

Timothy Gray *Gary Snyder and The Pacific Rim. Creating Countercultural Community*. Iowa City: University of Iowa, 2006. ISBN 0-87745-976-2

In this ambitious and often fulfilling book, Gray takes on the interdisciplinary issues of Gary Snyder's bond with the Pacific Rim populations and how these people and their cultures affected his writing and life. In his introduction Gray discusses the history, ecology and sociology vital for the blossoming of the Pacific Rim as a concept and as a cultural presence. Using James Clifford's terms the roots and routes of culture, Gray focuses on the times and spaces for "cultural continuum." (46) When and where events take place often determine their impact or importance. For Snyder these Pacific Rim interactions started young and always were a part of his cultural geography:

"The geographical significance of East Asia to the West coast was palpable, as I was growing up. Seattle had a Chinatown, the Seattle Art Museum had a big East Asian collection, one of my playmates was a Japanese boy whose father was a farmer, we all knew that the Indians were racially related to the East Asians and that they had got there via Alaska. . . There [was] . . . a constant sense of exchange." (49)

Early in Snyder's Northwest childhood, Gray finds that the poet learned to prize those who know the place they stand. He quotes Snyder's acquaintance with a Salishan man who "knew better than anyone else I had

ever met *where I was*” (47). For a youth, the Northwest forests and mountains could be dangerous and beautiful places. Such informed knowledge improved chances for both delight and survival, and so keen apprehensions of place became an engrained value in Snyder’s life and writing. In his travels, he became accomplished at networking and operated as “a countercultural ambassador . . .[for] the San Francisco Renaissance” (266).

Gray provides an overview of Snyder’s networks during the 1950s through the 1980s. He tells a story of Snyder’s twelve years of travel around the Pacific Rim and how the development of Pacific Rim consciousness occurred in multiple ways. He examines the various particular cultural pluses and minuses that result from such cultural exchanges. For the West Coast and Pacific Rim cultures, such trading involved mutual growth, renovation, unintended consequences and damage.

Gray traces Snyder’s education from his expansive Reed College literature and anthropology studies and his “de-education” (65) through the early California, Japanese and India experiences. Before dealing with Snyder’s emergence as a spokesman for ecological, political and sociological issues in *Regarding Wave* and *Turtle Island*, he concentrates on the creation and surround for Snyder’s early books: *Myths & Texts*, *Cold Mountain Poems*, *Riprap* and *The Back Country*.

Though his discussions cast a wide net, they are very thorough. He analyzes Snyder’s *Cold Mountain* alongside other translations and comes to conclusion that Han Shan “became for Snyder a kind of alter ego . . .” (154) Behind this mask Snyder blended his naturalist, mountaineer and hip underground vocabularies. And with this hybrid prosody, these 24 poems deal with “. . . the spiritual quest for enlightenment and the difficulties and obstacles one encounters along the way”(140). Gray examines Snyder’s word

choices versus other translators and pretty well nails down why Snyder's Chinese poet comes across as being a sharp-witted, hip and tart Zen Master: "All I can say to those I meet:/ 'Try and make it to Cold Mountain'" (152). He remarks that these sentences "infuse the final line with sufficient display of pride" (153). And Gray notes that a proper use of "try to make it here" lacks "invitation and the motivational pitch" (153) and doesn't have the ambiguity of "make it" (153). This alloy of American colloquial speech and Asian spiritual concepts became a feature for Snyder's future verse.

For *Riprap*, Gray zeroes in on Snyder's refusal "to cement the constitutive elements of syntax and image" creates ambiguity in this supposedly realistic poem (117). This ambiguous effect (also called *floating syntax* among young poets of that time), often supplies "multiple and intersecting lines of vision" (118). Some lines are not generated by the central subjective point of view, but enter from *another or other space*. To describe *Riprap*'s intention, Gray quotes effectively Snyder's later observation on meditation: "the problematic art of deliberately staying open as myriad things experience themselves" (119).

The Back Country chapter satisfies the most as the structure of this book presents a challenge. Snyder arranged poems written over many years in four thematic sections: Far West, Far East, Kali, and Back. Gray's touchstones are work, landscape, memory, race, class, gender, and sexuality. The difficulty of interpretation arises from the contradictions in the poet's attitudes, discoveries, and beliefs over decades. His analysis of "The Public Bath" in Far East revolves around the duality of Snyder's presentation. In a new strange culture, Snyder plays the roles of both observer and the observed. The most powerful perception comes when Snyder realizes that, for a second, he sees the old naked Japanese men as corpses washing up on shore in WWII war newsreels.

This startling example demonstrates how routes of cultures and the timing of their intersections educate so forcefully, yet may create such subliminal damage. Through no agency of the perceiver, objectification of the *other* may arise unbidden – image viruses from larger, more dominant forces inside one’s culture.

Gray closely examines such contradictions, conflicts, humanizing and dehumanizing shocks that Snyder experiences, registers and works with in *The Back Country*. Those successive obstacles, successes and failures that Gray surveys sympathetically, yet sometimes quite critically, ultimately help illuminate *The Back Country*’s four sections and make their cycles easier to follow. Regarding the Kali section, he quotes Snyder: “It is necessary to look exhaustively into the negative and demonic potentials of the Unconscious By representing these powers – symbolically acting them out —one releases himself from these forces” (200). That process is what makes Snyder’s collection so compelling and yet problematic. Gray summarizes: “. . . his exposure to terror and regret in ‘Kali’ probably gives him greater appreciation of the natural communion he searches for . . . an appreciation he invites others to share” (212).

In his last two chapters, Gray examines the works of Snyder written during the time he became a Pulitzer Prize poet, international environmental spokesman, an ambassador for the Pacific Rim outlook and the West Coast counterculture. Gray argues that the poet ultimately succeeded writing lyric and didactic poetry and essays without compromising his spiritual vision nurtured in the 1950s and 1960s.

Because of his fame and multiple cultural interests, Snyder’s new readers included postmodern theorists along with Native American, feminist, and structuralist critics. Taken seriatim, these new viewpoints, disparate

arguments, and dissimilar vocabularies create the need for a patient reader. When a wife is regarded as an “assemblage converter,” a Ralph Steadman cartoon or a Jon Stewart skit leaps to mind (258). Gray distances himself from “some theoretical ‘tactics of intervention’ ” to avoid distorting “real people and their everyday relationships” (258), but these sections perhaps needed life as a separate longer article.

Overall, Gray’s point is that Snyder celebrates “and thereby consecrates a Pacific Rim communionism” (260). Gray’s grounded comprehension of Snyder’s generosity and resolve as a pioneer in Pacific Rim issues makes his survey a model cornerstone for future studies.