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Worldviews And The American West

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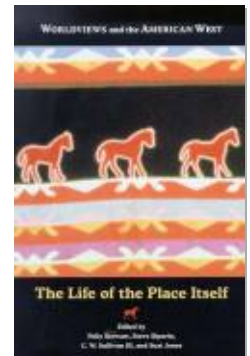
Published by Utah State University Press

Stewart, Polly.

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

Utah State University Press, 2000.

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Introduction

This book, a collection of essays on worldview and the American West, started life some years back as a festschrift honoring Barre Toelken. The four of us who edited this volume are all past students of Barre's. We wanted to assemble essays written by students and colleagues who over the years had, like us, benefitted from Barre's thought and wished to celebrate him as friend, colleague, and mentor. Yet, as we four eagerly began consulting (we hoped clandestinely) with a few trusted colleagues and publishers, we realized that although the traditional potpourri of festschrift-as-testimonial might have its special pleasures, we could honor Barre best by producing an anthology meant to stand on its own merits. We think readers will like the resulting book, which is diverse in approaches and writing styles but harmonious in its venture, variously applying Toelken's path-breaking ideas about worldview to the topic of the American West, a region that is both prominent in his work and a source of endless fascination to the rest of us. In our selections, we have aimed for a range of voices, methods, and visions but have integrated them through the focus of one theme, worldview, in one region, the American West.

What is *worldview*? Toelken gives us an entry point in *The Dynamics of Folklore*: "Worldview" refers to the manner in which a culture sees and expresses its relation to the world around it" (1996a, 263). A simple claim—with complex implications. As members of the species *Homo sapiens*, we possess five senses for collecting information, but the ways in which we use these physiological structures to do the collecting are dramatically conditioned by the particular culture in which we are raised. The worldview we acquire from those around us becomes as much a part of our perceptual equipment as the physical engineering of our senses.

Worldview is social as well as material, spiritual as well as physical. It refers to the socially agreed upon way in which a group with continuity in time and space shapes and expresses its reality. Thus worldview inevitably permeates all of every group's culture, yet, as members of a specific culture ourselves, it is hard for us to understand that worldview is only our *take* on reality (and our *only* take on reality) since it is the very conceptual tool with which we see and communicate. As Toelken puts it, "each culture has a distinctive way of

thinking that it passes on to its young, and this way of thinking is made up of codes so deeply represented in language that they become . . . the primary way in which people of that culture can understand anything” (1996a, 263).

Features of worldview extend beyond folk groups and may be surprisingly consistent at the folk, popular, and elite levels of a nation or even throughout a whole civilization over a long period of time, as Alan Dundes showed so powerfully in a series of pioneering essays (1968, 1969, and 1971). But even when folk and elite culture share the same worldview—as with the reliance on the number three in Euro-American culture for organizing everything from deity to small, medium, and large clothing sizes, to joking formulas—we are likely to acquire such fundamentals initially (as infants and children) at the informal, folk level and then find them reinforced through folklore on a daily basis throughout our lives.

Worldview is also an analytic tool, a holistic concept that we can use to attempt to grasp a culture’s way of seeing “from inside the culture rather than outside” (Mendelson 1968, 576). Rather than leading us to regard national, mass, or elite culture as more highly developed or more scientific or more all-encompassing than “primitive,” folk, and local culture, the concept assumes that there are legitimate, varied, logical systems of perception and expression flowing out of different, time-tested assumptions. Perhaps no scholarly concept involves so profound a move away from ethnocentrism as does the concept of worldview.¹

How, then, have we involved worldview in the interpretation of the American West in this collection of essays? A first answer, through analogy, might be this: imagine a huge, powerful, revolving telescope somewhere on the crest of the Rockies, swinging to focus on different places in the West—ethnic places, occupational places, places at a remove in time, gendered places. Do you have that image?

That’s exactly what this offering is not. Instead, in these essays we go to those same places and look outward from inside them. What does the world of the nineteenth-century West look like from the vantage points of women isolated on the plains of Texas or Nebraska? For one thoughtful answer, read Margaret Brady’s essay, “In Her Own Words: Women’s Frontier Friendships in Letters, Diaries, and Reminiscences.” What “might have been going on” when George Venn heard local Native Americans in the Skagit Valley of Washington State sing a popular Christian hymn in the 1950s? It took him two decades to recognize what it was, and he lets us in on his discovery in “Faith of Our Fathers.”² What did, and do, some promoters of different areas of the West want outsiders to think the West represented? Read Steve Siporin’s “Tall Tales and Sales.” And what particular religious visions exist in the Pimería Alta, a “shared space” (Griffith 1995), a region that straddles an international border? Jim Griffith’s “A Diversity of Dead Helpers: Folk Saints of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands” delivers a wealth of answers.

In other words, in taking our inspiration from Toelken's writings, we sought to see with the many "native eyes" that look outward into the western landscape and make different senses of it (Toelken 1971, 1982a, 1982b, 1983, 1996a). One goal for the writers of this anthology was to illuminate that coherent thread of human reasoning that someone else, usually someone representing another group, had created from within a historically derived cultural tradition, often in contact with a changing social environment. Thus Jarold Ramsey, in "John Campbell's Adventure, and the Ecology of Story," suggests that there is "an ecology of memory, imagination, and story, just as there is an ecology of land, water, and air"; then, reconstructing John Campbell's story from the fragments available to him, Ramsey provides a cogent example of the value, for nature and for the intellect, of preserving and handing down a story in a particularly western context. Barry Lopez's wanderings in the uplands near his home on the western slope of the Oregon Cascades these past thirty years have yielded subtle clues about how the Tsanchifin Kalapuya Indians listened to "The Language of Animals" and how we might also. Twilo Scofield's reminiscence, "'Two Moonlight Rides and a Picnic Lunch': Memories of Childhood in a Logging Community," recalls the inside of a complete universe that, like George Wasson's Oregon Coast Native culture of the Coquille Indians, has all but disappeared ("The Coquille Indians and the Cultural 'Black Hole' of the Southern Oregon Coast"). Even Native Americans whose narrative repertoires have been well collected offer us stories that make little sense without a context grounded in worldview. As Nora and Richard Dauenhauer write,

the expression of comedy is somehow more culture specific and more enigmatic to outsiders than tragedy. During the summer of 1984 field test with Raven we ourselves were laughing until the tears came, but many of our students just sat, finding the stories more puzzling than amusing. (p. 136)

The Dauenhauers go on to explicate the Tlingit story, "Raven and the Tide," through a line-by-line commentary that does let us in on the joke.

Some of the authors have taken us into worldviews we usually do our best to avoid—because they come from people who scare us, who force us to look at ourselves and our assumptions, whose view of the world might be philosophically threatening: the lonely "crazies" like Gypsy Slim, Kid Gilnap, Pro Human, Bottle Mary (who lived on the income from returnable bottles), Acy Deucy, and Tubby Beers (who logged with a World War II tank). Kim Stafford calls these eccentrics "local saints"—saints of small western places like Wallowa County, Junction City, Redmond, Florence, Celilo, Otis, Swisshome, all in Oregon. He seeks them out in "Local Character," giving us their stories and their idiosyncratic ideas and lives. We learn from Stafford and his saints what our own worldviews exclude.

Robert McCarl, in “Visible Landscapes/Invisible People,” also unearths silent (and sometimes silenced) worldviews—this time the heritage of miners and mining families in North Idaho:

the cultural and historical contributions of miners and their families also lie, for the most part, beneath the surface: miles of hand-dug drifts and stopes, row upon row of miners’ headstones in the graveyards, and page upon page of family pictures commemorating the cradle-to-grave passage of thousands of lives. This material is invisible to outsiders (page 225).

Such diversity typifies the West, and that in itself may still surprise some outsiders, to whom much is invisible in a deceptively transparent landscape. This is, after all, the region that contains the oldest European “core cultural area” in the United States—the Hispanic “hearth” in the Upper Rio Grande Valley of New Mexico (Zelinsky 1992, 119). It also holds the historical heartland (most of Utah and parts of Idaho, Arizona, Nevada, Colorado, and Wyoming) of one of the newest major religions in the world—the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.³ Further, the intermountain section of the region is at once the most urbanized *and* most sparsely populated part of the nation. With such extremes, perhaps the range of worldviews should not be such a surprise after all.

Our goal has not been to reconcile these sometimes inharmonious worldviews, but to try to get inside them through their outward expressions and to represent them accurately and fairly. Indeed, our shared assumption is that they are not reconcilable, for “reconciliation” would take us back to the crest of the Rockies—or to some academic high place—that supposedly would transcend (and be superior to) any given worldview. In this land of mountains and valleys, we know that each vantage point has its own integrity, value, and particular truth. We have tried to see with others’ eyes, and touch the thread of another’s reasoning, if only for a moment.

Our own worldview is, of course, the most difficult to see. Thus Elliott Oring, in “Icons of Immortality: Forest Lawn and the American Way of Death,” makes the case that it is a mistake to attribute the aesthetic ideas of Forest Lawn Cemetery (in the Los Angeles area) to nearby Hollywood. Evelyn Waugh’s *The Loved One* satirized the cemetery in both novel and film. How convenient it was to assign Forest Lawn’s “artificiality, superficiality, and sentimentality” (p. 54) to Southern California! Oring argues, however, that Forest Lawn cannot be cordoned off or assigned to the fringe, because it is part of the inheritance of Victorian America, an enduring piece of Anglo-American worldview. Jeannie Thomas’s “Ride ‘Em, Barbie Girl: Commodifying Folklore, Place, and the Exotic,” reads well as a companion to Oring’s piece, for Barbie also attracts and repels, with her “artificiality, superficiality, and sentimentality,” marketed as authenticity.

Jesse James could be included in that nineteenth-century inheritance Oring describes as well, but as Chip Sullivan shows in “Jesse James: An American Outlaw,” the James story began long before James was born, in British legends about outlaws like Robin Hood. With Jesse James, the outlaw narrative takes an American turn, never quite resolving “the tension between hero and outlaw” (p. 116). Jesse James stands for an American outlaw hero who continues to be recreated anew in the West, even today.

One author, William A. Wilson, turns our regional focus on end by bringing outsider (exoteric) views of Mormon culture into the discussion in his “The Concept of the West and Other Hindrances to the Study of Mormon Folklore.” The facts *are* startling: though “the public perception of Mormons places them squarely in the center of the West,” and folklorists like Dorson identified Mormons as a regional group, “only ten percent live in Utah, and over half of all Mormons live outside the United States and Canada” (p. 189). Wilson shows us how Mormon stories that outsiders take to mean one thing have an additional (and sometimes contradictory) set of associations and meanings for Mormons, regardless of where they live. There is no secret code operating among Mormons any more than there is among Tlingits who tell Raven trickster tales or among miners who have shared working lives underground. What Wilson brings to bear on his interpretation of these stories—besides an unceasing effort to “discover what it means to be human”—is Mormon worldview, carried forward in religious folklore that arises out of “the circumstance of being Mormon.”

Perhaps the consecutive presentation of all these diverse worldviews will jar the reader. Perhaps even more jarring will be the range of writing styles (from literary to technical), writing genres (from personal essay and reminiscence to exposition), and the idiosyncratic perspectives (the functional individual equivalent of worldview). We wondered, in fact, if we could honestly extol the virtues of studying a variety of worldviews without encouraging such variety in our own work. Should all attempts to get at others’ worldviews adapt the same methodology and style? Isn’t there in fact a *necessity* for a range of approaches to reveal what worldview consists of? And if worldview is as real as we say it is, aren’t the worldviews of our own authors inevitably entwined in their research and writing? Do we want to deny this? We may, as scholars and writers, be able to identify with another person, including his/her worldview, but we never completely stop being ourselves. Thus, these essays, by virtue of their many contrasts with each other, make us aware of who is doing the seeing, the feeling, and the writing; and we become aware that the various ways the authors see and feel and write are due also to the multiplicity of *their* worldviews. Different styles and methods, then, may be the most appropriate way to do justice to the subject of worldviews in the American West.

Barre Toelken once wrote that walking in someone else’s moccasins is not just a cliché or an item of pseudo Indian lore (1976). For traditional

Navajos this idea conveys a deep meaning partly because the word for “moccasin” and the word for “foot” are the same word, and one’s moccasin is shaped by one’s foot. So to walk in someone else’s moccasins is not only to experience the world as someone else does, but to adopt part of that person as yourself for a while, and perhaps to let go of part of yourself for a while, too. Clearly that goal has been the intention of many of our essays, reflecting, we believe, a recurrent theme in Toelken’s work.

It is also interesting that this Navajo metaphor is one of *touch* and *motion*. Walking in someone else’s moccasins/feet suggests feeling what they feel as they move across a landscape rather than seeing what they see from a static position. Yet the language we Euro-American editors employ to describe the cultural relativity of experience depends on metaphors of vision and seeing (*worldview*, *perspective*, *viewpoint*, *outlook*, etc.) In other words, the very language and metaphors we use for trying to understand another culture’s worldview inevitably recode it to fit our own. Even our word *worldview*, an intellectual attempt to get outside it, reproduces it once again. And again we run smack into the wall: we can’t escape our own wiring, our own culture, or our own worldview. But we can hope that the effort to do so improves our awareness and understanding.

To appreciate, acknowledge, and value the multiplicity of worldviews, then, is one of the highest goals we can ethically aspire to in the world of scholarship. Many may regard this goal as too simple, bald, or naive, but we believe it still underlies significant efforts in the discipline of folklore. We are not talking about pro forma bowing at the temple of political correctness, or polite (but ultimately indifferent) acceptance of all ideas as equally valid. To try to get inside another worldview is not as easy as that. It takes more than reading. Walking in someone else’s moccasins isn’t a bad way to put it.

Notes

1. For a rich bibliography on worldview, especially in reference to cultures found in North America, see Toelken 1996a, 308–313.
2. The time-lapse Venn reports in coming to understand a cross-cultural performance is reminiscent of the one reported by Toelken in *Dynamics of Folklore* (1996, 246) and cited herein by Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer (p. 136): “What my Indian friends understood and relished in a few moments took me over four years to understand. Yet it was only one joke.”
3. Yet William A. Wilson’s “The Concept of the West and Other Hindrances to the Study of Mormon Folklore” (in this volume) unearths entrenched assumptions and gives us new perspective on the purported impact of geography on religion and vice-versa.