

INTERPRETATION AND INCLUSION

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The purpose of this column is to address the need for improving our interpretation diversity and developing a broader approach to WHAT we interpret and to WHOM we interpret. This includes changing both our techniques and our subject matter to reflect a more diverse and encompassing education and interpretation program.

Ø COLUMN NOTES

This is the seventh article in an occasional column on the In Touch bulletin board. Comments, essays, notes, and news, are welcome. You can address to me by cc:mail under my name on the directory. Please indicate if your item is intended for future printing in this column.

Ø DEMOGRAPHICS

As has been mentioned before, in talking about inclusion we are seeking a holistic approach to dealing with diverse audiences. One of the areas least discussed is the subject of gender bias in teaching. Though we are all aware of the employment discrepancies that are often the subject of national news, the exploration of gender bias in education is less frequently examined and findings are often controversial. Future issues will include more discussions of this subject.

This essay by Ed Zahniser offers rarely examined perspective on our work.

Ø FEATURE ARTICLE

This essay was submitted by Ed Zahniser, Division of Publications
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Does Landscape Have Gender?

The West--and particularly our public lands heritage there--has a rich potential for teaching us and our park visitors who we are. However, we have largely ignored so much of the inclusive panoply of our history in the West that we stunt our individual and collective self-concepts. Furthermore, by this not-knowing of who we are, we allow ourselves to be manipulated by the catchwords of devious exploiters who press on us a false nostalgia masquerading as history. These assertions began for me as questions provoked in the late 1970s by browsing the local college library and finding literary critic Annette Kolodny's book *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (1975). Kolodny set out to examine the "richness, the potency, the continued repetition of the land-as-woman symbolization in American life and letters. . . ." (As a poet, I'm a sucker for anyone who wants to scrutinize metaphor with scholarly acumen.) Six years of study convinced Kolodny that we need "a better grasp of the ways in which language provides clues to the underlying motivations behind action; provides clues, if you will, to our deepest dreams and fantasies."

I remember thinking then, in the late 1970s, "I wonder where such thinking might lead?"

Kolodny calls what follows, "probably America's oldest and most cherished fantasy: a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine--that is, not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification--enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose, and painless and integral satisfaction."

One need not ever have inhaled to grasp the potent psychodynamics of such fantasy as she asserts. This is, in short, the American pastoral fantasy. Wallace Stegner struggled with it as a writer about the West for more than 50 years.

"The excitement that greeted John Rolfe's marriage to Pocahontas, in April of 1614," Kolodny writes, "may have been due to the fact that it served, in some symbolic sense . . . for the possibility of Europeans' actually possessing the charms inherent in the virgin continent." And Kolodny specifically wants to "grasp the meaning behind historical events by getting at their underlying 'fantasy' or psychic structures."

The Lay of the Land, indulging the Pristine Myth more than NPS dogma today should allow, suggests that "the European discovery of an unblemished and fertile continent allowed the projection upon it of a residue of infantile experience in which all needs--physical, erotic, spiritual and emotional--had been met by an entity imaged as

quintessentially female."

Obviously, Kolodny's book title is intentional double entendre.

Where did this thinking lead? It led to a great deal of feminist thought about Manifest Destiny. It led to examination of a wealth of diaries and early fiction by women involved in the settling of the West, which of course was itself, through the 19th century, a westering phenomenon. It led to seeing the West as a regional subset of scholarly women's studies. It also led to Kolodny's *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860* (1984). The book charts "women's developing literary response to the fact of the west" and takes as its subject "the sequence of fantasies through which generations of women came to know and act upon the westward-moving frontier." Her argument is that fantasy "allowed women to enact relational paradigms on strange and sometimes forbidding landscapes."

Landscape is not only geographic but also symbolic. Much of the rhetoric of the wise-use movement, for example, invokes less the West's geographic realities than its symbolic contents. Kolodny believes that "in addition to stringent antipollution measures and the development of wind, water, and solar energy sources, we need also to understand the unacknowledged fantasies that drive us either to desecrate or to preserve the world's last discovered Earthly Paradise." So why should NPS interpreters give a hoot? Kolodny's thesis is that "the landscape is the most immediate medium through which we attempt to convert culturally shared dreams into palpable realities. Our actions in the world, in short, are shaped by the paradigms in our head."

To pursue actual preservation of parks, ecosystem management, reauthorization of the Endangered Species Act, etc. as palpable realities--Kolodny's point of view suggests--our interpretation must convince a plurality of audiences that there are shared dreams. There are dreams to share besides the dream of greed that has long driven public resource allocation in the West.

Does landscape have gender?

Does landscape have ethnicity?

Does it have spirituality?

Malcolm Margolin poses the question: "What did it feel like to grow old in a world in which the plants, animals, rocks and mountains were seen as family members?" His subject is the native North Coast Californian's sense of place.

Mircea Eliade writes of sacred space as that which is invested with the sacred over time. John Sears study of American tourist attractions in the 19th century, *Sacred Places*, includes chapters on Yellowstone and Mammoth Cave.

As interpreters, how do we relate to disparate streams of "culturally shared dreams?" How do we do our work so that their confluence preserves parks and ecosystems and perpetuates cultures?

First, as previous postings on "Interpretation and Inclusion" make clear, we must realize that as individuals we come from a place and a time. We must be aware that there is such a thing as paradigm and that we have one.

Second, we need to look at and appreciate those cultures and world views not our own.

Third, we need to tell the truth about what happened in the West.

Kolodny's examinations of landscape and metaphor are part of a much larger revising of the history of the West. It behooves us to keep abreast of these new examinations whether we agree with or fully understand them or not. Alan Brinkley summarizes some of their thrusts: "The new historians fault [the late western historian Frederick Jackson] Turner (and his latter-day disciples) for many things, but most of all for what they consider his ethnocentrism, his triumphalism, his emphasis on individualism and his insistence that Western history as a distinct field of study ends in 1890."

Turner developed the "frontier thesis" of American history. But was there in fact a frontier, or does that concept merely perpetuate the Pristine Myth of the continent as an unpeopled wilderness? Were there not, Brinkley asks, "elaborate and highly developed civilizations (Native American, Hispanic, mixed-blood or 'metis' and others) that already existed in the region?"

Individualism? "Western 'pioneers' were never self-sufficient," Brinkley writes. "They depended on Government-subsidized railroads for access to markets, Federal troops for protection from Indians, and (later) Government-funded dams and canals for irrigating their fields and sustaining their towns."

A gender and cultural diversity consultant has written that "In America, salvation is individual, you make it on your own. Of course, few of us really do." This rugged individualism is part of our mythos, and it has had tragic implications on the land. It is fraught with false nostalgia passed off as historical justification for continuing unchecked the exploitation of public lands in the West.

Brinkley is summarizing the work of historians of the West such as Richard White, Patricia Limerick, William Cronon, David J. Weber, and Donald Worster. I have read in White, Limerick, and Cronon and can recommend them as

thought-provoking. They feed, I think, our ability to understand our collective origins. Brinkley again on the West: "No other region has had so long and intensive an experience of racial and ethnic diversity; no other place displays the imprint of multiculturalism more clearly."

What better time than now for NPS interpreters to learn from--and about--what really happened in such a place? Many of us even live and work there.