

Cascadia Redux

Chronicle of a Return to the (Extra) West

It is never too late to become a student of Laurie Ricou. One does not have to have studied English at the University of British Columbia, nor have his ability to identify a particular plant species nor bird variety, nor share an appreciation of the more challenging British Columbia poets to learn from his profound sense of place: its layers, its sounds, its tensions, its intricacies. In the early pages of *The Arbutus/Madrone Files: Reading the Pacific Northwest* (2002),¹ Ricou feels compelled in a book about place and story to explain his own connection to the region: though a native of Brandon, Manitoba, he had been living on the West Coast for almost two decades at the time of the book's publication and thus claims, albeit rather sheepishly—though I can't see why—"insider"/"local" status. For Ricou, his years spent in Vancouver have to count for something or rather they say something of the "upstart indigenoussness that has permeated the urbanization of the Pacific Northwest over the past two centuries" (7). As a Canadian born in Prince George, British Columbia, raised in Vancouver, educated in Ontario and Quebec in both official languages, and who has lived and taught in both Canada and the United States, I, personally, see no need for qualifiers, no need to count years spent, nor dues paid. Ricou has made the Pacific Northwest his later life work. He has now a second West Coast self to add to his earlier prairie self; the two live together in shared residency: "I soon realized that I was not confined to one home" he continues (an observation that resonates with my own expanded, complicated notion of Canadianness), "that, although I would carry my prairie home with me . . . I also felt almost immediately at home with

evergreen mountains and even mist. I set out to read my way into that place and climate. This book [*The Files*] is a record of that continuing encounter” (8).

As it turns out, *The Files* would become my guide, my *livre de bord* as it were, for my own re-encounter with the Pacific Northwest, part of which I would like to recount in these pages as a way to pay tribute to Ricou—his teaching, his philosophy—and as a means to engage in a discussion, ten years after the book’s publication, on matters of Cascadia, Canadian-American literary comparisons and border stories. After many years spent far from the Pacific coast (my first home region) pursuing research on Quebec nationalism, my interests have widened to include literary and cinematic representations of the West on both sides of the Canada-US border. I knew from the outset that Ricou’s work would be essential to my current endeavours on many levels: first, as a veritable treasure chest of what and whom to read of Northwest writers both Canadian and American; second, as a style of place-based textual criticism; and finally, on a more philosophical level, as an example of how to be a reader, to be a critic, to be oneself in *that place* of “saltwater tides, high-gloss foliage, arbutus trees, unhorizontal landforms” (16) and “storied mist” (17). Reading *The Files* thus constituted the first step in a reconciliation of sorts with my (old) home place, my lost place. For example, there is no more eloquent tribute to the (non)kaleidoscopic shades of grey, shifting in the dim light, where the land meets the sea, than Ricou’s blending of quotes by Bertrand Sinclair, Brenda Peterson, and Carol Windley (two Canadians and an American no less), and his own observations looking southwest from Tofino’s Wickaninnish Inn on a mid-February afternoon: “We study the colour that is no colour. Sea, waves, beach, trees, sky, islands, all—in light rain and lighter fog—shades of monochrome. An entire landscape seems to be printed in greyscale” (17). This greyscale is echoed in his mind by the black and white photographs on display in the halls of the Inn, bringing to mind the Burkian notion of the sublime as greyscale: indistinctness, unknowability. This section of *The Files* is rounded out by an observation in late April upon contemplation of William H. New’s remarks on Daryl Hine’s poem “Point Grey.” That place name for the western extremity of Vancouver, “where the University of British Columbia, and my office, sit, is itself an expression of the *somehow* and *not exactly* of mist.” “This version of my home,” he concludes, “the westcoast edge, is a paradox of point (absolute, definite) and grey (obscure, indeterminate)” (18). The “point,” here, is an attempt to embrace the wet and the edge, to entertain the possibility of delusion, of seeing something,

as Windley suggests, “just outside the range of ordinary light” (qtd. in Ricou 17). We are light years and shades from Margaret Atwood’s infamous quip: “Vancouver is the suicide capital of the country. You just keep going west until you run out. You come to the edge. Then you fall off” (44). With Ricou you do not fall off. You stand and contemplate. You attempt to listen for the poetics of the wet edge/forest/point. Books, Ricou claims, have taught him the restfulness of grey, “just to stand and stare at the missed and misted” (17). One needs only to choose wisely.

So I set out. Back. West. I wandered the alleys of Victoria, drank coffee in a caboose in Blaine, sat quietly in damp, cold, car ferry lineups, waiting to go “islanding.” I observed the students on the campus of Western Washington University (WWU) in Bellingham, where I had the good fortune to spend a couple of months, looking for signs of cross-border “West-coastness.” But as an untrained anthropologist, I learning nothing other than that they appeared slender and healthy and displayed a penchant for tattoos. I donned an anorak and wandered creeks (both Roberts and False) and seawalls and sometimes quietly grieved for the irrecoverable side of my lost city. Yet I also rebelled, as unruly students do, because living on the edge is not easy: too much rain and forest and grey and damp and trees coming right down to water’s edge. “It was the rough edge of the world, where the trees came smack down to the stones,” claims Annie Dillard’s Ada Fishburn in her historical novel *The Living* (1992), as she gets her first glimpse of Bellingham Bay in 1855 after an epic westward journey overland. “The shore looked to Ada as if the corner of the continent had got torn off right there, sometime near yesterday, and the dark trees kept growing like nothing happened. The ocean just filled in the tear and settled down” (4). No doubt passages like these did nothing to endear Dillard to her local reading public nor did the rumour in the Bellingham area that she moved away after having openly declared that it simply “rained too much” or that the region was not conducive to real “intellectual life.” I am not sure which. Surely I did not need Annie Dillard to help me see my own (home) place; but such is the evocative power of writing. Her dense, mesmerizing account of late-nineteenth-century pioneer life in the Pacific Northwest accompanied me on my re-encounter, the “rough edge” haunting my winding drives through old growth forests.

Eventually, I began to long for another West, for plateaus and valleys, for the dry slopes and blue skies of the British Columbia Interior (towns like Ashcroft, Cache Creek, Spences Bridge, Merritt come to mind) with its

sagebrush perfume and sparse pine trees—thinned out now, tragically, by the pine beetle, which has dotted them brown here and there like the aftermath of a thousand selective lightning strikes. I longed also for the Okanagan, its shimmering lakes and hot brown rock/mountain. I am no poet so I will not attempt here to conjure up in a few words what these landscapes mean to me. But many of British Columbia's best, though now living on the coast, hail from these parts, that is to say from a much different topography than Ricou's celebrated wet and mild and muted misted light (George Bowering and Patrick Lane are but the first two voices that come to mind). British Columbia is in essence a place of interconnected and opposing Wests. The same is true for Washington state where recent discussions of the border, to my surprise, did not focus on the 49th parallel but on the "Cascade Curtain" dividing the West from the East side of the state which differs dramatically in topography, climate, population density and, it appears, political culture.² But on the question of coastal-interior interdependence, Ricou, in *The Files*, having anticipated charges of Lower Mainland imperialism, was already slowly and decidedly moving—upriver. In "Island File" he reads in counterpoint two decidedly different texts, American novelist John Keeble's suspense thriller *Yellowfish* (1980) and Canadian poet Daphne Marlatt's long poem *Steveston* (1974). I want to linger on this section of the chapter as I see it illustrating, by way of putting texts "in conversation" with one another, a possible method of doing comparative Canadian-American literary analysis which remains rare in our discipline. "Island File" also offers a way of connecting coast to interior, a model for reading interior towns as "islands." Ricou reads Marlatt's imagined Steveston as both built on an island and an "island of men" while Keeble's description first of lumber and then mining communities of the Idaho Panhandle "built in pockets, ravines, hollows and up against cliffs, the people insular, and the routes of travel serpentine" (qtd. in Ricou 34), evokes another kind of island. Keeble's one-industry towns (his are in Idaho, but one could substitute towns in Montana or British Columbia for similar effect) "are based on extraction of a single resource confined in an inaccessible valley" (34). This description, Ricou argues, shows "the power of the island-idea in the wider Northwest" (34) as it allows Keeble's inland company town to be linked imaginatively to the coastal archipelago. Taking his cue from Keeble, Ricou argues for an interdependence of topographies: "the Northwest always consists of dramatic contrasts of wet and dry. The Fraser River carries down to its mouth from the Interior the soil on which Steveston is built" (35).

Theorizing the rapport between “the dramatic contrasts of wet and dry,” the unforgiving wind-swept, sun-parched plateaus and the lush, dense rain, (over)growth, is key, in my view, to reading many western writers whose work encompasses both ecologies, each one reflecting back on the other, be it within a single work in the span of an entire oeuvre. Take for instance, Montana writer, now Seattle resident, Ivan Doig. His *Winter Brothers: A Season at the Edge of America* (1980) Ricou cites as a tempting yet imperfect guide (4) for the continuing encounter that is *The Files*. Doig’s text is both personal essay and natural history, a retracing of the ethnographer and historian James Gilchrist Swan and his time among the Makah Indians of the northern Olympic peninsula in the late-nineteenth century. I understood *Winter Brothers*, in true student spirit, to be a required text for unlocking the mysteries of place in the Pacific Northwest. But it merely confused and befuddled me. The book does thoughtfully probe the multiple meanings of the very last land on the continent. Reading the ethnographer Swan, Doig ponders how Swan has become “a being of our continental edge, rimwalking its landscape and native cultures” (qtd. in Ricou 22). But, for me, Doig remains both present and absent from *Winter Brothers*, ghosting that jagged edge he so painstakingly retraces through Swan, yearning perhaps for “contact” with Indigenous cultures that does not materialize. Then this:

What Swan and his forty-year wordstream will have told me by the end of this winter, back where I have never been, I can’t yet know. But I already have the sense from his sentences and mine that there are and always have been many Wests, personal as well as geographical. . . . Yet Swan’s Wests come recognizable to me, are places which still have clear overtones of my own places, stand alike with mine in being distinctly unlike other of the national geography. Perhaps that is what the many Wests are, common in their stubborn separateness: each West a kind of cabin, insistent that it is no other sort of dwelling whatsoever. (*Winter Brothers* 109-10)

Indeed, *Winter Brothers* is only one dimension of Doig’s West(s), of the “dramatic contrasts of wet and dry” especially as the latter, the dry, is so well known to readers of western literature, at least in the United States, through both his fiction set in Montana and his celebrated memoirs, *This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind* (1978) and the memoirs based on his mother’s letters to her brother Wally, *Heart Earth* (1993).

I confess to not finding many clues to unlocking the mysteries of the Pacific Northwest in *Winter Brothers*, no doubt through no fault but my own. But I found something else. Taking my cue from Doig, reading Swan—suggesting by Ricou—I retraced the life-path of writer Ivan Doig and went

back up over the mountains to “Sixteen country” of south central Montana, the Montana of his childhood, a place, described in *Heart Earth*, of “bone and gristle marriages” (15), of “women who carry the sky” (17), that “do-it-yourself expanse the West was supposed to be and never was” (28). It was a place with “people who had a wire down in their lives” yet who emigrated “into an America they never managed to savvy nor let go of” (32). Doig’s description of his parents performing a chore that best exemplifies their “handling of *the country*” (32, emphasis mine) is one of the finest evocations of place and feeling I have ever read. He details how they wiped away mud and dust from their 1940 Ford coupe’s fenders and flanks so as to ready it for the funeral procession of a Big Belt Mountains hired hand, belonging, like themselves, to a kind of “people who drew no cortege while they were alive” (32). It recalls my own rural West, captured in a black and white photo of my paternal grandparents, dressed in their Sunday best, my grandfather crouching with four young boys in front of the family car somewhere in the Comox Valley where they had come to farm after a lonely existence in a remote cabin at Reid Lake, outside of Prince George. For Doig, and no doubt for my father, born one year before Doig, coming to the coastal cities to attend university (University of Washington for Doig, UBC for my father) was a voyage to a much more affluent West than what they had previously known. It was almost a luxury West with its new-found wealth and temperate climate, the one functioning almost as the flip side of the other. There is a sense in Doig’s work of the need for a personal archeology, alluded to in *Winter Brothers*, an urge to “place” his Montana pioneer past within his contemporary Seattle life. The juxtaposition of these two worlds is most eloquently evoked in preface of the 15th anniversary edition of his celebrated *This House of Sky*, where he describes himself as a “relic,” “out of step,” a man having worked at a whole host of occupations during his Montana upbringing (“I had worked in a lambing shed, picked rock from grainfields, driven a power buckrake in haying time . . .” [vii]) that differentiate him from his UW doctoral student peers. Now, having brought his elderly parents to Seattle to live out their remaining years, he is reminded once again of the memoir’s genesis:

The sight of these two people of the past who had raised me— Bessie Ringer, ranch cook, diehard Montanan since her early twenties . . . ; and Charlie Doig, ranch hand and rancher, born on a sagebrush homestead in the Big Belt Mountains south of Helena—the daily sight of these two in our Seattle living room, with a shopping center out the window below, made me very much aware of the relichood of the three of us. (vii)

Thanks to *The Files*, I was prompted to enter the world of Ivan Doig and through his layered exploration of place, family, and history, came to embrace my own multiple Wests, the rural and the remote as well as the wet windy coast.

The interplay between the hot/dry and the temperate/wet are also at work in Sunshine Coast writer Theresa Kishkan's historical novel *The Age of Water Lilies* (2010). In this text, English gentlewoman Flora Oakden has come to join her brother on a ranch in the British Columbia Interior settlement of Wallachin near Ashcroft in the years just before World War I. Over the course of one summer she falls as much in love with the landscape—its open skies, “wide expanses of earth undulating in the heat, hills shimmering in the distance like mirages” (6)—as with an educated English labourer in whose company she learns to recognize rattlesnake tracks and discovers a box canyon, its entrance hidden by Saskatoon bushes: “Once inside, it was like being in a room with a ceiling decorated with tumbling cloud. The creek for water, dry grass for a bed” (72). At summer's end, her lover, Gus, enlists and is subsequently killed in the battlefields of Europe. Flora, pregnant and unmarried, seeks shelter in Victoria with a free-spirited widow in a house overlooking the Ross Bay Cemetery. The novel alternates between this narrative and one set in 1962, the story of a curious young girl who explores her own personal domain among the headstones of Ross Bay and befriends Flora, now 70. This relationship allows Kishkan to alternate between two time periods but also to juxtapose two settings, each working in tandem. While the writing in *The Age of Water Lilies* certainly does justice to the splashy moist greenery of Victoria, the waterfront, the wind in Beacon Hill Park, the “beautiful Garry oaks [standing] in groupings on mossy rises” and “water lily plants holding the chalices of their yellow flowers above the water” (123), it is that other environment, that other quintessentially British Columbia place that comes to Flora in her new Victoria home:

She recalled hills, covered with grasses that smelled so sweet after rain—wild rye, bunchgrass, needlegrass, ricegrass. . . . And she recalled the raps of grasshoppers as they jumped from stem to stem, the vault of blue sky; she remembered the texture of the dust, caught in wind and dry with seeds, particles of sands. . . . Flora had not expected to love the miles of grassland, the flinty smell of the river, and yet she could bring these to mind, across the miles and years, with no effort at all . . . (263)

Kishkan's novel thus becomes an evocative illustration of Ricou's insistence on the interconnected and opposing “Wests” at work in Pacific Northwest writing.

Ricou's “Island File” not only argues for an interdependence of the Northwest's wet/dry topographies, a doubling of locales, but masterfully

twins texts in a way that consciously avoids promoting the “dichotomies that are the frequent pitfall of Canadian-US comparisons” (38) which in this case would lead to facile conclusions: Marlatt’s *Steveston* equals peaceful, garrison; Keeble’s *Yellowfish* equals violent, narrative of adventure. Instead, Ricou argues, “I would rather walk the border, to ask what lies in the middle, to ask one work to illuminate the shadow in another, to reveal its changing process and its fluidity—refusing to *fix* one or the other” (39). This approach allows him to conclude that *Yellowfish*, read in contexts established by Marlatt’s *Steveston*, could be the “poem of place” that Keeble’s protagonist Erks longs to write: “As a historian, he wants to stop and go down into the sensory, layered history of a place, but he is caught up in the narrative of the smuggler and outlaw” (38). Conversely, the narrator in Marlatt’s long poem is “trapped” in the role of ethnographer, lacking distance from her subject: “Somewhere hidden in Marlatt’s *Steveston* is another hungry, souvenir-gathering, bewildered, traveller like Erks” (39). Ricou is rather audacious to bring together a poem and a novel from opposite sides of the border, giving each its due, letting each have his and/or her say, but then “pushing them together” (38) and in so doing creating something completely new and different. This is the art of the critic. And this is the art of “Island File.”

At the core of *The Arbutus/Madrone Files*, as the name suggests, is the question of a shared Pacific Northwest region (that begins and ends in different places depending on your point of view) but that also contains within it a division figured by the slash in the title of the book and the two different words commonly used in Canada and the US to describe the same tree. At various points in the text, Ricou seems to lean towards the idea of the arbitrariness of this division, figured by the international boundary. From the standpoint of the edge, Vancouver, the boundary is “an unwaveringly line and visible boundary [that] dissolves into a meandering hypothesis traced in water” (23). A regional literature and culture, he continues, might be discovered where the boundary becomes indeterminate . . . in a shared ecology far too international to claim” (23). To think the Pacific Northwest with Ricou, is to think “ocean currents and species distribution” (6), drainage basins (crucial for defining territorial boundaries), and watersheds. One of the recurring themes in his work is the study of regional writing, defined in *The Files* as the “politics of appreciating difference” (29). Wendell Berry provides inspiration for Ricou in defining regionalism as “local life aware of itself,” as “politics more personal, more concerned with some imaginative power, rather than physical or regulatory or jurisdictional power,” and as an “awareness that local

life is intricately dependent, for its quality but also for its countenance, upon local knowledge” (qtd. in Ricou 29). Ricou’s choice of chapter titles—“Salmon File,” “Raven File,” “Kuroshio File,” “Salal File,” and “Sasquatch File”—all underscore a conscious effort to find and read writing that by its very subject matter, theme, sensitivity and language, responds in some way or another to this idea of local knowledge and even, as do Marlatt and Keeble, to “ecological and autochthonous patterns that omit national boundaries” (39).

I often pondered the phrase “omitting national boundaries” during my return to the Pacific Northwest in the fall of 2011, as I sat in traffic gazing at the Peace Arch at the Douglas-Blaine international border crossing, waiting, on numerous occasions, to cross into the United States, watching the predominantly-male armed US Border Patrol Guards move comfortably, confidently—and not un-aggressively—amongst the cars (remember Canadian Border Services Agents stay in the booth and sometimes you get a woman and/or a Francophone). Much has transpired between Canada and the US in the decade since *The Files* was published. I am hard pressed to remember a moment before 9/11 when the otherwise quiet, trust-oriented tradition of border relations between our two countries allowed us to contemplate “boundariness” quite like Ricou does in 2002; the rules of the game seem to have been so irrevocably changed. Yet, the Pacific Northwest is special, as proponents for Cascadia have been arguing for a long time. A convergence of shared ecological values, respect for the environment and increasing trade and economic linkages have made it one of the premier cross-border regions (or CBR) in North America. Ricou admits to having been, himself, “influenced, largely unawares, by cultural and economic forces . . .” known as the “Cascadia initiative” (6)—which prompted the shift in the original project of *The Files* from one on British Columbia writing to one that would also include writing from south of the border. Teaching, as I do, in a North American Studies program, I have also been influenced by post-NAFTA debates on increasing economic and political integration between Canada and the US. While recent findings suggest that integration is not inevitable, hindered by sovereignty concerns in both countries and fragmentation in policy-making, sub-national or regional areas of cross-border activity still seem to be the most likely places to chart economic and political convergence. For political scientist Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly, the Pacific North West/Cascadia best illustrates this new, rising border region, where a “complex ideational construct” spanning economic, social, cultural and political elements forms a regional and transnational “symbolic” regime

in which various state and non-state actors (trade groups, sub-national bureaucrats and environmental groups) can promote their specific agendas (117). In *The Files*, Ricou recognizes Cascadia from the outset as primarily a trade and marketing alliance (26). Indeed, the concept has been critiqued for some time now, most succinctly, in my view, by social geographer Matthew Sparke who has convincingly argued that trans-border “re-mappings” like Cascadia are not *geopolitics* but *geo-economics* and “represent a neo-liberal, market-oriented, anti-state transmutation of what is generally understood as a democratic political sovereignty,” a “decentred political-economic project to entrench neo-liberalism locally” (7; 21). Despite their appeals to the positive impact of borderless free trade, Cascadia’s promoters, he counters, are unable to point to any widespread *regionalizing* impact. The increase in north-south trade/traffic flows do not necessarily indicate the rise of *regionalizing* tendencies in supply networks that cross the border and integrate Cascadia economically; instead, the trucks cross the border and then frequently drive on to other distant places (25). Sparke’s critical view of north-south trade flows weighed on my conscience as I drove side by side with these trucks on the I-5 in Washington state or watched them line up at the border. Recent research by a unique pair of cross-border collaborators, geographers Patrick Buckley of WWU and John Belec of the University of the Fraser Valley, provides a useful example of the need to rethink the possibilities of local cross-border cooperation, or rather how difficult it is, outside of the realm of the literary, to omit national boundaries. Their detailed case study on the failure to successfully develop a power plant in the borderzone between Sumas, Washington and Abbotsford, British Columbia highlights how the absence of a coordinated cross-border “Green party” or business party hindered negotiations between the various levels of government. Given that none of the stakeholders on either side of the border had come to terms with what it wanted, nor what was desirable or possible in this context, they were more comfortable with letting more “distant actors make the real decisions rather than wrestling with some very troubling issues” (73). In the end, the Canadian National Energy Board favoured Canadian environmental interests over US economic ones in what the authors see as an “apparent move to re-affirm the border as a shield” (57). Their conclusions go against the strong normative inflection in most research on cross-border regions that assumes a desire on the part of local actors to emancipate themselves from the nation-state, an inflection that is simply not borne out by the Abbotsford/Sumas case.

I do not want to dismiss with a slight of hand the spirit in which conservationist Gary Snyder claims, quoted in Ricou, that “the border between Canada and the United States is illusory” (26). Perhaps there isn’t anything to stop you from going over “there” and feeling as at home as you feel “here.” “It comes down to the nitty-gritty, Snyder continues, when you get into water quality control, air pollution control questions, or salmon runs. The salmon don’t give a f— which border it is” (26, omission mine). Indeed they don’t. Neither do the swarm of swallows that congregate and then fly off in the final scene of Olympia writer Jim Lynch’s quirky, yet enjoyable novel *Border Songs* (2009). Former Border Patrol officer and avid birder Brandon Vanderkool blends in with the flock, letting them circle him before they set off, their voices rising in crescendo, “lost in a mad, simultaneous flutter of wings, as if gunfire had launched them airborne in a swarm that extended, then collapsed as it veered southeast across the valley toward the treed hillsides below Mount Baker’s flanks” (291). Brandon clearly dreams to be a part of them, free, one can assume, to cross borders, so much so, “that it half-startled him to look down and find himself still there, left behind, alone” (291). This may be what Ricou means by a regional writing defined by species distribution. I am somewhat irked by *Border Songs*’ Canadian stereotypes and its disavowal of any American responsibility in Lower Mainland drug violence, but I read the novel again—for the birds, so to speak—with a *Files* ecology in mind.

I did try to listen for the sounds of these species while in Bellingham; but in my rented condo sandwiched somewhere between the I-5 and the railway lines, the sound of the birds and frogs was drowned out by the sounds of other flows, of cars, trucks, and trains, and the endless humming of the circulation of commodities, of cross-border trade. With all that endless transport activity (and the desire on the part of PNW transportation stakeholders for it to run faster and smoother), I wondered, regretfully, who in Whatcom County outside of environmental circles, and especially given the recent economic crisis, has had time to think about bioregions, watersheds, and salmon runs? And how exactly was this cross-border trade going to spark a dynamic chain of connectors wherein supposed “intense communication” (Brunet-Jailly 117) would lead to shared cultural values or to a shared regional consciousness that could possibly rethink national boundaries? I can’t help but reflect on the number of times during my short stay in Bellingham (21 miles south of the 49th parallel) that local residents (off WWU campus) told me they rarely went to Canada any more as they

found the border “intimidating” or had simply let their passport expire or just hadn’t gotten around to applying for a document they thought “costly” and/or “cumbersome,” not to mention the number of people that just assumed, when I told them where I was from—I said “Vancouver” to simplify things—that I meant Vancouver, Washington. My observations here are not meant to be scientific as I did not conduct planned interviews; but my findings are no less relevant, in my view, to an ongoing debate on a supposed shared, emerging transnational regional consciousness/culture promised to us by the proponents of cross-border economic regions like Cascadia. Nor are my comments meant in any way to betray a sense of superior cosmopolitanism or Canadian smugness, a “we-travel-and-they-don’t-so-what-do-you-expect” response that is neither new nor productive. These are not at all my intentions. I return to Waterloo, Ontario with a sincere appreciation, respect, and fondness for northwest Washington State. It is similar to the appreciation and respect I have for northwest Ohio/Michigan, having lived and taught there and having come to understand the local culture as best I could. These are both border regions of the United States; yet they are no less American for all that. They are contiguous (with Canada) yet separate spatial zones with often very different political priorities and styles of cultural imagining.

One of the best-known and most prolific American novelists of the Pacific Northwest is undoubtedly Seattle’s David Guterson.³ Unable to resolve in the long term the thorny question of an emerging cross-border consciousness, though I certainly have my misgivings on the subject, I decided, in the short term, to take a closer look at Guterson’s style of imagining the region. In the end, his work shores up the limits of the idea of a regional consciousness, if that consciousness is to take into account those living north of the 49th parallel. Thanks to its long stay on the bestseller list in both the US and Canada, Guterson’s 1995 *Snow Falling on Cedars* is perhaps the most widely read Pacific Northwest novel of all time. It was also made into a critically acclaimed major motion picture in 1999, directed by Scott Hicks and shot on location—in Canada. The novel tells the story of the 1954 trial of a Japanese fisherman for the murder of a fellow fisherman on the small fictional San Juan island of San Pedro. Ricou pauses briefly on *Snow Falling on Cedars* in the “Mistory File” and notes its “traveling rain” (15), a metaphor for how the novel “emphasizes a pattern of connections appreciated by most of the region’s writers” (15). He also underlines how the novel evokes “a place whose living connects rain to sea to salmon to Japan to cedar to racist exclusion”

and whose narrative “embraces key stories that have been told and retold to make the Northwest: the Gold Rush (and all the connected tales of extraction), the dream of utopia and ecotopia, a tale of travelling the Pacific, which is also the salmon narrative, and the story of the Raven stealing the light” (16). Interestingly, while Ricou’s reading emphasizes connections and linkages, arguing for the novel as a representative Northwest/regional text, William H. New sees in *Snow Falling on Cedars* something quite different. For him, Guterson’s novel positions itself as a “national cultural saga” as references to Ishmael [*Moby Dick*] and other canonical American literary figures suggest. It is a text about the role of the state and the right to independence, mired in the conflict of authority and the individual (84), emphasizing isolation and separateness (86) alongside the fundamental mistrust at the heart of the island community. In the end, New’s reading points away from a regional pattern of connections, suggested by Ricou, towards an understanding of this best-selling novel as embedded within a resolutely American national imaginary.

Given Guterson’s importance for the Pacific Northwest imaginary, I wondered whether he would perhaps henceforth exhibit in subsequent writings an awareness of coastal/interior linkages or even a sensibility for the extra-national. His *East of the Mountains* (1999) features a seventy-three-year-old widowed Seattle heart surgeon diagnosed with terminal colon cancer. Unwilling to face the pain of a low slow demise, he decides to commit suicide, planning to make it look like a hunting accident to spare the feelings of his daughter and grandchildren. He sets off on the long drive east from Seattle to the Columbia Basin, across the Cascades to the apple-growing region where he grew up. His carefully laid plans soon go awry, however, when his car skids off the road in a rainstorm in the Snoqualmie Pass and crashes into a tree. He has various adventures over the course of the novel including an encounter on a greyhound bus with a Mexican migrant worker in need of medical attention. Finally, he spends a night in an apple over the course of the novel pickers’ camp near Wenatchee,—where he helps deliver a baby and is reacquainted with a woman from his childhood—before deciding to abandon his suicide plan and accept to be driven home to Seattle to face death (the reader assumes) amongst his family. *East of the Mountains* is a novel structured by crossings both personal and physical, from rainy urban Seattle to the harsh rural, remoteness of the Columbia plateau. The imagined West in this text is organized along a horizontal West-East trajectory echoing in reverse a whole host of epic Frontier voyages

(for instance, those of Lewis and Clark, and those along the Oregon Trail) that are a significant part of the American mythology. The only “border” here is the Cascade Mountain Range where the car accident occurs changing the course of the narrative. Aside from a fleeting reference to a truck driver who is heading to Calgary with a load of lettuce, the northern border with Canada is absent from this text. Yet, one of the surgeon’s more meaningful encounters (in terms of his own generosity) is with a group of illegal Mexican fruit pickers, one of whom he feeds and helps find work by giving him the use of his own social security number. Not insignificantly, in fact, the only meaningful cross-border human encounter in this novel is with Mexican nationals. If places and regions, as Western Studies scholar Steve Tatum argues, need to be regarded as not only geopolitical/geological territories and physical landscapes, but also as “sites produced by the *circulation of peoples*, of technologies and commodities” (emphasis mine, 460-61), as well as cultural artifacts, images, stories and myths, then Guterson’s Pacific Northwest in *East of the Mountains* includes not Canada nor any real sense of the 49th parallel but rather “Greater Mexico.”

In *The Other* (2009), Guterson returns to a wet and windy rainforest locale: the novel takes place in Seattle and on a remote part of the Olympic Peninsula. Two Seattle teenagers meet running track and field in the 1970s. One is enormously wealthy, while the other is of blue-collar origin, and yet both share a passion for literature, marijuana consumption and wilderness adventure. While Neil Countryman, the narrator, marries and becomes a high school English teacher, his wealthy doppelgänger, John William Barry, taken by Gnosticism and frustrated by fakery, drops out of college and moves into a limestone cave near Forks in the North Cascades. Countryman witnesses his friend’s slow starvation and eventual death, still refusing to break his promise to John William not to disclose his whereabouts to his family who had by this time hired a private investigator to find him. The novel is rife with a host of references to masculine American letters, exhibiting a sort of outdoorsy handiness and hardiness that evokes Twain and Hemingway and touches on a number of quintessentially American themes from Puritan beginnings, westward expansion, ecological collapse, social decline and the interplay of wealth and bohemia. Yet again, despite a proximity to the Canadian border, there is but one evocation of Canadian space in this text: an ill-planned and ill-fated hiking expedition during which the two protagonists get lost in the woods for ten days and “end up” in Hope, British Columbia, from where they simply hitch a ride home. No mention

is made of how they got back across the border. This is, after all, the 1970s. This incident nevertheless evokes Canada as both an undifferentiated “non-space” and an extension of America itself, to paraphrase William H. New (73); a benevolent hiker’s playground awaiting their arrival. Incidentally, distant Mexico is not absent from this wet, rainy Pacific Northwest text: Neil Countryman and his girlfriend in fact drive John William’s car down to San Diego and abandon it there at his behest in order to make it seem as if he has disappeared into Mexico. Thus we have in *The Other* a strangely configured North American West Coast framed by two border regions: one, Mexico, a place of intrigue and danger (the idea being that if John William has crossed over this border he becomes officially *disappeared* and will not be found); the other, Canada, a border which is not much of a border at all, but an empty wilderness that signifies by its lack of difference from the US.

My brief remarks here do not by any means do justice to either of Guterson’s later novels, both of which warrant more academic attention than either has garnered. I read each of them with a specific purpose in mind and found an absence: Canada. In many ways one could argue I am asking too much of Guterson as an emissary of the Pacific Northwest. I would counter that critics, including even Ricou, are asking too little. A shared regional consciousness, a regionalism of place, a “local life aware of itself,” as defined by Ricou and others earlier in this text, would, for me, in the context of the Pacific Northwest, necessitate acknowledging and/or taking into account the “other,” the socio-political reality that is Canada, lying on the other side of the US’ northern border. Given the setting of Guterson’s work, this desire for some sort of recognition of Canadian space does not seem an unreasonable expectation. His nonchalance in this regard is simply part and parcel of the larger omission of Canada that characterizes our north-south relationship.

Such are the complications of “creative cross-bordering,” of the “dramatic contrasts of wet and dry” and of “responding to ecological and autochthonous patterns” that do not necessarily *omit* national boundaries, but trouble the easy dichotomies between what is Canadian and American, while simultaneously shoring up each text’s shadows and respective lacunae. I have argued elsewhere for a North American approach to Canadian literature that moves beyond sameness and difference to stress linkages and connections; in short, a way of thinking about the Canadian imaginary not in deference or reaction to but *in relation* to the American (Roberts 29). American literature of the Pacific Northwest, however, for reasons of national myth and styles of imagining, seems less likely to make connections, more akin to Ivan Doig’s aforementioned

“cabin” or “dwelling,” off on its own within a resolutely “national geography” (*Winter Brothers* 110). Even then, I hesitate to affirm these national differences, spelled out and affirmed, only to be challenged—just as Ricou scribbles down national differences that provoke unease as soon as they are noted (19). Perhaps the ultimate lesson to learn is to work in the manner of the *The Files*: “just outside the range of ordinary light” (mist; 17), in “tropes of suspension” (rain; 63), and in tune with the “mystery just below the surface” (salmon; 100). I interpret this to mean the following: in harmony with the text at hand and the place from which it originates. It is this most personal, ethical, and humble approach that buoys and sustains me during my continued forays into our many *extra Wests*.⁴

NOTES

- 1 For reasons of brevity, this text will heretofore be referred to as *The Files*.
- 2 See National Public Radio’s KUOW series “Behind the Cascade Curtain” written and produced by Dominic Black. <<http://www2.kuow.org/specials/cascade-curtain.php>>.
- 3 Chuck Robinson, owner of Village Books in Fairhaven, Washington, communicated to me in casual conversation that since so many writers in the Pacific Northwest have been born elsewhere, the fact that Guterson is a third-generation Seattleite qualified him, in Robinson’s view, as the region’s “local boy makes good.”
- 4 I borrow the phrase from Ricou’s “Extra West.” Western Literature Association. Lincoln, Nebraska. Fall 1996. Past-presidential address.

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