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Worldviews And The American West

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Published by Utah State University Press

Stewart, P..

Worldviews And The American West: The Life of the Place Itself.

Logan: Utah State University Press, 2000.

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Blue Shadows on Human Drama: The Western Songscape

Hal Cannon

*There's a place I know where no man can go,
Where the shadows have all the room
I was riding free on the old SP,
Humming a southern tune
When a man came along, made me hush my song,
Put me out a-way out there. . . . (Boyd 1936)*

I grew up with one foot in Salt Lake City and one foot in a western agricultural community, Bluffdale, Utah. As a boy I remember visiting our doctor's office. I can picture the waiting room vividly. Cheap prints hung on the wall. One was a picture of a marsh, duck hunters waiting behind a blind as a V of ducks flew overhead. The other was of a Conestoga wagon, with pioneer family, rolling across a desert landscape. As an adult I came back to that same office. The old prints had come down. The wall color had changed, the furniture was modern, and new prints were in place of the old: now there was a print of mallards swimming peacefully in the water—no hunters in sight—and, replacing the pioneers, a photograph of a red-rock landscape. In both cases the human beings were taken out of the landscape.

Recently, during a layover while traveling, I stopped to eat a hot dog at the airport. A poster hung on the wall which advertised a fund-raising campaign for something called "Share the Earth," a joint campaign of forty-nine environmental organizations. Encircling the poster were illustrations of those who would benefit from this sharing—whales, birds, foxes, trees, leaves, and others. Nothing on the poster included people, even those who really could benefit from some sharing of the riches of the earth. The implicit message was that humans are separate from nature. And by contributing to the fund you would assuage your guilt by giving your fair share back to the natural world.

I'm part of the generation of environmental activism which helped form this aesthetic. Two decades ago, when I began searching and researching

cowboy music and poetry, I was anxious to find songs and verse which, like the new prints in the doctor's office, had divested themselves of the human element. Focusing on the natural western environment, I hoped I would find works from the folk perspective that would illuminate and give a new vantage to the natural landscape. What I found instead, in this occupational repertoire, were poems and songs full of human drama, with the natural world as a mere backdrop. I asked myself, where are the works from the folk repertoire which explore the pure natural world, the world without Conestogas and duck hunters? Naively, I hoped that if I could find traditional songs and stories that were environmentally sensitive—i.e., not so damn full of people—then I could prove to myself that at least at one time folk culture was more environmentally sensitive. Though I found some western poetry which dealt entirely with the natural world, these works—the works without people—didn't seem to resonate with the same meaning as those focusing on people. I was crestfallen not to find that place where, as in Bill Boyd's "Way Out There," "the shadows have all the room."

*I sat up on a pinnacle and took off my slouch hat
But all that I could see was the farm shacks on the flat
Said the Indian to the cowboy, You had better look around,
Or you're liable to be camping on some other fellow's ground.
Oh, the Indian and the cowboy, they used to live in peace,
Till the damned old dry-land farmer come a-creeping from the East.*
(Atwood 1976)

My heritage is of people who comprise a mere layer in a myriad of layers of western conquest and displacement. My people are those dry-land farmers who came "a-creeping from the East." I remember asking my father why we called our place a farm, not a ranch. I wanted my dad to be Sky King, flying over some vast kingdom that was all ours. Unfortunately he loved the idea of being a farmer—no show, just agricultural production. This may have been Mormon modesty or it may have been an older family tradition which did not include the potent horse-and-cattle culture that defines ranching. There is a western saying that a man might have a thousand sheep and twenty cows and he will proclaim himself a cattle rancher. I can see how that would go against my father's grain. Though I loved *Sky King*, I had little use for most cowboy movies. I just didn't find the movie cowboys and their stories interesting or believable. I found our farming and ranching neighbors and their stories different from the popular image and, frankly, much more subtle and evocative. Interestingly, though the stories from the cowboy movies and the story of our family and our Utah neighbors contained similar underlying themes, I could not conceive of my family or our neighbors being part of a heroic human drama that marks the West. Our heroism was not monumental. It was a heroism of ordinary life. And now I see drama, both subtle and embellished, in

each folk song, poem and story of our region. The relation of environment to these works may not be thematically central, but references to a place, “way out there,” contribute in a powerful way to much folk expression from the old West. There is almost a sense of fresh reaction to the place. After all, the people who made these works up and used them were newcomers to the West, and though they may have seen themselves at odds with the environment, they also came to the region with hopes and dreams and a fresh perspective on the landscape. That may be one reason why cowboy songs and poems have persisted, have become emblematic of a common experience.

The cowboy is the symbolic recipient of an enchanted melding of western landscape and human drama. As symbol, his story is universal. But why has the cowboy defined the West so directly? Part of understanding the power of the cowboy is knowing where his song and story come from. Every artistic tradition has a murky past marked by high creativity, low self-consciousness, and marginal popularity to outsiders. For the cowboy it was in those trail-drive days of the eighteen-seventies and -eighties, when the American West still seemed a frontier, that the expressive life of the cowboy became legendary. There are no historic narratives from the trail drives following the Civil War which fully explain the chemistry of an incredibly diverse lot of men brought together, in the wilderness, relying on each other and animals for long and trying odysseys. From this experience came an amazing amalgam of life that forever would identify Americans. It was a jazz of Irish storytelling and lore, Scottish seafaring and cattle tending, Moorish and Spanish horsemanship, European cavalry, African improvisation, and practical Native American survival techniques. All this history makes up what the cowboy is, even today.

*They had not been gone for an hour or two
When out of his budget a fiddle he drew
He played her a tune caused the valleys to ring
Hark hark, cried the maiden, hear the whippoorwill sing.*

*Oh ho, cried the cowboy, It's time to give o'er
Oh no, cried the maiden, just play one tune more
So he played her a tune caused the valley to ring
Hark hark, cried the maiden, hear the whippoorwill sing*

*Oh now, cried the maiden, won't you marry me
Oh no, cried the cowboy, that never can be,
I've a wife in New Mexico and children twice three
Two wives on a cow ranch, too many for me.¹*

The beauty of songs that endure through time is that they convey worlds of information. The words (the poetry) both paint the place and chronicle the action. There are also subtle elements that define folk songs, conventions of tradition that build trust in the song by representing the period, the class and

ethnicity of the singer and, most importantly, the veracity of the message. Built of word and tune, songs must stay true to specific traditions or they will not be learned and passed on. The critical process of natural selection for songs that last through time is much more stringent than one might think. Therefore, if a song, story, or poem survives, the very fact that it lives on makes it worth examination. In the old British ballad, “The Soldier and the Lady,” adapted to the West as “One Morning in May” or “The Cowboy and the Lady,” the lusty cowboy and the impressionable young lady cry to each other like ravens cawing: “Hark hark.” In this song, the cautionary message of choosing mates carefully is as economically contained in the song as raven DNA containing a road map for mating habits. “Hark hark, cried the maiden.”

I’ve been told that tone-deafness is caused by music teachers who hate their students. In many cultures there is nothing, save deafness, which defines tone-deafness. Otherwise how could we recognize specific voices or muster tone in our own discourse? I’ve come to mourn, even more than tone-deafness, what Bertrand Russell calls “immunity to eloquence” (Postman 1985, 26). I referred earlier to an impression that some poems carry resonance, others do not. Perceived meaning, the impressionistic appraisal of truth, the relation between the subconscious and improvisational oral discourse, the unconscious gesture—these are potent and real parts of life that might seem ludicrous as the stuff of hard study. Yet that is why some of the finest ethnographic work comes in novels and paintings rather than in analytic observation. You can’t always capture the subtlety of cultural expression in didactic ways. The late cowboy singer and poet Buck Ramsey, testifying to the National Endowment for the Arts in 1995, spoke directly to the value of folk eloquence in his folk community, what he calls his tribe, the cowboy tribe:

I think our nation, and our species has common memory that keeps us, through tradition, connected; reminded of the precious things our minds and hearts and souls have sifted and sanctified from our long and common experience. But, as regards to songs, stories and poems, which are much of the traditional foundation of my tribe, I learned early a curious fact: The older the cowboy, the more likely he was to be plugged into that common memory of the tribe. That is he knew more songs, stories and poems than the younger ones and seemed to be in some way purer in his tribal etiquette.

When it came to my generation, we know only snatches of what the old ones knew. Clearly radio, movies, television began drowning out the resonance of the tradition, acted as something of an Alzheimer’s disease on the common memory.²

Neil Postman observes in his epistemology of media in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* that “Since intelligence is primarily defined as one’s

capacity to grasp the truth of things, it follows that what a culture means by intelligence is derived from the character of its important forms of communication. In a purely oral culture, intelligence is often associated with aphoristic ingenuity, that is, the power to invent compact sayings of wide applicability" (Postman 1985, 24–25).

The story of the cowboy and the lady is gloriously compact in its meaning, combining the power of nature, the whippoorwill's song, the beguiling fiddle, the lustiness of the flowing spring in the dry wilderness. And yet the seduction is followed by the rebuke. How's that for landscape and human drama. Folk songs weave landscape and human drama into a single fabric. It's always there. It seems ironic that as my appreciation for folk expression has refined, so has my fervor as an activist for both nature and culture. Thinking that we can divorce human history from natural history now seems ridiculous to me. Many continue to believe that if only we humans were not part of the equation, the world could once again be pristine. The world has never been pristine and it is only pristine because we, as humans, give it that value.

*Blue Mountain, you're azure deep, Blue Mountain with sides so steep
Blue Mountain with horse head on your side, you have won my heart for to keep
I chum with Latino Gordon, I drink at the Blue Goose Saloon
I dance at night with the Mormon girls and I ride home beneath the moon.*

(Keller 1947)

Wallace Stegner's words have always stuck with me: "A place is not a place until a poet has been there" (Stegner 1989). I've come to wonder if it took a poet to tell us the Grand Canyon was majestically beautiful rather than a majestic inconvenience for travelers. Indeed, Ernst Cassirer contends that "Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man's symbolic activity advances. Instead of dealing with things themselves man is in a sense constantly conversing with himself. He has so enveloped himself in linguistic forms, in artistic images, in mythical symbols or religious rites that he cannot see or know anything except by the interposition of artificial medium" (quoted in Postman 1985, 10).

When I spoke with Judge Fred Keller, the man who made up the song, "Blue Mountain," he told me quite simply that he wrote the song to remember a place and a time in this life. He knew his cowboying days were over. He was going off to school and he was at a loss for ways to keep those memories alive, so he wrote a song. Now it lives on.

Bob Nolan, of the Sons of the Pioneers, wrote a song one day in 1932 as he looked out his apartment window in West Los Angeles, deciding it was too rainy and windy for him to go to his regular job as a caddie at the Bel Air Country Club. He watched as leaves blew past him along the street. His song has survived in popular culture as a symbol of freedom and open spaces in the west:

See them tumbling down
 Pledging their love to the ground
 Lonely but free I'll be found.
 Drifting along with the tumbling tumbleweeds.
 (Nolan 1934)

Across town, Bruce Kiskaddon sat in the lobby of the Mayflower Hotel, where he worked as a bellhop, and measured once again how we are tied to place and how we can find independence to move on:

My spurs they ring and the song I sing
 Is set to my horse's stride
 We gallop along to an old time song
 As out on the trail we ride.
 CHORUS.
 Oh I'm hittin' the trail tonite tonite
 I'm hittin' the trail tonite
 My horse is pullin' the bridle reins
 I'm hittin' the trail tonite.
 (Kiskaddon 1987, 62)

I grew up on radio-format songs, songs lasting rarely more than two or three minutes, songs picked for airplay for very specific commercial reasons. Growing up, I don't believe I quite understood what a song could do, what a song could be, until I traveled to the outback of Australia and spent time with Aboriginal people who talked about their songs being tied directly to the experience of the Walkabout. Quite literally, stanzas of songs are prompted by the passing of certain places. The song is integral to time and place. Later, halfway around the world, interviewing Paul Ethalbah, a White Mountain Apache medicine man and rancher, I got that same sense about his songs and prayers. His blessings for horses and ropes are a part of daily life. He relies on the power of his songs. He believes that his horses and tools are enhanced through the singing.

We have come to underestimate the power of songs, prayers, poems, and stories. Those that resound with truth have great power. They define the eloquence of western experience.

Notes

1. "The Cowboy and the Lady," I. D. Jones's version of the traditional English song, "The Soldier and the Lady," was field-recorded by James Griffith.
2. Buck Ramsey, testimony before the National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D. C., February 1995.