

The Geography of Night Highway 99

by Geoffrey Skinner

"Night Highway 99", the longest poem in *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (MRWE), is a road song, a portrait of the West Coast in the late 50s and early 60s, a chant, a chronicle of discovery, and something deeper – an analog to the opening poem. Endless Streams and Mountains. The poem functions as an American landscape scroll – the mountains are there, the rivers (and Highway 99 is the longest river of all), and the people along the way. Facing west (this is a stretch), the scroll unrolls from right to left, just as the silk one does. The description begins in almost the same way as Endless Streams and Mountains-damp air and all. The narrator mentions roads not taken:

"The road that's followed goes forever;
in half a minute crossed and left behind"

like the "trail of climbing stairsteps" that "fork upstream." ("Endless Streams and Mountains"). And like the painted trail, the highway twists and bends through all the little places along the way. The narrator veers off the "junction US 40 [now I-80] and highway 99" to go to San Francisco, but the line of 99 goes on toward Mexico.

Highway 99 is a river, as well as a path, flowing all the way up and down the West Coast, up and down mountains and through the centers of valleys. We begin somewhere south of the northern end and leave well before the southern one. Like the endless rivers, it is one of endless paths.

On one level, the poem is a road song (*Michiyuki**), chronicling the journey from the Puget Sound, north of Seattle, to San Francisco, down the route that is now largely taken over by 1-5. Each stop along the way is named, each stop is a collection of quotations, descriptions and experiences. It is a young man's song – on the road, footloose and ready to discover what lies in the next town. The poem begins with a description of a situation and a place – the north Puget Sound. The narrator feels he can't stay put and the the road song is in his head –

We're on our way...

Upon closer reading and with an atlas in hand, the journey turns out to be many journeys. The narrator doesn't simply begin in Bellingham and hitch his way south to San Francisco in one long stretch; he stops and starts, goes off to northern California and southern Oregon coast (straying far from Highway 99), drops down to Yreka, and returns to Portland several times. In the references to Dick Meigs, he reveals that the journey may take place over a period of years:

Stayed in Olympia with Dick Meigs
– this was a different year & he had moved –

* MICHİYUKI (travel song)

Michiyuki: Sung descriptions of travel by either the waki at the beginning of a play or by a shite or tsure (who might also dance). Usually comprise of an ageuta with or without a preceding sageuta. (K. Brazell. *Twelve Plays of the Noh and Kyogen Theaters*. Ithica, NY: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 1988)

The title, which is taken from a line in the middle of the poem, is a metaphor for the travelers though it also describes the time of day in a number of places. "Night Highway 99" is full of quotations from people he encounters, and of their stories. Snyder speaks with myriad voices – the narrator is only one of many who travel the road. In the story about Sokei-an and the old man (which occurs immediately following the title line), we meet the only person in the whole poem who stays put, and he claims to have "forgotten how to speak human words." Everyone else is restless, seeking, or running. The stories also point to the impermanence of peoples' lives and situations. Lew Welch's statement about "elegance (soon to be demolished)" underscores this idea. If *Mountains and Rivers Without End* is an instructive poem, as Stephanie Kaza suggested, telling us:

1. Where we are
2. How to behave
3. The true nature of reality

then "Night Highway 99" is a songline that extends north-south and it teaches us about where we are. There is a great litany of names and places (some set off typographically like a chant). We have glimpses into the land with its covering of human artifacts that grounds the journey – this isn't just any road, this road is Highway 99, one of the National Roads, and these are the people who call it home.

The poem seems to also say a great deal about who we are and the state of mind we have at the beginning of the path toward enlightenment – all busyness and desire. The narrator reaches the shining goal of San Francisco at the end and finds that nobody cares about who he is. In addition, he has lost the touchstone of the whole journey because there

IS no 99

which is a teaching in itself about the impermanence of things.

Returning to Sokei-an and the metaphor of the title, the subject of buttermilk comes up several times in this poem and elsewhere. As I note in the gloss, below, the story of Sujata, Gautama and the buttermilk refers to the night before Prince Siddhartha attains enlightenment, which is a long and extremely difficult night.

Toward the end of the poem, we find the line:

(Six great highways; so far only one)

The six highways could be taken literally, perhaps referring to the highways crossing the land, but the next poem in the sequence. "Three Worlds, Three Realms, Six Roads," suggests otherwise. Snyder states, in his notes, that "the 'six paths' are territories of psychological passage: the hells, the animals, the humans, delightful gods and goddesses, angry warrior geniuses, and hungry ghosts – Snyder doesn't indicate which path we are following, but it seems likely that we are on one of the three "evil paths" of the lowest realms of existence – hells, hungry ghost or animal.

"Three Worlds, Three Realms, Six Roads" covers some of the same territory – Seattle, Portland and San Francisco – but goes farther, extending the journey to Japan and back. At the end of the section "Things to Do Around San Francisco," come the lines:

Get lost – or
Get found

Night Highway 99 ends with the first. Three Worlds ends with finding one's place:

Throwing away all the things you'll never need
Stripping down
Going home.

Finally, the scale of time in MRWE expands as we move through the poem. In arranging the 39 poems, Snyder may have set up a symmetry (centered on “The Circumabulation of Mt. Tam”), which would set “Night Highway 99” against “The Mountain Spirit.” The latter is expansive, including a grand geologic scale and non-human beings telling stories, while the latter is almost all at a human scale and with a time that encompasses only a few decades. “Night Highway 99” is only one of the first stages of discovering the true nature of reality.

“Night Highway 99” is a chronicle, a portrait, a road song, an instruction—a geography of the human endeavors and existence. The poem is also complex in its references. I have attempted to gloss a number of lines throughout the poem, expanding on locales, places and ideas that were obscure or unfamiliar to me. Many of the references were impossible for me to unearth, such as sources of quotations [his journals]. I was aided in the geography by finding a 1963 highway atlas (the poem was published in *Origin 4* in January, 1962), reduced photocopies of which are appended. I have also appended the poem as it appeared in *Origin 4*.

white birch chicken coop

Put up in Dick Meigs cabin
 out behind the house--
 Coffeecan, PA tin, rags, dirty cups,
 Kindling fell behind the stove, miceshit,
 old magazines,

winter's coming in the mountains
 shut down the show
 the punks go back to school
 and the rest hit the road--

strawberries picked, shakeblanks split
 fires all out and the packstrings brought
 down to the valleys:
 wet loose to graze.

Shakeblank: pieces of timber prepared to be split into shingles

Gray wharves and hacksaw gothic homes
 Shingle mills and stump farms

Stump farms: logged-over land

overgrown

Here the journey begins – the preamble is over and the narrator heads south

•

Fifty weary Indians
 Sleep in the bus station
 Strawberry pickers speaking Kwaikiutl
 turn at Burlington for Skagit & Ross Dam
 under apple trees by the river
 banks of junked cars

Mt. Vernon

Kwaikiutl (Kwak'wala): Language of the Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwaikiutl) people of the coastal area of southern British Columbia and northern Washington.
A note on the typography: in the version published in Origin 4, the town names to the right were set in italics.

BC Riders give hitchhikers rides

"The sheriff's posse stood in double rows Everett
 flogged the naked Wobblies down
 with stalks of Devil's Club
 & run them out of town"

Wobblies: Members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a radical union organization of the early 20th century, which was strongest in the Northwest. Wallace Stegner's book, *Joe Hill*, is a fictionalized account of the Everett Massacre in 1916, in which a number of Wobblies and others were killed. An account of the Massacre may be found at:

<http://www.ac.wvu.edu/~n9517146/bloodysunday.html>. Members of Snyder's family belonged to the Wobblies.

Devils Club (*Opiopanax horridus*): a riparian plant, a relative of ginseng, which has many spines that will break off in the skin and are nearly impossible to remove.

While shingle weavers lost their fingers
 in the tricky feed and take
 of double saws

Dried, shrimp
 smoked, salmon
 --before the war old Salish gentleman came
 & sold us kids rich hard-smoked Chinook
 from his flatbed model T
 Lake City,

waste of trees & topsoil, beast, herb
 edible roots, Indian field-farms & white men
 dances washed, leached, burnt out
 minds blunt, ug! talk twisted

Salish: Native Americans group living in the Puget Sound region.

Lake City: neighborhood of Seattle, located on the shore of Lake Washington. 99 (1-5) runs nearby

a night of the long poem
 and the mined guitar
 "Forming a new society
 within the shell of the old"
 mess of tincan camps and littered roads.

The Highway passes straight through every town
 at Matsons washing bluejeans
 hills and saltwater

ack, the woodsmoke in my brain

(high Olympics – can't go there again)

East Marginal Way the hitchhike zone
 Boeing down across Duwamish slough
 and angle out &on.

•

Night rain wet concrete headlights blind

Tacoma

salt air / bulk cargo / steam cycle / AIR REDUCTION

Tacoma is an industrial and shipbuilding area. AIR REDUCTION probably refers to the smelting operations located there.

eating peanuts I don't give a damn
if anybody ever stops I'll walk
to San Francisco what the hell

"that's where you going?
why you got that pack?"

"well man I just don't feel right
without something on my back"

& and this character in milkman overalls
"I have to come out her
everyone in a while, there's a guy
blows me here"

way out of town

Stayed in Olympia with Dick Meigs
--this was a different year & he had moved--

This line is the first clear indication that the journey down 99 is not a single one by the narrator, but a collection of journeys, perhaps analogous to the many journeys that are contained in the quotations and descriptions of other travelers

sleep on a cot in the back yard
half the night watch shooting stars

These guys got babies now
drink beer, come back from wars,
"I'd like to save up all my money
get a big new car, go down to Reno

& latch onto one of those rich girls--
I'd fix their little ass"--nineteen yr old
North Dakota boy fixing to get married next month.

To Centralia in a purple Ford.

Carstruck dead doe
by the Skookumchuck river

Fat man in a Chevrolet
Wants to go back to L.A. "too damned poor now"

Airbrakes on the log trucks hiss and whine
stand in the dark by the stoplight
big fat cars tool by
drink coffee, drink more coffee
brush teeth back of Shell

hot shoes
 stay on the righside of that
 yellow line

Mary's corner, turn for Mt. Rainer
 --once caught a ride at night for Portland here.

Mary's Corner: town in Lewis County, Washington, southwest of Chehalis. It was named for Mary Rogers, who ran a store there in the 1920s. It is the junction for State Route 5 to Rainer.

Five Mexicans ask me "chip in on the gas."
 I never was more broke & down.

Got fired that day by the USA
 (the District Ranger up at Packwood
 thought the Wobblies had been dead for
 forty years
 but the FBI smelled treason
 --my red beard

That Waco Texas boy
 took A.G. and me through miles of snow
 had a chest of logger gear
 at the home of an Indian girl
 in Kelso hadn't seen since fifty-four

A.G.: Here and elsewhere, A.G. is Alien Ginsberg. In the *Origin 4* version, A.G. was spelled out as Ginsberg.

Toledo, Castle Rock, free way four lane
 no stoplights and no crossings, only cars,
 & people walking, old hitchhikers
 break the laws. How do I know...
 the state cop
 told me so.

Toledo, Castle Rock: Washington towns north of the Columbia River.

Come a dozen times into
 Portland
 on the bum or
 hasty lover
 late at night.

•

Dust kicking up behind the trucks – night rides – Who
 waits in the coffee stop

night highway 99
 Sokei-an met an old man on the banks of the
 Columbia growing potatoes & living all alone,
 Sokei-an asked him the reason why he lived there,
 he said,
 Boy, no one ever asked me the reason why,
 I like to be alone.
 I am an old man.
 I have forgotten how to speak human words.

I split my last two bucks with
 him in town
 went out to Carol & Billy's in the woods.

Here the poem shifts north again to **Portland**.

Foggy morning in Newport
 housetrailers
 under the fir.

The poem leaves 99 for the Oregon coast before returning to Portland.

An old book on Japan at the Goodwill
 unfurled umbrella in the sailing snow
 sat back in black wood
 barber college chair, a
 shave

On Second Street in Portland.

What elegance. What a life
 Bust my belly with a quart of
 buttermilk
 & five dry heels of French bread
 from the market cheap
 clean shaved, dry feet

But here, with a reference to **Sujata** and the **Buddha** again, we return to **Portland**. This stanza also contains a reference to **Lew Welch's** quotation

We're on our way
 man
 out of town
 Go hitching down that
 highway 99.

With the return of the road song, the journey begins in earnest and makes no more backtracks. The pace also picks up explicitly, with the names of the towns arranged like a guide to the right of the rest of the text. As one of the students in the class pointed out, they could be the litany recited through the loudspeaker at the Greyhound bus station.

Oil pump broken, motor burning out	Salem
Ex logger selling skidder cable	
wants to get to San Francisco,	
fed and drunk	Eugene
Skidder cable: cable used for dragging (skidding) logs.	
Guy just back from Alaska – don't like	
the States now – too much law	Sutherlin
A woman with a kid & two bakes of hay	Roseburg
Sawmill worker, young guy thinking of	
going to Eureka for redwood logging later in the year	Dillard
Two Assembly of God Pentacostal boys from a	
holy-roller high school. One had	
spoke in tongues	Canyonville
(LASME Lost Angeles-Seattle Motor Express	

LASME: actually the Los Angeles-Seattle Motor Express, which was a freight company during the 1940s and 1950s, doing business on 99. In the *Origin 4* version, the name is given correctly.

place on highway 20
 LITTLE ELK badger &
 badger
 South of Yoncalla bum the engine
 run out of oil (a different car) (Six
 great highways; so far only one)

Reference to the six paths of existence in Buddhist thought: territories of psychological passage: the hells, the animals, the humans, delightful gods and goddesses, angry warrior geniuses, and hungry ghosts (from Snyder's notes to "Three Worlds, Three Realms, Six Roads")

Jumpoff Joe Creek &
 a man carrying nothing, walking sort of stiff-
 legged along, blue jeans & denim jacket wrinkled
 face, just north of Louse Creek

Jumpoff Joe Creek, Louse Creek: both near Grants Pass, Ore.

– Abandon really means it the network womb
 stretched loose all things slip through

In my reading, this stanza describes the network of roads that the narrator and all the others travel. From the stories, everyone is slipping through while the machinery rolls on.

Dreaming on a bench under newspapers I woke up
 covered with rhododendron blooms alone in a
 State Park in Oregon.
 "I had a girl in Oakland who worked
 for a doctor, she was a nurse, she let him
 eat her. She died of tuberculosis
 & I drove back that night to Portland
 nonstop, crying all the way" Grants Pass
 "I picked up a young mother with two children once,
 their house had just burned down"
 "I picked up an Italian tree-surgeon in
 Port Angeles once, he had all his saws
 and tools all screwed & bolted on a beat-
 up bike."
 Oxyoke, Wolf Creek, a guy Coming off a five-day binge to
 Phoenix

Phoenix: Oregon town near the Calif, border.

An ex-bartender from Lebanon to Redding
 Man & wife on a drinking spree, to Anderson

Here we enter California again.

Snow on the pines & firs around Lake Shasta
 – Chinese scene of winter hills and trees us "little
 travelers" in the bitter cold six-lane highway slash

& D-9 Cats – bridge building squat earth-
movers
– yellow bugs
I speak for hawks. Creating "Shasta as I go –"

This represents a jump north again.

The road that's followed goes forever;
 in half a minute crossed and left behind.
Out of the snow and into red-dirt plains
 blossoming plums
Each time you go that road it gets more straight
 curves across the mountain lost in fill
Improvements to 99 were underway...
 towns you had to slow down all four lane
 Azalea, Myrtle Creek

Azalea, Myrtle Creek: both small towns in southern Oregon, which used to have Highway 99 as their main streets. Bypasses were built around both. Although the references point north again, movement continues southward without interruption.

 watch out for deer.
At Project City Indian hitcher Standing
under single tarpole lamp
 nobody stopped
 we walked for miles to an oak fire left
 by the road crew, shivered the night
 away

Project City: Community created for workers who built Shasta Dam in the 1940s. In 1993, Project City was combined with the communities of Central Valley, Summit City and Pine Grove to form the City of Lake Shasta.

Going to San Francisco
Yeah San Francisco
Yeah we came from Seattle
Even farther north
Yeah we been working in the mountains
in the spring
 in the autumn
 I always go this highway 99-
 "I was working in a mill three weeks there then it
 burned down & the guy didn't even pay us off –
 but I can do anything – I'll go to San Francisco –
 tend bar –"
Sixteen speeds forward windows open Stopped at
the edge of Willows for a bite

Willows: town on the western side of the Central Valley; indicates that the narrator is following 99W, rather than going down the eastern side of the Valley toward Sacramento, on 99E, which splits off at Redding

 grass shoots on the edge of drained
 rice plains
 – where are the Sierras –

With this break, the journey leaves 99 and turns west to San Francisco on US 40 (now 1-80). Although the narrator abandons the route, 99 continues on. The lines which occur shortly before the break::

*The road that's/allowed goes forever;
in half a minute crossed and left behind.*
speak of this shift

standing in the night in the world-end winds by
the overpass bridge
junction US 40 and highway 99
trucks, trucks roll by kicking up
dust dead flowers
level, dry.
Highway turns west.
Miles gone, speed still pass
through lower hills heat
drying
toward Vallejo gray on the
salt baywater
brown grass ridges
buckbrush blue.
Herons in the tideflats
have no thought for State of Cars
-I'm sick of car exhaust
City gleaming far away we make it
into town tonight get clean and
drink some wine—

SAN FRANCISCO

The typography indicates a return to the road song

NO body
gives a shit
man who you are or
what's your car
there IS no 99

With this ending, the poet appears to be making a statement about reality and the permanence of things. The narrator has been rootless, with a dream of going to someplace exciting—San Francisco—but when he arrives, the gleaming city doesn't care about him and Highway 99, which has been a touchstone the entire time, is no longer there.

Bibliography

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