

Andreas Krebs
Book Review
IN-SPIRE
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Tsawalk: A Nuu-chah-nulth Worldview

E. Richard Atleo (Umeek). Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press. 2004. xx + 146pp.
References. Index. ISBN 0774810858 & 077481084X.

Tsawalk: A Nuu-chah-nulth Worldview is simultaneously at the cutting edge of social philosophy and steeped in mythic reality. Through a translation of Nuu-chah-nulth origin stories, Atleo elucidates the ontological perspective of these people from the West Coast of Canada. He successfully demonstrates the linkages that the core belief of *Tsawalk*, everything is one, has with quantum physics, weather patterns, and postmodern theory, among other things. This holistic concept is the lynch pin (and namesake) of the book, incorporating Euro-American ideas and methods *into* Nuu-chah-nulth ontology. Although the majority of the book is dedicated to the retelling of ancient myths and their analysis, Atleo is explicitly trying to instigate a new research pattern based on a realization of *Tsawalk* in the academy.

Of course the first thing one notices about a book is its cover, especially one such as *Tsawalk's*. The amazing illustration of a whale hunt, taken from an autobiographical story told to the author by his grandfather includes artistic reference to traditional West Coast Aboriginal styles while incorporating obvious European influence. These illustrations are scattered throughout the book, often demonstrating an entire origin story with a single design. The style of these illustrations is not without significance to the book's overall feel: a hybrid project that is deeply embedded in a specific place and time. The illustrations are interpretations of specific events that have specific meaning to a specific people. *Tsawalk* could not have been written anywhere else or in any other time. The West Coast of Canada is home to some of the most political and litigious of Canada's Aboriginal people, and it is no surprise that such an ambitious work has its roots from there. *Tsawalk* is a specific interaction and response by the author to the colonization of his people. Prior to very recently, the colonial mentality was far too overt and unyielding to have accepted a work such as this; now, in the early 21st century, the Nuu-chah-nulth and the people who they originally described as 'houseboaters' are beginning to recognize each other as mutually valuable.

Like many recent works in the field of social studies (rather than social *science*), Atleo's work is based around an overt espousal of certain values. Unlike many other works, the values he espouses in *Tsawalk* are not necessarily oppositional to a mainstream; they do not belong to the class of warrior-intellectuals fighting the evils of society, but are rather representative *of* a society. One has the impression on reading this book that the values being enumerated through Nuu-chah-nulth origin stories are deeply ingrained in Atleo. He is dissecting these stories and demonstrating the truths that lie therein; this is especially interesting, since coming from him there are no qualifiers about these truths. He believes them firmly, and is explaining how these beliefs relate to the world. An excellent example is given early in the work, and it tries to bridge the gap between Atleo's value system and a modern scientific explanation of precipitation:

Giving is natural to creation, in effect a law of life. Giving can also be perceived from a cyclical perspective of modern science. The heavens give rain to the mountains and earth, which give water to the rivers and streams, which fill the oceans, which return the water in the form of vapour to the heavens. The interdependence and interrelationships of the natural world reflect the interdependence and interrelationships of all life forms (p. 15).

This characterization of precipitation as generosity is representative of Atleo's entire project where cutting edge scientific theories such as quantum physics are incorporated into the Nuu-chah-nulth perspective. He also responds to postmodern social theory with his peoples' ontology, stressing that the gradual shift from modernity to postmodernity is aligned with Nuu-chah-nulth values. The explicit conclusions drawn concerning postmodernity are few, and many questions remain. Postmodern theory is intensely fragmentary, whereas *Tsawalk* is holistic; does this mean

that they are in fact in opposition to each other? Or can *Tsawalk's* characterization of the sameness of being present a solution to the problem of community within postmodern thought? There is also the question of whether Atleo's amalgamative enterprise is reproducing the reductionism of scientific rationalism that is itself so forcefully criticized in the book.

Tsawalk is an archetype of cutting edge social research – it is biographical, focuses on ontology, is culturally relative, and deconstructionist. Bringing Atleo's particular perspective into this milieu provides a fascinating encounter. In the specific context of politics in colonial states, and the mushrooming of interest in indigenous politics, *Tsawalk* provides a means of opening a new dialogue between colonizers and the colonized.