For the Land, Not the State : Post-National Multicultural Literature

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Abstract

This essay argues that there is developing in the United States a literature that counters national identity and nationalism by emphasizing relationships to the land and specific regions as a different kind of social construction in contradiction to the society of the nation state. Writers are producing this literature from various traditional ethnic heritages, but the definition of "multicultural" needs to be expanded to include authors who identify with micro-cultures. This post-national multicultural literature is organized into four heuristic categories: transnational, bioregional, new agrarian, and futurist. Authors treated include Anzaldua, Berry, Escamill, Hogan, Masumoto, Mora, Piercy, Silko, Snyder, and Yamashita.

Keywords: Post-national, multicultural, land, literature

Across a divergent range of contemporary American literary production, we see a growing trend of post-national orientations. The version that I want to consider here consists of literature that counters national identity and nationalism with an emphasis on relationship to the land as a different kind of social construction from that of the nation state. In order to demonstrate this emphasis, it will be necessary for me to depict only briefly a variety of movements, authors, and texts organized according to four heuristic categories: Transnational, Bioregional, New Agrarian, and Futurist. But before limning these, I want to clarify my use of "post-national" and "multicultural."

Post-national

While the historical period of the dominance of the modern nation-state continues with intensity today, including the formation of new nation-states in Eurasia, there clearly exists a variety of post-national formations stepping forward on to the stage of history. While military power remains largely in the hands of nation states, military actions have been undertaken under the flags of the U.N. and NATO. Transnational corporate mergers are proceeding with geometric intensity, as well as corporate-state alliances, as most recently indicated by the agreements signed to build a pipeline to exploit the Azerbaijan oilfields. These are all facets of the globalization that the World Trade Organization is designed to foster, and which myriad organizations oppose.

The Seattle demonstrations brought media attention to a host of highly divergent and contradictory groups, some of which represent various manifestations of a post-nation anti-nationalism. Human rights organizations and environmental justice movements are anti-nationalist because they deny the rights of states to dictate how the workers within their political domains will be exploited, and yet at the same time they oppose the kind of globalization that WTO promotes since trade not people is the WTO unit of measurement for decision-making. Environmental groups are also largely anti-nationalist both because

they recognize that transnational corporations often choose manufacturing sites based on their potential for uncontested polluting and because they know that environmental degradation does not respect the borders erected by political states (see Kuehls).

Yet, frequently environmental groups make very local, specific issues the focal point of their actions. As molar organizations, they attack their perceived enemies on numerous fronts. Along similar lines, members of oppressed and minority cultures within nation states also are anti-nationalist and anti-globalizing, because they see both the nation-state and WTO-style globalization seeking to destroy their culturally bound means of livelihood and ways of life.

In many instances, these various manifestations of anti-nationalism can be understood, or are self-conceived, as post-nationalist in their vision of future political, economic, and cultural organization. Repeatedly, we find their foundational assumptions to have a grounding orientation based on identity with, and defense of, a specific place that they seek to inhabit themselves or whose inhabitants, human and nonhuman alike, they seek to conserve. What I am envisioning here is a human embeddedness in the specific features of a given locale, in which the unit of the polity can be based on inhabitational relationships.

Multicultural

To date the term "multicultural" has primarily been used to designate visibly ethnic, oppressed groups attempting to practice cultural survival and renewal. In the United States, unlike many other nation-states, such ethnicity is inextricably racially defined, with the factor of visibly racial differentiation precluding full assimilation into the dominant culture. But such a limited usage of "multicultural" actually contributes to the continued racialization of cultural difference and cultural resistance to the dominant American culture by predicating its binary on a homogeneous representation of white Americans. It is thus inadequate to depict the variegated forms of cultural resistance and nondominant cultural production occurring today. We need, therefore, to expand the conception of "multicultural" to include the interaction and syntheses of diverse micro-cultures frequently practicing alternative or modified economic interactions. Such micro-cultures often involve, in their post-nation manifestations, inhabitory reintegration based on a commitment to place. Such reintegration and commitment to place are not only a Native American activity, but an activity practiced and experienced by diverse peoples in a wide variety of locations. For example, environmental justice, with its emphasis on environmental racism, is fundamentally visibly-ethnic focused and more frequently urban based rather than rural based, while the new agrarian alternative economies are more frequently white initiated and rural based. In my conception then, "multicultural" needs to refer to all manifestations of resistance to the dominant, state-approved culture and the promotion and development of alternative cultures and their economies.

Let me now turn to the heuristic categories by which I am organizing my discussion of post-national, place-oriented literatures: transnational, bioregional, new agrarian, and futurist.

Transnational

The majority of my examples here come from Native American writing because, as with the colonial carving up of Africa, the borders of the United States, Mexico, and Canada cut across historically constituted tribal territories. In addition, in recent decades there has been a strong pan-tribal movement among Native peoples. In addition, movements such as the Indigenous Environment Network seek to form global alliances among indigenous peoples threatened by transnational maldevelopment. Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of*

the Dead addresses these phenomena through the indigenous rebellion brewing in southern Mexico and beginning to work its way North. Silko closes out her novel with a vision of larger political alliances that unites groups and organizations across tribal, national, and racial lines representing a variety of micro-cultures and longstanding ethnic cultures. Larry Evers and Felipe Molina, in *Yaqui Deer Songs, Maso Bwikam,* show a different kind of transnational anti-nationalism in terms of the continuing cross-border interaction of Yaqui communities in the U.S. and Mexico. Evers and Molina, in fact, suggest through the unifying features of the Deer Songs that the vitality of Yaqui culture has been maintained in significant part precisely because the Yaqui Indians continue to ignore the nation-state borders that legalistically separate their communities. While Evers and Molina focus on the Yaqui delegitimation of the U.S.-Mexico border, Linda Hogan in *Solar Storms* deligitimates the U.S.-Canadian border, by showing how the lives of boundary-water Native peoples, and by implication all peoples, are affected by the destruction of First Nation lands in Canada as a result of the massive James Bay hydroelectric project (see Tarter). Angel and her relatives travel by canoe through the boundary waters to participate in resisting the rerouting of rivers prior to the flooding of native hunting grounds, thereby discrediting the very idea that such waters constitute a boundary. The waters of the U.S. and Canada are interlinked to provide a trail of connection. As a result, not only do the protagonists link up with other native peoples but with their own tribal relatives. This multifaceted interlinking of native peoples inversely mirrors the economic interlinking of the Canadian and U.S. economies, through which the electricity generated by the James Bay project is primarily destined for the U.S. market.

Chicana author, Pat Mora addresses a different history of the U.S.-Mexican border than do Evers and Molina, when she speaks of her family as being people of the desert who have been separated by the border erected when the U.S. annexed nearly half of greater Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century. Culturally, linguistically, and geopsychically, Mora remains bonded to the history of her family, not only linguistically and ethnically, but also because she remains bonded to the desert, the place that has formed her family's "geopsyche," to use Gregory Cajete's term.

A different kind of transnational anti-nationalism is represented by Karen Tei Yamashita's *Brazil-Maru,* which tells the story of a Japanese immigrant communal experiment in Brazil. The participants in this commune give their allegiance to its locale and become neither Japanese nor Brazilian in any nationalistic sense, although retaining strong Japanese cultural elements. At novel's end, Yamashita has a first-person narrator claim that the original commune and a split-off from it both survive in the jungle today and continue to follow a communal, politically self-sufficient lifestyle.

The concept of geopsyche, which I mentioned earlier, could be applied to all of the texts of this section in terms of defining the way that individuals within communities become culturally, politically, and economically situated in a particular place when those social constructions promote rather than hinder human embeddedness in the land. The political borders of nations artificially divide people linked through identification with, and cultural heritages built on, particular regions of the Americas. Such regional cultural constructedness has been represented in contemporary political terms in several forms, one of these being bioregionalism.

Bioregional

Perhaps the best known literary figure associated with the bioregional political agenda is Gary Snyder, who has repeatedly explored the

imagery and philosophy of a bioregional allegiance to place. From his profession of anarchism during his college years to his recent call for the breaking up of the U.S. into several smaller states, Snyder has been adamantly post-national in his political orientation. In "Coming into the Watershed," he observes that the boundaries of ecoregional systems, as "porous, permeable, arguable" as they are, mean more than political borders for "these are the markers of the natural nations of our planet, and they establish real territories with real differences to which our economies and our clothing must adapt" (220). Snyder goes on to say that "those of us who are now promoting a bioregional consciousness would, as an ultimate and long-range goal, like to see this continent more sensitively redefined, and the natural regions of North America/Turtle Island gradually begin to shape the political entities within which we work. It would be a small step toward the deconstruction of America as a superpower into seven or eight natural nations — none of which ha[s] a budget big enough to support missiles" (227).

Freeman House, author of *Totem Salmon: Life Lessons from Another Species,* also professes a bioregional political agenda. Specifically, in *Totem Salmon* he describes the multi-decade process of forging a new micro-culture in northern California along the Mattole River watershed by uniting people around the ecological recovery of the river in order to conserve the king salmon who migrate up its waters annually to spawn. As House notes, throughout the 1970s he was involved in the process of "fleshing out a concept called bioregionalism" (xi), which he has since put into practice living in Petrolia, California. His memoir recounts not only the ecological and political self-education of the save-the-salmon participants, but also their cultural education and their process of building a community sense of inhabitation that encompasses the human and the nonhuman in its ethical circle.

One of the key features of this kind of anti-national bioregional politics is an emphasis on human inhabitation based on the realities, or carrying capacity and sustainability, of the land-base in terms of food production. The contemporary nation state, in contrast, has created the myth among its populace that food and energy can be endlessly borrowed from other locations without there ever being a day when the bills come due. Japan and the United States, for instance, are creating enormous "ecological footprints" that require territories far vaster and dating farther back in times in terms of fossil fuels than could possibly be encompassed by their own national political boundaries. Post-nation politics and literature, however, are acutely aware of the relationship of human inhabitation and food production. The result of this awareness has been the growth of a new agrarian writing in the United States.

New Agrarian

Some of the new agrarian writers are Dori Sanders, Jane Brox, Wendell Berry, and David Mas Masumoto. There is also a host of southwestern Latino/a writers who are not farmers themselves, but for whom agriculture and animal husbandry are constituent categories of community identity. I am thinking here of such writers as Gloria Anzaldua, Edna Escamill, and Ana Castillo. I have too little time to say much about these authors except to point out that in each case, their focus is on community-based, local senses of identity and allegiance. For Dori Sanders in *Her Own Place* the land holds out the promise of self-sufficiency and economic leverage for African Americans in a racist society. For Berry and Masumoto, it is the small family farm and its communities that must unite and cooperate in order to survive the onslaught of agribusiness and its market strangleholds that would destroy them. Berry, for instance, points out that in the heavily wooded state of

Kentucky, 91% of the forested land is "owned by approximately 440,000 nonindustrial private owners" (28), many of whom would like to practice sustainable silviculture, but who have no control over the market except that which they could exert through forming cooperatives.

It is precisely the power of cooperative organizing that forms the basis for the triumph of life over an economy of death in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God.* In it the village of Tome regenerates local agrarian and herding practices to gain some measure of economic control of the villagers' lives in opposition to the kinds of environmental injustice to which they have been subjected by transnational corporations (see Platt).

Futurist

The futurist group consists of works of science fiction in which the successful communities of the future are based on political and economic organization that functions primarily or exclusively at the level of the village or city and then loosely federated or coordinated by some consensual council. Mattapoisett in Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* is a classic example. More recent texts with stronger ecological emphases are Starhawk's *The Fifth Sacred Thing* and Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars Trilogy: Red Mars, Green Mars, and Blue Mars.* As with Piercy, Starhawk and Robinson advocate the concept to which Snyder refers when he invokes the work of Jane Jacobs: "The city, not the nation-state, is the proper locus of an economy, and then that city is always to be understood as being one with the hinterland" (233).

Conclusion

In my discussion the post-nation formation involves a new formulation of an ancient concept and practice. It is a type of situatedness based on en-natured and place-based cultures and economies that for the first time, in some cultures at least, has the potential to include all of the human beings in that locale in the councils of government and the formation of cultures. While the authors I have discussed all write from within the political boundaries of the United States, theirs is not an American literature in the sense that an F. O. Matthiessen would use to define "America." In fact, Richard Nelson, a Tongass forest activist in Alaska, writes in the current issue of *Orion Afield* of the need to reinvigorate the concept of patriotism by emphasizing "our allegiance to the American land," with the emphasis squarely and clearly on place as inhabitation, an emphasis already being enacted by the authors I have named in this essay.

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