

## PRAXIS: An Editorial Statement

By Kent Neely

John Colter, a member of Lewis and Clarke's Corps of Discovery, was one of the first white men to see the natural wonders of the area now defined as Yellowstone National Park. His stories of spewing geysers, boiling mud and crystalline blue pools were not believed by his Eastern friends. With the exploration of the West by others, especially artists, the tales of the region, like Colter's, began to take on mythic proportion. George Catlin's paintings of the "vanishing" race of native tribes in the Great Plains gave the first glimpse of peoples unseen by most 19<sup>th</sup> century, Eastern Americans. Thomas Moran and Albert Bierstadt later would create canvases overwhelming in size and subject matter. They showed a land larger than human scale, not surrealistic but incredible. William Henry Jackson's photographs served as bona fide truth that those stories and paintings were not fantasy. His photos of Yellowstone and Colorado made real the dream first represented by Catlin, Moran and Bierstadt. These artists, all born east of the Mississippi River, were changed by their journey into the frontier. Their canvases and prints are testament to that experience. The American frontier was a land of immense proportion and appeared to offer a bounty of resources that was unknown.

Close on the heels of these artists came hundreds, and then thousands, of settlers determined to realize the dreams of living in a land of unparalleled beauty and bounty. Eastern newspapers heralded the move. As early as 1839, John L. O'Sullivan in his *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* articulated the ideal that would ultimately shape national policy — manifest destiny. Americans were to fulfill the role of commanding and settling the immense western space. Later, at mid-century, Horace Greeley would say "Go west young man, and grow with the country" from the pages of his *New York Tribune*. O'Sullivan and Greeley fed the frenzy for a land where the resources were inexhaustible and the opportunity was infinite. William Gilpin, territorial governor of Colorado would add to that perception throughout the 1860's. Note his comments as he spoke to the Finian Brotherhood 4 July 1868:

What an immense geography has been revealed! What infinite hives of population and laboratories of industry have been electrified and set in motion! The great sea has rolled away its sombre veil. Asia is found and has become our neighbor ... North America is known to our own people. Its concave form and homogeneous structure are revealed. Our continental mission is set to its perennial frame ...<sup>1</sup>

The movement of population and economy would grow (just as the myth) along the American western frontier.

Then in 1890 the U. S. Census declared that the frontier was “closed” as there was no longer a distinct, contiguous frontier line. The declaration led Frederic Jackson Turner to comment three years later at the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition that, “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development.”<sup>2</sup> Turner’s “western thesis” rested on the belief that to understand the United States, one must first understand the West and the beliefs and perceptions surrounding it.

Indeed the Western frontier became so entangled in myth that it remained a source of illusion into modern times. The hobo ballad *Big Rock Candy Mountain* represented the myth of the West containing a “promised land” known by “. . . the soda water fountain at the lemonade springs, where the bluebird sings on the big rock candy mountain.” It perpetuated the belief that such a Land of Canaan existed, even for the rail-riding, free loading hobo of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Wallace Stegner took that hobo ballad as the title for his 1992 book decrying the unchecked development of the West. Stegner deftly notes that the storytellers who told of a land of unceasing opportunity drowned out the other voices which cited the Great American Desert (the Great Plains) and the region’s inherent aridity that cannot sustain agriculture nor civic development without extraordinary irrigation.<sup>3</sup>

*Frontiers: Environmental History, Ecocriticism and “The Kentucky Cycle”* a performance study by Teresa J. May featured in this issue of PRAXIS examines ideas regarding the American frontier and the West and shows us that “. . . the frontier is still a working and vital myth.” Using Robert Schenkkan’s play, Ms. May provides us an analysis of the myth’s operation (within a western, regional venue and then on Broadway in New York). Her analysis raises a number of points relevant to the eco-critical discourse.

Loren Ringer’s review of Pierre Corneille’s *Le Cid* accompanies May’s study. Ringer has given a glimpse into a contemporary, French treatment of Corneille’s classic. Like the original production which sparked controversy, this *Cid*, directed by Declan Donnellan, done July 1998, was not enthusiastically received by critics. Nevertheless, Donnellan’s version tilts the play’s relevance in a feminine fashion and provides a fresh perspective of the play.

## Notes

1. Wallace Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1953) 2.

2. Frederick J. Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, a paper delivered at the American Historical Association meeting, Chicago World’s Fair, 12 July 1893, reprinted by University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, 1966.

3. Wallace Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West*. (New York: Random House, 1992).