley, and brawny Oakland work as a metropolitan team.¹⁵

But when we turn back to Cascadia, we find a different situation. The three cities are too distant from each other for effective everyday interaction (the same distances as Prague-Vienna-Budapest). They are also too similar to form a complementary whole on the analogy of the Bay Area. The cities have grown and prospered as east-west gateways, competing with the others as a gateway to the Pacific and Asia for continental. British Columbia does less of its trade with the United States than does the rest of Canada.

Moreover, each metropolis is large enough to support a full range of services ranging from research universities to advertising firms. A Portlander need not go to Vancouver to seek out a sophisticated architectural firm, and a Vancouverite need not go to Seattle for transpacific container service or air connections. In other words, it is not clear that the three cities working together are necessarily more than the sum of their parts. A realistic expectation for Main Street Cascadia may be less a merger of well-matched parts than a federation of otherwise similar city-states--a sort of Hanseatic League for the twenty-first century.¹⁶ Anything more would require conscious decisions to generate economies of scale by systematically designating and developing agreed-on areas of economic specialization.¹⁷

Finally, western Americans can never forget the looming presence of California, that vortex of economic power and engine of demographic and cultural change with the capacity to overwhelm a smaller Cascadia. Northward connections have been important for the northwestern United States, but southward even more so. In my home state of Oregon we know that we're a stubby little tail wagged by the very large California dog. California is the market, population pool, corporation headquarters, and consumption arena that pulls Oregon, Idaho, and Washington southward from Canada and Cascadia. Indeed, the northwestern United States has even forged its regional identity as a contrast to California.¹⁸

The Golden State is the missing guest in discussions of Cascadia, waiting to take over the debate just as the statue of the Commandatore takes over the final act of Don Giovanni.

What remains is a vision in which the three "Cascadian" cities go their separate ways rather than converging into a regional supermetropolis. Vancouver is likely to continue its development as a cosmopolitan gateway city--a Miami of the West, or Sydney of the North. Seattle is realizing a future as a globally competitive production city--an Osaka or Houston for the twenty-first century. Portland is following with one foot in both the old and new economies as a service center for regional resource communities and a bit player on the global stage--Kansas City with container ships or San Jose with steelhead trout swimming in its suburban streams.

The bottom line is the continued importance of that long northern border after a century of economic change. I have framed this essay with a series of contrasts--an international Age of Mobility giving way to a global Age of Bureaucracy, an ecological Cascadia contending with an economic Cascadia. I've argued that the border became more prominent rather than less in the second half of the twentieth century. The regulatory web that mediates United States-Canadian relations is firmly established and functional. Progress toward either an ecological or an economic Cascadia is likely to involve more coordinating committees and international agreements rather than fewer. The promised Age of Communication in the twenty-first century may make the regulations easier to navigate, but it is not likely to turn northwestern North America into a region where borders don't matter.

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