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SYMPOSIUM
PROCEEDINGS

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
ASPEN, COLORADO
SEPTEMBER 23-24, 1999

PRESENTED BY
THE WESTERN STATES ARTS FEDERATION

WESTAF

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
ASPEN, COLORADO
SEPTEMBER 23-24, 1999

S Y M P O S I U M P R O C E E D I N G S

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WESTAF (WESTERN STATES ARTS FEDERATION)

The Western States Arts Federation (WESTAF) is a regional arts organization that serves the arts-development needs of the arts community and the general public in the 12 Western states. The 25-year-old organization is an active partnership of the state arts agencies of Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming. Working with these states and in cooperation with private- and public-sector funders, WESTAF's primary goals are to strengthen the arts infrastructure in the West and to expand the audience for all forms of the arts.

Throughout its history, WESTAF has adapted and transformed its programs and initiatives to reflect the current needs of the arts field and to respond to major structural changes of the field. The recent dramatic changes in arts funding in both the public and private sectors have prompted WESTAF once again to transform itself to ensure that it is properly positioned to best benefit the arts.

WESTAF remains committed to programmatic work in the areas of literature, folk arts, visual arts, and performing-arts presenting. Programs in these areas include activities such as the convening of leaders from an arts discipline; the development of model programs; and the sponsorship of long-term, region-wide programs that fill a gap in the arts infrastructure of the West. WESTAF also has launched an ambitious program in the area of technology and the arts. The presence of the Internet has provided WESTAF with a much-sought-after means of serving artists and arts organizations across the vast reaches of the West. WESTAF remains committed to the improvement of the capacity and quality of public funding of the arts by Western state arts agencies. The sustenance of this effort and the constant improvement of the manner in which it is administered are core commitments of WESTAF.

The symposium featured 10 presenters and 5 respondents. Each presenter was allowed approximately 20 minutes to deliver a prepared statement, after which the symposium facilitators directed a discussion that included all participants.

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CONFIGURING CULTURAL POLICY IN THE WEST: SUMMARY, OBSERVATIONS, AND CHALLENGES

by Daniel Buehler
with Erin Trapp and Anthony Radich

In September 1999, the Western States Arts Federation (WESTAF) convened a symposium to stimulate discussion about the nature of cultural policy in the West and to identify features of the region's policy environment

that influence and shape cultural policy in the region. The forum was not designed to reach closure on or develop a consensus about the West's cultural policy environment or the cultural policies that emerge from it. Rather, the gathering was structured to serve as a forum for discussion about the ways in which cultural policy in the West is fashioned and enacted as well as to provide an arena in which to offer challenges and present proposals for future cultural policy initiatives.

The symposium convened an array of distinguished individuals at the Aspen Institute in Aspen, Colorado. They were asked to present their thoughts, engage in discussion, and challenge overarching themes that impact the creation and execution of cultural policy in the West. WESTAF hopes that the interchange that occurred at the symposium will serve as a catalyst for future cultural policy discussions centered on the West. The 1999 symposium was the first of what is intended to become a series of lively and inclusive annual conversations about cultural policy. This summary identifies several major themes

that emerged from the participants' comments and offers observations about the symposium conversation.

Cultural Policy and the Fidelity of the Western Myth

If an operating definition of *cultural policy* in the West were to be developed, a widely accepted definition might emerge after considering the function and meaning of culture in the diverse communities of the region.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz might offer a useful starting point. For Geertz, individuals are suspended in webs of significance, which they themselves have spun; Geertz takes culture to be those webs.¹ One cultural strand that is woven throughout the symposium's discussion on cultural policy in the West is the great Western myth.

In the West, as in other parts of the country, there exists a constantly morphing, multifold constructed reality of what it means to be a citizen of a region—in this case, a Westerner. This socially invested construction of reality shapes motivation, enshrines goals, and informs attitudes about decisions made regarding all aspects of life in the West. Because the instruments of culture are a primary means by which the myth is perpetuated and extended, rearranged, refreshed, and rebutted, a cultural policy in the West that fails to consider the Western myth and the value of its maintenance is a policy that is not engaged with a primary force of the region.

The Western myth exists because of the strong desire of humans to associate with a constructed identity that is larger than themselves and yet intimately familiar and integral

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to the world in which they live. Such regional myths are culturally significant for a number of reasons: They serve as shared reference points for mutual understanding, they act as guideposts for those seeking acculturation and assimilation, and they articulate a set of values and beliefs that inform public decisions and shape cultural policy. Although the Western myth is functionally similar to other regional myths, it nonetheless is unique by virtue of the values, ideas, and attitudes that it promulgates and the cultural policies that it affects in the West. Several elements of the Western myth permeate the symposium's discussion and contribute to the West's cultural composition.

Independence

A central feature of the Western myth is its celebration of the spirit of independence. This independence is rooted in the experiences of Easterners and immigrants to the New World who left their long-time homes to begin anew in the West. Unfettered, pioneers journeyed westward hoping to escape the arrogance of the crown, the tyranny of the church, and the debilitating laws of primogeniture. In the words of Wallace Stegner, "land available to anyone with the initiative to take it, made America, Opportunity, and Freedom synonymous terms."² The adulation of independence is embodied in Thomas Jefferson's yeoman farmer; articulated in Horace Greeley's "Go west, young man"; and personified in Owen Wister's *The Virginian*. It endures today in the form of Harley Davidson riders, long-haul truckers, and Internet entrepreneurs. Indeed, staking a claim on the World Wide Web is synonymous to a typical Western gold rush.

Independence as a result of emancipation is a dimension of the Western myth that appears in several guises in the symposium.

Decentralized Cultural Policymaking

Independence is reflected in the highly decentralized cultural policymaking in the region. Although cultural policymaking across the country is substantially decentralized, it is arguably most decentralized in the West. This is the case for a number of reasons. The challenging physical distances in the region hinder communication, making collaborative or coercive networks difficult to establish. In addition, the historic, geographic, and sociological divide between the West and the cultural policymaking community of private foundations centered in the East has left the West only moderately influenced by its initiatives. The West's historic distaste for federal interference has kept to a minimum the ability of federal cultural policymakers to influence the region. Finally, the region's inhabitants prefer being left to their own devices and thus consider a decentralized system of cultural policymaking to be more congruent with their interests.

Symposium participants acknowledge that decentralized cultural policy is formulated in the West through a series of unlinked decisions made by state and city arts agencies, nonprofit arts organizations, humanities organizations, universities, arts and humanities associations, and government agencies engaged in cultural projects as a part of their mission. Collectively, these entities shape the environment for and the direction of cultural policy in the region—but they do so largely as independent agents.

The West's independent, decentralized cultural policymaking system presents a challenge in that larger visions for cultural development are not easily realized or sustained. For instance, Christopher Zinn's call for cultural education that "can help people become both lifelong learners of culture and critical thinkers about culture" might be difficult to enact without the benefit of a nationally designed and supported cultural policy plan. In addition, a decentralized system is limited in its ability to respond to concerns about equity and to address the aspirations of the public. Thus, Arlene Goldbard's concern regarding the commercial culture industry's hegemonic influence may not be addressed effectively without a national cultural policy. Although policymakers may wish to consider the advantages of more centralized approaches to the creation and sustenance of cultural policies, such approaches are likely to be viewed with skepticism or outright mistrust in the West.

A Distrust of the Federal Government

The seeds for the distrust of Washington by Westerners is born out of the past actions of the federal government. The federal government's mistreatment of American Indians, its periodic non-consultative approach toward formulating land- and water-use and wilderness preservation policies, and its approval of nuclear testing and radioactive waste storage on public lands in the West are enough for most Westerners to harbor an innate mistrust of federalism. Although history does not favor her position, Karen Christensen contends that through programs like "Challenge America," the National Endowment for the

Arts (NEA) can "sponsor community partnerships in every part of the United States in support of arts education, arts access, cultural planning, heritage and preservation activities, and positive alternatives for youth." Still, most symposium attendees prefer a decentralized network approach to formulating and enacting cultural policies rather than being yoked to federal programs not of their own making.

A Distaste for Centralization

Because Westerners have considered themselves to be left out of so many decisions that have resulted in centralization, the Western myth contains a deep mistrust of centralized processes. Westerners can point to many examples of

centralized decision making having a negative effect on them. Although a decentralized cultural policymaking approach

affords a number of advantages, a centralized approach warrants additional discussion for at least two reasons. First, there is no guarantee that a de facto cultural policy of the region will be inclusive and equitable. Christopher Zinn gives warning in his presentation that "in the absence of an explicit cultural policy, we have instead tacit, often un-public, and largely undemocratic cultural effects."

Second, a centralized cultural policy may be required to serve as a counterweight to the

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overwhelming proliferation of commercially generated policies.

Indeed, the supremacy of mainstream American culture can be problematic for those seeking to obtain a voice in the cultural policy decision-making process. History has shown repeatedly that views in discord with mainstream American culture are frequently marginalized and often silenced. For example, one need only consider the discrepancy between the Euro-American view of land as a commodity and the American Indian's ecological relationship between place and human life and the triumph of the former over the latter in public land policy. Jan Brooks reminds us that at stake in any discussion about centralized cultural policymaking is "identity, historical representation, diverse values, and of course, the power of intellectual authority." These issues speak directly to women, ethnic communities, and other collectives that long have existed on the periphery of mainstream American culture. If a centralized approach to cultural policymaking is taken, can it successfully bind disparate worldviews? More important is the question of whether evidence exists to suggest that a decentralized approach is better suited for the task at hand.

Interdependence

The Western myth sings the praise of individualism. Western history, however, is as much about interdependence as it is about independence. Just as "politics makes for strange bedfellows," so Westerners enjoy an uneasy relationship with the federal government that finances and/or subsidizes reclamation projects, resource-extraction activities, the ranch-

ing industry's use of public grazing lands, and other tools of economic expansion and development of the West. In addition, many Westerners could not survive without occasional help from local community members. The "raising of the barn" and the practice of partnering are often overlooked but important subtexts to the Western myth.

Participants in the symposium explore the issue of partnering in several ways. For example, the term *culture* in the West largely has been interpreted to mean the arts; however, the humanities and other endeavors increasingly are included in this definition. The coalescence of cultural endeavors such as historic preservation, public broadcasting, humanities advocacy, libraries, and the cultivation of heritage tourism is increasing in the West. The failure of these interests to expand public-sector funding for themselves individually has encouraged them to work together. Beyond this circling-for-survival behavior, the cultural groups in the West and those commenting on their work hold out the promise that collaborative action by these groups is likely in the region due to their collective commitment to the development and preservation of Western culture and the recognizable need to improve funding for all.

Collaborative efforts are not limited to kindred spirits but may include uncommon partners. Given that the cultural community typically vilifies its commercial component and occasionally expresses pride in a complete ignorance of that sector, partnerships between nonprofit cultural policymakers and the commercial culture industry have been largely underdeveloped or simply eschewed. Laura

Zucker, however, argues in favor of collaborating with commercial cultural enterprises to affect cultural policy in the West. Zucker opines that commercial enterprises believe “they are part of a cultural continuum that embraces art in all of its forms. Unless we accept that there are people in the cultural community and elsewhere with other viewpoints and that we are better off working with them, we are not going to be able to move forward.” Several participants echo Zucker’s suggestion not to view the commercial sector of the culture industry as an enemy but as a resource and an important element

of the overall cultural community. To do otherwise is to waste energy and invite dysfunction.

Several participants argue that the West’s culture community must formulate new and powerful partnerships outside the public sector—and most likely with the West-based commercial culture industry—if it wants to leverage its position and increase its ability to shape cultural policy and affect change.

They note that, except for the tax benefits allocated by the federal government for donations to cultural

institutions, there is precious little public-sector activity that makes a significant difference in the area of cultural policy. Still, many participants note that American culture is an irresistible global force, despite the fact that the United States has no minister of culture or extensively articulated cultural policy. To a large degree, this country’s cultural policy, as measured by its impact on audiences around the world and within the United States, is

private-sector centered and thus largely outside the reach of public-sector cultural policy-makers. Consequently, the potency and effectiveness of present or future public-sector cultural policy are questionable.

A Resentment of Financial Dependency

Another component of the Western myth is a resentment of financial dependency. Not only has the federal government had an overwhelming influence on the West, but so have capitalists from outside the region. The fact that for most of its history the West did not have the home-based capital to invest in new ventures meant that all or a significant part of mining, timber, transportation, and agricultural export businesses were controlled by interests outside the region. In the cultural community, this out-of-region financial dominance was reflected in the funding patterns of major private foundations that, until very recently, were located outside the region. The manner in which a foundation operates in a region is substantially different when the resources needed to underwrite a major project are not under the control of an entity from the region that shares similar values and perspectives but rather are available through an entity that operates in a different—and often non-synchronous—environment. These external sources—particularly foundations—have a considerable impact on cultural policy in the West.

Peter Donnelly’s comments at the symposium draw attention to the fact that commercial and nonprofit capital sources are changing in the West. The growth of the electronics, software, aerospace, and Internet industries in the West has increased the availability of both

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commercial and nonprofit capital in the region. Private foundations that are now emerging from the technology industries of the Pacific Coast region have the potential to counter-balance the cultural policy activities of the foundation community currently centered in the East. As a result of these recent developments, the capital structure for cultural activities is changing, and the funding resources of the West will increasingly become Western-based. These sources then will be challenged to develop region-friendly programming rather than to imitate historic funding patterns.

The Western Landscape as a Shaping Force

Conversations at the symposium also invoke the Western myth's powerful imagery of nature. John Muir articulates this aspect of the myth when contemplating the sublime scenery of the Grand Canyon: "No matter how far you have wandered hitherto, or how many famous gorges and valleys you have seen, this one, the Grand Canyon of the Colorado, will seem as novel to you, as unearthly in the color and grandeur and quantity of its architecture, as if you had found it after death, on some other star."³ The Western myth has helped transform the Puritan's "howling wilderness" into Emerson's romantic landscape, a sacred place that can inspire writers, painters, and poets. Wallace Stegner writes, "Every time we go off into the wilderness, we are looking for that perfect primitive Eden."⁴ While Stegner found his Eden in Utah's surreal canyonlands, others have found theirs in Washington's primeval forests, Colorado's magnificent Rocky Mountains, and California's crystalline deserts. Although terms like *picturesque*, *sub-*

lime, and *grandeur* long have fallen out of popular use, the public's appreciation of nature and the inspiration it imparts has grown over time.

Undoubtedly, the Western landscape has made an indelible impression on the region's psyche as well as on the construction of cultural policy. For instance, participants identify the West's wide-open spaces and natural wonders as elements that inspire a free, creative, and unbounded Western spirit. David Brower, Edward Abbey, Paul Shephard, and others have written of this spirit and the related issues of environmental balance and human habitation that underscore many of the major conflicts of the region. In addition, the relatively recent reevaluation of Western arts signifies the Western myth's perennial appeal to the public. Historian Donald Worster notes, "The beauty discovered in nature through aesthetic appreciation has inspired people repeatedly to try to construct harmonies of their own, in the landscape as well as in song and picture."⁵ Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran, some of the earliest artists working in the region, have been inspired by their Western surroundings, helping to promote the West's remarkable landscape and secure its place in the arts and the nation's consciousness. John Fisher, however, argues in his presentation at the symposium that if "we once had an enchanted marriage, we now seem to have an uneasy separation. Among environmental thinkers there is suspicion of art and aesthetics. And in the contemporary art world and art theory, there is disinterest or skepticism...about nature as the subject for art." Although Western aesthetics were not analyzed in depth, there is agree-

ment as to their ability to affect the cultural policy environment; the manner and extent to which this occurs, however, deserve additional analysis and discussion.

Assessing the Limitations of the Western Myth

Although the Western myth maintains a privileged place in the West, it does not exist uncontested. Woster writes, “Say the word ‘West’ and, immediately, vistas of mustangs galloping across wide-open spaces under immense, unclouded skies fill our imagination, and sober reason has to come panting after. Say the word and we are off living in a dream, experiencing its old powerful emotions but as ever finding it difficult to say how the dream ends. As a people, we are quick to invent fantasies but slower to find plausible, realistic endings for them.”⁶ Perpetuating the Western myth is problematic because of serious incongruities between the myth and social reality.

One specific problem with the myth is that it selectively recognizes certain cultural components while obscuring other elements of the West. For instance, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto notes in his presentation that contributions by American Indians, Latino Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans are “largely absent from the historical record.” When these communities are presented in history, they often are stereotyped and caricatured. In light of this legacy of absence and distortion, Ybarra-Frausto calls for an “arduous cultural reclamation project.” To a certain extent, this project is underway. Philosopher Jack Turner reports that a new generation of historians is rewriting the past, “deflating the

West’s myths with rigorous analysis of our imperialism, genocide, exploitation, and abuse; our vast hierarchies of wealth and poverty; the collusion of the rich and the government, especially over water; the biological and ecological ignorance of many farmers, ranchers, and capitalists . . .”⁷ Ybarra-Frausto’s prescription enlists artists and cultural policymakers to serve as agents in “the social production of memory.” Assuming that the future of the West is, in part, a projection of its past, Ybarra-Frausto’s revisionist history harbors the potential to alter markedly the trajectory of Western cultural policy.

Another problem with the myth is that it does not speak to current physical, social, and political

aspects of the Western context. In discussing the physical characteristics of the New West, Patricia Limerick notes in her discussion that today’s

“The unpolluted, undeveloped, and sparsely populated West that gave genesis to the Western myth does not exist today... Cultural policymakers must address the revolutionary transformation that the West is undergoing if they want to contribute to the architecture of the emerging New West.”

West is one of the most urbanized sections of the country; 82 percent of Westerners live in cities. This fact raises questions about the reality of the component of wide-open spaces of the myth for many Westerners. Also, Limerick notes that developers and builders are actively homogenizing the West’s landscapes into strip malls, auto rows, and grid-based developments. Many wild animals that

survived civilization's initial onslaught on the West are now confined to small, protected ecological islands. The unpolluted, undeveloped, and sparsely populated West that gave genesis to the Western myth does not exist today.

The Western myth also pays no heed to important social dimensions of the current West. New and fast-growing minority communities are testing the elasticity of the Western myth. Easterners and emigrants relocating to the West import with them their own perspectives and attitudes of life in the West. For instance, South Africans, Eastern Europeans, and Southeast Asians as well as New Englanders, Southerners, and Midwesterners bring with them culturally specific behaviors and beliefs about the role of government, the importance of wilderness, and aesthetic values that both complement and conflict with the Western myth. Cultural policymakers must address the revolutionary transformation that the West is undergoing if they want to contribute to the architecture of the emerging New West.

Finally, the apolitical quality of the Western myth renders it virtually mute on the subject of politics. Yet, Westerners repeatedly have turned to political mechanisms to mediate their limited ability to control major decisions—decisions that directly affect their well-being. The people of the region have elected potent individuals to represent them in Congress, supported political causes with major funds from the private sector, and turned to both the politics of the Left and the Right to attain a higher level of control over their destiny.

Recently, Conservatives have dominated the region and its politics, although perhaps temporarily, and this fact cannot be ignored when considering the dynamics of cultural policy in the region. The political landscape of the West remains colored by the drubbing and ultimate defeat of national public-sector culture funders by the forces of the political Right. Not long ago, public-sector cultural activity was largely a politically neutral event that garnered little attention—even from the public sector that supported it with limited funding. However, when the political Right called for an end to the open-ended, limited-censorship approach to the funding of cultural activities by the National Arts and Humanities Endowments, the results were felt across the country—especially in the West. As a result of the national public cultural funding crises, several of the region's arts agencies faced multi-year attempts by state legislatures to eliminate them. In addition, the state arts agencies in the West entered and have not yet exited from a long period of funding stagnation. Although the far-Right has called off its direct challenge to the national cultural endowments, the concerns it brought forward continue to affect public arts funding in the West.

The Right-Left discussion on how much government should be involved in the support of culture has yet to play itself out fully in the West's cultural community. The political Right encourages the cultural community to think in terms of a market economy, claiming that such a system better serves the public at a price that is efficient for both the public and private sectors. Beyond this core argument, there are politically based arguments

such as censorship and intellectual property rights that branch off of this cultural policy discussion. The national discussion about the scope and means of public support for the arts has built the political factor into cultural policy discussions in a way that has not been

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developed before. Because the beliefs and attitudes of the political Left and Right are an overt part of the discussion, the political complexion of the West must be considered in any discussion of cultural policy. The Western myth, however, does not appear to offer a decisive map for navigating the political landscape of today.

Conclusion

The Western myth is a ubiquitous backdrop to cultural policy discussions in the West. Understanding the components of the myth and their antecedents is essential to comprehending past and present cultural policy decisions in the region. To accept the myth unchallenged and to build on its tenets without question invites the establishment of a parochial cultural policy. Still, Western cultural policymakers must take into consideration the myth’s perennial appeal in the region’s psyche. In light of the symbolic status of the Western myth, policymakers need to address two fundamental questions to advance beyond the symposium’s initial discussion on cultural policy in the West:

- 1) In what ways does the myth retard cultural policy efforts in the West and how can policymakers overcome these obstacles?
- 2) What elements of the Western myth can

cultural policymakers exploit effectively and strategically when crafting cultural policies for the West? Although cultural policymakers should be cautious of the Western myth’s restrictive portrayal of the West, they cannot help but remain its servants if they wish to capitalize on its cogent appeal.

The Western myth constitutes a component of the web that is interwoven with other beliefs, opinions, and practices that comprise Western culture. Although the Western myth is merely a strand, it is an important and well-recognized one that informs cultural policy and helps define Westerners. There is more to Western culture, however, than the Western myth. Cultural policymakers need not only understand the Western myth and its impact on cultural policy but also how the myth relates to other components of culture and where and with what strands of significance it intersects. Undoubtedly, discovery of how the Western web of culture is composed will take patience and perseverance. These proceedings mark an important step toward delineating the relationship between culture and cultural policy in the West.

¹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.

² Wallace Stegner, *Marking the Sparrow’s Fall: The Making of the American West*, ed. Page Stegner (New York: Henry Hold and Company, 1998), 194.

³ John Muir, *Our National Parks* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1991), 27.

⁴ Wallace Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 34.

⁵ Donald Woster, *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 182.

⁶ Donald Woster, *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 79.

⁷ Jack Turner, *The Abstract Wild* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997), 57.