

The State of Jefferson: Beyond Myth and Mindset, Toward Enhanced Conceptualization of a Region

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Abstract

The State of Jefferson, a ruggedly beautiful region consisting of swaths of southern Oregon and northern California, is often described as “mythical” or a “state of mind.” Introducing this issue of HJSR, this article lays out the basic regional features of Jefferson—its topography, rurality, traditional reliance on resource-extractive industries, and associations with secessionism—and poses the question: How might we conceptualize the Jefferson as more than just “mythical” or a “state of mind”? In discussing how the region as an object of study has been approached by geographers, the author highlights the importance of enhancing the manner in which Jefferson is narrated. Toward that end, two geographic metaphors are offered to frame understandings and discussions of Jefferson.

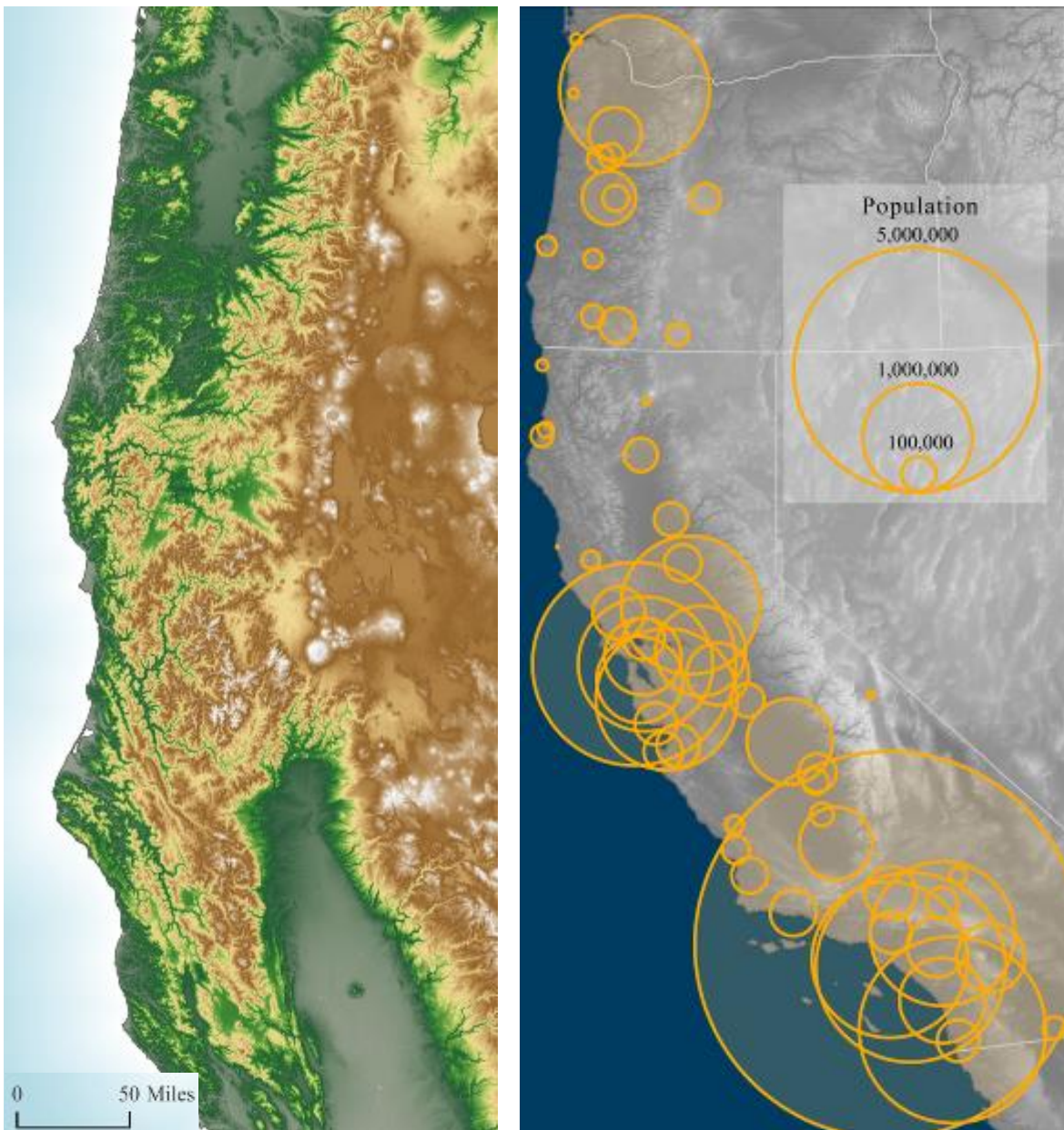
The focus of this special issue of *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* is the State of Jefferson, a nebulously defined region comprised of swaths of southern Oregon and northern California. Drawing on case studies from a range of perspectives, the primary goals of this issue are (1) to draw attention to challenges and opportunities confronting communities of southern Oregon and northern California and in doing so (2) contribute to an enhanced conceptualization of the State of Jefferson as a region. Jefferson presents a multitude of spatially explicit social, political, economic, environmental, and other issues that should be of interest to researchers, yet to date the region has received scant scholarly attention. Thus, a secondary goal of this journal is to spur additional research within and about the region—in short, this edition of *HJSR* represents the start of a longer-term project.

Challenges in Conceptualizing Jefferson as a Region

A central challenge that has inhibited formal conceptualization of the State of Jefferson is its temporally and spatially fluid borders. *Where exactly is it?* The landscape of southern Oregon and northern California is punctuated with symbols of the State of Jefferson: the toponym and its logo are emblazoned on flags, t-shirts, bumper stickers, road signs, and buildings throughout the area. The region is even served by an eponymous radio station, Ashland, Oregon-based Jefferson Public Radio. A sense of place is certainly palpable despite being a fuzzily demarcated geo-cultural entity that has never formally existed—much to the chagrin of secessionists in the area.

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Nevertheless, three basic regional characteristics can be identified: topography, rurality, and economy. Sandwiched between Oregon’s Willamette Valley to the north and California’s Central Valley to the south, Jefferson consists of a dramatic series of mountains and valleys (see Figure 1), creating a physical landscape described as “ruggedly beautiful” (Redding Record Searchlight, 2013). The region’s rural settlement pattern also sharply contrasts with the urbanization of these two great valleys (see Figure 2). The economy of Jefferson’s relatively isolated and rural settlements is defined by its traditional dependence on resource-extractive industries—most notably timber, but also minerals, fishing, and, more recently, marijuana. The



Figures 1 and 2. Left: Located between the Willamette Valley (north) and the Central Valley (south), Jefferson is defined topographically by a dramatic series of mountains and valleys. Right: Jefferson is a largely rural region, sharply contrasting with the urbanization of the two great valleys north and south of it (maps by Connor Mullinix).

precipitous decline of formal resource-extractive industries in the region, beginning in the latter decades of the 20th century, has left many communities in southern Oregon and northern California facing unemployment, poverty, and a host of other acute socio-economic challenges (see Figure 3).

A fourth important feature is Jefferson’s close association with secessionism. Proposals to carve a new state out of southern Oregon and northern California date to the mid-19th century, but the most famous secessionist movement arose in late November 1941. That year the California counties of Del Norte, Siskiyou, Modoc, and Shasta teamed up with Oregon’s Curry County to declare independence from their respective states and reconstitute themselves as a new State of Jefferson, to be headquartered in Yreka, California (see generally Laufer, 2013). The Jefferson secessionists felt that their distant state capitals favored the interests of urban centers and the seal of their would-be state—a gold pan inscribed with “XX”—was developed to symbolize their feelings of being double-crossed by Salem and Sacramento with particular regard to mineral extraction. Their specific grievance was the lack of state initiative in building roads to facilitate resource development, namely that of copper deposits prior to World War II when the market for such materials would have benefitted the region. Carefully staged photos of frontier rebellion appeared with reports of secessionism in newspapers throughout the country (see Figure 4, next page), creating the impression that a new State of Jefferson was plausible, if not imminent. However, the movement quickly dissipated amid a tide of national patriotism following the attacks on Pearl Harbor in December 1941.

Though failing to create a new state, the secessionists were successful in attracting attention and, in the process, constructing a powerful mythology that has fueled subsequent waves of secessionism in southern Oregon and northern California. But this “success” has

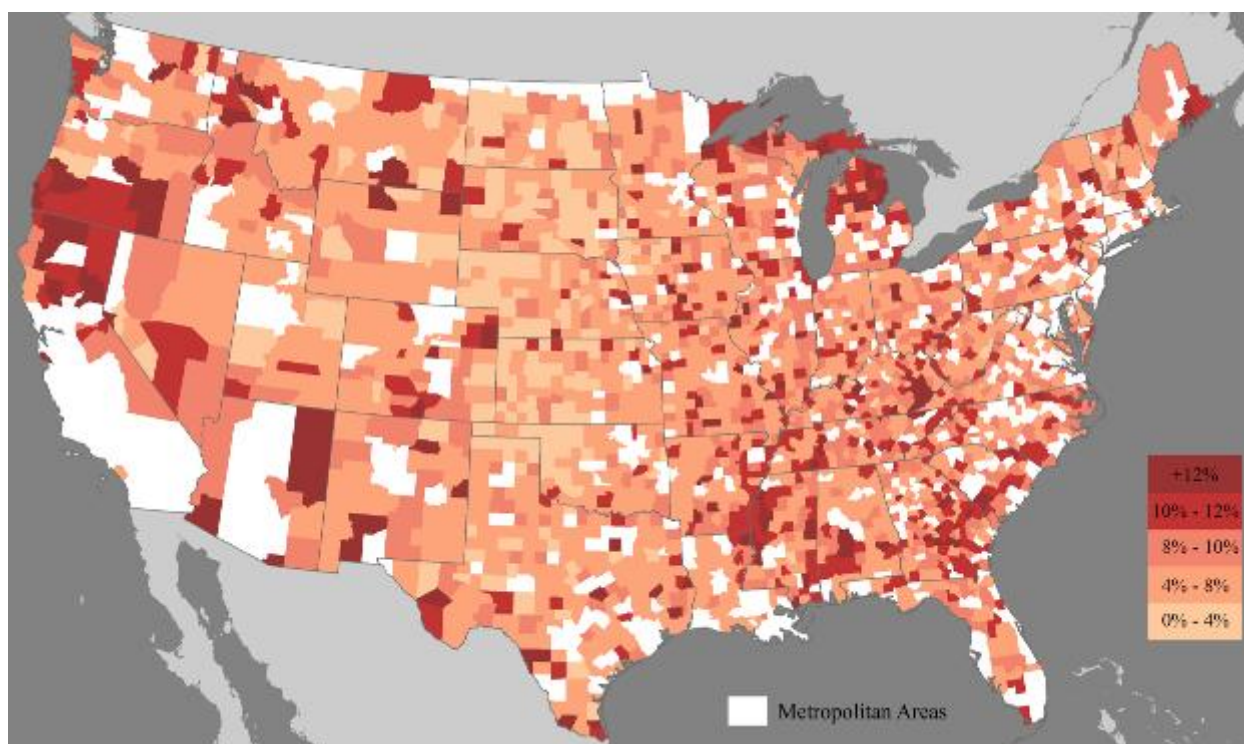


Figure 3. Counties associated with Jefferson post among the highest unemployment rates in the rural United States (2013 data from Bureau of Labor Statistics; map by Connor Mullinix).



Figure 4. The 1941 State of Jefferson secessionists hand out their “Proclamation of Declaration” to a passing-by traveler (photograph courtesy of Siskiyou County Museum).

impoverished how the region is understood formally. Talk about Jefferson, so tightly tethered to secessionism, often centers on the question of feasibility. *Do you think it can happen?* This is surely a dead-end line of inquiry.¹ Discussions that do transcend the question of feasibility are generally severely constrained in their narration because secessionism in the region has failed to produce political borders. Jefferson is therefore commonly narrated as “mythical” (e.g. Sutton, 1965; Shaw, 2000; Magee, 2005; Schwartz, 2013). The suggestion that the region is somehow unreal discounts the fundamental realities of physical and historical geography (topography, natural resources, settlement, traditional economic activities) that have played out within a specific geographic context. Such narration serves to distract from the real-life and everyday struggles of economic transformation, political disputes over land use (e.g. water rights, forestry practices, etc.), environmental concerns, and other pressing issues that are common to the region.

Another popular narrative is that Jefferson is a “state of mind,” meaning the “rugged individualism” of the pioneer spirit (e.g. Motaz, 1972; Thomas, 1984; Rock, 1999; Colby, 2000; Wilson, 2005; Tickner & Fiorini-Jenner, 2005). Or, as Wilson describes the regional mindset, “Jeffersonians have inherited [from the 1941 secessionists] an independent attitude and remain suspicious of state and federal governments” (2005, p. 22). This narration is just as problematic as the “mythical” Jefferson by being culturally exclusionary (notably omitting Indigenous residents), narrowly ascribing a certain type of reactionary politics to people of southern Oregon and northern California, and obfuscating the hand of government in subsidizing the region’s putative rugged individualism.

¹ For explanation, see Peter Laufer’s contribution to this issue of *HJSR* (especially p. 31).

Secessionism has reemerged in southern Oregon and northern California since confirming the theme of this issue of *HJSR* a year ago. In early September 2013, for example, the Siskiyou County board of supervisors voted 4-1 to secede from California and join up with like-minded counties to form a new State of Jefferson (Berton, 2013). Similar resolutions have since passed in the California counties of Glenn, Modoc, and Yuba; most recently, Tehama County voted to adopt a “Declaration of Support” for seceding from California (Associated Press, 2014; Redding Record Searchlight, 2014). With committees organized in more than 20 counties, the territorial vision of the current Jefferson secessionist movement far surpasses that of 1941 (see Figure 5). However, in June early 2014 the longtime Jefferson proponent, California’s Del Norte County, voted against adopting the declaration and neighboring Siskiyou County rejected a proposition to rename itself the Republic of Jefferson (Redding Record Searchlight, 2014). The timing of these events is serendipitous for the editorial staff and contributors of this issue of *HJSR* because the resulting media attention highlights the importance of examining the State of Jefferson not only for what it purports to be, but also for what it may not be.

Understandable are the anxieties of some researchers in engaging with a regional construct so closely associated with a reactionary political movement. However, the underlying circumstances driving the secessionists’ complaints are certainly deserving of scholarly inquiry.



Figure 5. The territorial vision of the current State of Jefferson secessionist movement is far greater than that of the 1941 movement (map by Connor Mullinix).

More fundamentally, these circumstances are rooted in a specific geographic context, begging for a more robust, more nuanced conceptualization of a region that, for better or worse, has become known as the State of Jefferson. To date, ideas of Jefferson have largely been shaped by secessionist mythology and mindset and narrated in narrow terms that, in the process of caricaturizing cultural and political dynamics, distract from real-life issues confronting southern Oregon and northern California. The challenge at hand is to put aside anxieties and engage with the following question: How might we conceptualize the State of Jefferson as more than just “mythical” or a “state of mind”? No definitive answer to this question is offered in the pages of this edition of *HJSR*; instead, its purpose is to bring attention to Jefferson so that its issues and identity can be more fully understood.

The Region in Focus

Motivating the production of this issue of *HJSR* is not only a researcher’s concern and interest in *a* region; it is also motivated by a geographer’s concern and interest in *the* region, one of geography’s “central objects of study” that has waxed and waned in popularity over the past century (Allen et al., 1998). During the first half of the 20th century, when regional geography dominated the discipline, regions were treated uncritically—understood as existing objectively (Paasi, 1996). Geographers influenced by chorology (the study of place) worked to identify and delimit regions and take inventory of their characteristics (Johnston et al., 2000, p. 35). By mid-century this ideography had relegated the region to an intellectual backwater in the discipline, in part because many borders had become politically formalized.

The rise of “new regionalism” in the 1980s introduced new critical approaches to the concept. Human geographers began looking at regions in three ways: (1) sites of capital accumulation, (2) sites of social interaction, and/or (3) sites of identity formation (Gilbert, 1988; MacLeod, 2001). No longer viewed as objective entities, regions increasingly became understood as social constructs produced through institutions, discourses, symbols, and practices (Entrikin, 1996; Allen et al., 1998). Regions were also no longer viewed as discrete entities, but instead as the products of processes occurring at a variety of spatial scales. The state-centrism of the preceding era gave way to a focus sub-state and supra-state regionalism (e.g. Paasi, 1991; 2004), including cross-border regionalism (e.g. Krätke, 2002; Perkmann, 2003). This shift from “old” to “new” regionalism, as Alexander Murphy explained in the early 1990s, was partly driven by geographers’ growing attentiveness to the uneven dynamics of global capitalism. Yet Murphy cautioned against exaggerating the powers of globalization in shaping regions, contending that such “large-scale institutional and ideological developments” are mediated by a regional sense of place that is borne out of “place-specific activities, interactions and understandings” (1991, p. 29).

By the mid-1990s, the region again began losing its appeal to human geographers due in part to major theoretical shifts in the discipline and the perceived erosion of place and space by globalization. Specifically, a large and important body of work from post-structural, feminist, critical realist, and postmodernist perspectives illustrated the value of intensive, small-scale case studies in the production of geographic knowledge. At the other end of the spatial scale, accelerating globalization was argued to have created a borderless world where, ironically, regions had no place (e.g. Ohmae, 1995; Strange, 1996).

In recent years, as the “hyperbolic claims” (Elden, 2005, p. 9) of a borderless world have been critiqued with increasing frequency, a number of notable geographers have made the case for a revitalized engagement with the region (e.g. Paasi, 2009; Jonas, 2012; 2013; Agnew,

2013). Of particular relevance to this issue of *HJSR* is a recent forum in *Dialogues in Human Geography* in which Murphy cites the overwhelming predominance of small-scale case studies in his discipline and consequent need for an “expanded geographic engagement with grand regional narratives” (2013, p. 131). He defines a grand regional narrative as a “generalized, empirically grounded account of what is going on, or has gone on, in a region of significant size and importance to be widely viewed as a significant presence on the world stage” (p. 132). Underpinning this call for scholarship on large-scale regions is a concern with real-world outcomes because the manner in which a region is narrated figures prominently in public debates. For example, the Global North-Global South regional narrative is not only imprecise but also helps sustain environmental determinist stereotypes and undermines the idea that geographic spaces are modifiable.

While Murphy’s focus is macro-scale, his basic argument applies to meso-scale regions like the State of Jefferson, whose narration has been limited to only a few memes. In light of these matters, this issue of *HJSR* aims to contribute to a more robust narration and therefore conceptualization of Jefferson through a series of empirically rich cases. This multidisciplinary project is comprised of works by authors from a range of disciplines, including sociology, political science, journalism, geography, forestry, environmental planning, and the visual arts. Prior to introducing the contributions to this issue of *HJSR*, however, I offer two geographic metaphors to frame the understandings and discussions of Jefferson contained herein.

Jefferson as a Borderland, Jefferson as a Periphery

Jefferson may be viewed as a *borderland*, which, as studied by geographers and other social scientists, is a type of region located adjacent to or around the political boundaries of nation-states. The concept can be applied to Jefferson, not least due to the presence of the Oregon-California border, because this is an area where populations converge and complex cultural and political interactions occur. Augelli writes that “borderlands tend to be zones of cultural overlap and political instability where the...identity and loyalties of the people often become blurred” (1980, p. 19). Wilson and Donnan (1998) also say borderlands are characterized by shifting and multiple identities. This coming together of diverse populations in borderlands, according to Dear and Burridge (2005), might produce two outcomes. First is *integration*, defined as

mutually-agreeable contact leading to interdependencies that cause little or no change in contact partners and which does not require their geographical proximity, merging, or adjacency. Though integration, the essential constitution of contact partners remains intact, sovereign and unaltered. (p. 303)

The second potential outcome is *hybridization*, or the

contact that creates novel forms and practices that exist independently of antecedent forms and practices and requires that engaged agents be geographically adjacent for their production to occur. In short, hybrids exist when different cultures come together in the same place to create something that did not previously exist. (p. 303)

Borderlands are also shaped by their distance from state centers: the greater the distance, the weaker the bond, often resulting in a feeling of political marginalization (Rumley & Minghi, 1991; Kaplan, 1999). Feelings of extreme marginalization can lead to borderland residents seeking the creation of autonomous regions with a different set of rules and privileges (Mikesell & Murphy, 1991).

Jefferson may also be viewed as a *periphery*. This concept comes from Immanuel Wallerstein's macro-scale approach to world-systems analysis (1979; 2004). Whereas social scientists have traditionally taken the nation-state as their primary unit of analysis, Wallerstein argues that a single world-economy exists with an international division of labor. He separates the world into areas along a spectrum of economic functionality within a global capitalist system: at one pole is the *core* (the so-called First World), countries focused on higher-skill, capital-intensive production of goods and services; at the other pole is the *periphery* (the so-called Third World), countries focused on low-skill, labor-intensive extraction of raw materials; in between is the *semi-periphery*, exhibiting characteristics of both the core and periphery. The core and periphery are dependent on each other as the periphery sends low-value raw materials to the core for transformation into high-value consumer goods, which are then sold back to the periphery. In this self-reinforcing cycle, the dominance of the core over the periphery is ensured by global-scale political structures established through colonialism. Economic development in peripheral countries is consequently problematized.

Although Wallerstein's world-systems framework considers geopolitics and the comprehensive historical development of the capitalist world-economy as a whole, geographers recognize that capital accumulation occurs just as unevenly *within* nation-states. Indeed, concepts such as core, semi-periphery, and periphery have been applied to intrastate analyses of socio-spatial relations (e.g. Hanna, 1995; Taylor, 1989; 1997). Considering Jefferson's historical reliance on resource-extractive industries and recent struggles to create new, post-extractive and post-industrial economic bases, the concept of "internal periphery" could be applied to the region.

Overview of Issue

The papers selected for inclusion in this issue of *HJSR* represent the eclectic possibilities for Jefferson regional studies. As a body, the articles contribute a more robust narration of Jefferson by providing greater historical contextualization, bringing Indigenous perspectives into the discussion, confronting socio-economic challenges, addressing environmental issues, and considering potential futures for the region.

The collection opens with Peter Laufer's "All We Ask Is To Be Left Alone." Drawing on archival resources as well as interviews and personal observations, Laufer historicizes State of Jefferson secessionism and places it in the region's current context. His investigation of the 1941 secessionist movement exposes some of the year's most notorious events as having been staged in collusion with national media for the consumption of audiences across the country. That the mythology of 1941 endures, inspiring secessionism in the borderland region today and continuing to fascinate audiences afar, begs the question: To what extent is the story of Jefferson an American story?

Second is "Sawdust Empire, Sawdust Mountain, and Beyond: The Challenges for the State of Jefferson as Seen Through the Photographs of Eirik Johnson's *Sawdust Mountain*" by Gordon and Peter Stillman. By interpreting photographs of contemporary Jeffersonians and the landscapes they inhabit, the Stillmans analyze how the region's boom-and-bust history of

logging and fishing has shaped a people who today, with their traditional economic activities in sharp decline, face an uncertain future. Will they continue to pursue resource extraction, modified to suit contemporary values? Will their rural landscapes give way to suburbs? Or will they retreat from the very land that shaped their identity? In posing these questions, the Stillmans suggest a peripheral existence for their subjects.

The following three articles bring Native Americans into the Jefferson narrative as they confront issues related to the continued settlement of Klamath Basin tribal lands by Euro-Americans. First is Laura Hurwitz's "Got Land? Thank an Indian: Settler Colonialism and the White Settler in the Karuk Ancestral Territory." Through a series of interviews, Hurwitz examines the complexities and ambiguities that she and other white settlers living in the Karuk Ancestral Territory face while taking accountability for their involvement in a colonial system. In addition to exploring the ongoing process of Indigenous disenfranchisement common to the American West, Hurwitz also upsets the mythology of Jeffersonian rugged individualism by seeing borderland settlers much like the Stillmans view the subjects of *Sawdust Mountain*—grappling with fragile identities and facing insecure futures.

The second article addressing the legacies of Euro-American settlement of tribal lands is Kari Norgaard's "The Politics of Fire and the Social Impacts of Fire Exclusion on the Klamath." Norgaard argues that white settlers have not only affected Indigenous livelihoods through land parcelization and private ownership but also by interrupting and preventing traditional land-management practices. In doing so she draws attention to the changing biogeography of Jefferson following introduction of national fire suppression policies. Using data from interviews, surveys, and other documents, Norgaard specifically examines how fire suppression has disrupted the processes by which biodiversity was made greater by Indigenous activity, which in turn has negatively impacted the Karuk people's cultural practices, political sovereignty, social relations, subsistence activities, and their mental and physical health. The question of identity is again addressed in this article.

The final contribution examining the legacies of Euro-American settlement of tribal lands is "Who Will Own the Mazama? Tribal Power and Forest Ownership in the Klamath Basin" by Erin Kelly and Hannah Gosnell. Using the Mazama forest tract as a case study of changing power relations between Native Americans, timber companies, and private landowners, Kelly and Gosnell explore a complex history of tribal land ownership over the past 150 years as the region has moved from an extractive to a post-extractive economy. The Mazama was originally part of the Karuk Ancestral Territory in the Klamath Basin before it became federal property and then logged by private interests. The tract—called a "tree farm" for much of the 20th century—was initially sold to a large timber company before a series of post-1980 sales to smaller entities. In recent years, as the timber value of such tracts has declined, companies have begun to sell parcels to suburban developers. Kelly and Gosnell see the current post-extractive economy as a potential boon for Native American tribes who may finally have the opportunity to procure ancestral lands that, as noted by Hurwitz and Norgaard, have been illegitimately acquired, settled, and degraded by Euro-Americans.

Two subsequent articles are included as examples of how economics in the State of Jefferson may operate going forward. Seth Crawford's "Estimating the Quasi-Underground: Oregon's Informal Marijuana Economy" examines Oregon's marijuana "shadow economy" using web-based surveys to identify the most significant factors related to private marijuana use and sales. His goal is to determine the extent to which legalization may benefit the state through tax levies and a decrease in arrests and incarceration. After discovering that marijuana could

currently be the state's most important crop, and has the potential to become the third largest commodity overall, Crawford recommends that future levies be assessed keeping in mind the importance of this crop to local economies. He specifically notes that the production and sales structure of the industry has developed to benefit economically depressed areas and individuals. Of particular interest to Jefferson scholars is his discovery that several southern Oregon counties currently hold the most medical marijuana permits per capita, that most growers and vendors appear to engage in this "shadow economy" to supplement otherwise meager incomes, and that state-level regulation has the potential to further cripple those counties in Jefferson.

Ed Madison's "The State of Jefferson and the Future of Regional Journalism" addresses the recent national movement toward media consolidation in rural areas. This phenomenon leads to underrepresentation of such areas, contributing to regions like Jefferson becoming further marginalized. Madison explores university-sponsored, student-driven coverage as a possible solution to journalistic silence in Josephine County, Oregon. He details the experience of University of Oregon students in covering news in Grants Pass, complete with practical examples of the challenges and opportunities afforded by arrangements with local law enforcement. The future of journalism in regions like Jefferson may lie in partnerships between educational institutions and local municipalities.

A third article related to possible futures is "Scenario Planning for Building Coastal Resilience in the Face of Sea Level Rise: The case of Jacobs Avenue, Eureka, CA" by Kerry McNamee, Evan Wisheropp, Christopher Weinstein, Andrew Nugent, and Laurie Richmond. The authors were tasked with compiling a feasibility study of management options accounting for sea level change for an economically important area of Eureka, Humboldt County, California. Jacobs Avenue, they argue, may be representative of other coastal communities in northern California and southern Oregon that are experiencing the most rapid rates of sea level rise compared to the rest of the West Coast. They set forth three scenarios: no action, rebuild/fortify, and strategic retreat. After taking finances and residents' sense of place into account, the authors recommend a combination of rebuilding/fortification and strategic retreat. The consideration of strategic retreat echoes the Stillmans' suggestion that one possible future for the State of Jefferson is retreat, where residents realize the near futility of resisting the decline in traditional economies and instead let nature take its course.

The final two entries represent alternative conceptualizations of Jefferson, both with an artistic inclination. The first, Becky Evans' "Learning the Klamath Knot...and Creating a Bureau of Reclamation," follows the author as she moves through the region collecting materials and inspiration for creating what she calls the "Bureau of Reclamation." In her work, Evans uses locally sourced material to create artwork that reflects the identity of Jefferson as both wild and tamed; her goal is to reimagine the region without human influence, including through imagined removal of dams.

The second is an interview with the author of *The Oregon Experiment*, Keith Scribner. Scribner wrote this fictionalized account of two couples living in Oregon at the time of a secessionist movement modeled after that of Jefferson. He writes not only about separation at the political level, but also at the personal level as he explores the chasms between each of his main characters. This reimagining of secession as a challenge to state- and self-integrity is compelling in light of other articles in this issue that touch on the meaning of Jefferson to different groups and individuals.

This special issue of the *HJSR* also includes two geovisualizations of Jefferson's economic landscape and temporal location among other 20th-century secession movements. Six reviews of recent books dealing with regional topics conclude this issue, each contributed by Humboldt State University faculty and students.

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