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Fredrik Chr. Brøgger

Wallace Stegner and the Western Environment: Hydraulics, Placelessness, and (Lack of) Identity

1. Introduction

1 As it makes its way into the 21st century, the American West seems to be inexorably headed for ecological disaster. How it ended up in this position is carefully documented by a series of books published in the 1980s and 1990s in which the triumphant feats of hydraulic engineering in the West are seen to serve as the very instruments of its own environmental impoverishment. The rapid depletion of both rivers and aquifers throughout the region in the last part of the 20th century has proved that even water, ideally renewable, is not by any means an unlimited resource. This is the central implication of for instance Philip L. Fradkin's *A River No More: The Colorado River and the West* (1981), the environmental historian Donald Worster's *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (1985) and his *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (1992), Marc Reisner's *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (1986), and Wallace Stegner's *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West* (1992). After delineating the main assertions of some of these books, my article focuses predominantly on the discourse of Stegner's (semi)autobiographical, nonfictional prose about the West. In books like *Wolf Willow* and *Where the Bluebird Sings* Stegner does not only depict the exploitation of nature in the West; he also sees its inhabitants' disregard of the limitations of their own environment as a direct result of a specifically Western character and ideology of opportunism and restlessness. In a paradoxical twist, however, Stegner also attributes the migratory character of Western life to the effect of the landscape itself.

2. The Degeneration of the Dream of the Hydraulic Garden

2 It is a well-known historical irony that Frederick Jackson Turner launched his frontier thesis of American history and identity at the very time when there was little free land left in the United States. The myth of the West as the arena of freedom, pioneering, and material advancement continued, however, in the 20th century – due no longer to the availability of free land, but instead to the availability of free water. If rain, it turned out, did not follow the plow, water certainly trailed the hydraulic drill. The large-scale drilling for groundwater and damming of rivers seemed until recent decades to guarantee that the West could continue to embody the American myth of the garden. By the end of the 20th century, however, it had become increasingly clear that the dream of the garden was turning into an environmental nightmare.

3 As Donald Worster has argued in both *Rivers of Empire* and *Under Western Skies*, the West of the 20th century had been increasingly characterized by a hydraulic mode of living. Its modern commencement may perhaps be said to be marked by the construction in the 1930s of the Hoover Dam and the Californian Central Valley Project, and its coming-of-age may be said to have taken place after World War II, when the Bureau of Reclamation built hosts of dams and canals for irrigation purposes. In Stegner's own aphoristic recapitulation of the story of the West: you may deny aridity for a while, but “Then you must either try to engineer it out of existence or adapt to it” (*Where the Bluebird Sings* 75). The tragedy of the West is that it went for engineering rather than adaptation. As Worster notes, the West in general and California in particular have “emerged as the most elaborate hydraulic system in world history, overshadowing even the grandiose works of the Sassanians and the Pharaohs”:

In 1976 the federal Bureau of Reclamation alone operated 320 water-storage reservoirs, 344 diversion dams, 14,400 miles of canals, 900 miles of pipelines, 205 miles of tunnels, 34,620 miles of laterals, 145 pumping plants, 50 power plants, and 16,240 circuit miles of transmission lines. That technology has remade completely the western river landscape. The Colorado has not reached

the sea for twenty years, while the Columbia, the Snake, the Missouri, the Platte, the Brazos, and the Rio Grande, over much of their length, are descending staircases of man-made tanks. Water sparkling in a Beverly Hills swimming pool may have fallen as rain in the Rockies or in the Sierra. En route to its final consumptive use, it may have generated electricity for a neon cowboy in Las Vegas or lapped against the bow of a sailboat on Lake Mead. (*Under Western Skies* 56)

- 4 As Stegner himself puts it so succinctly, “We have acted upon the western landscape with the force of a geological agent” (*Where the Bluebird Sings* 47). In the words of Marc Reisner, “Thanks to irrigation, thanks to the Bureau [...] states such as California, Arizona, and Idaho became populous and wealthy; millions settled in regions where nature, left alone, would have countenanced thousands at best; great valleys and hemispherical basins metamorphosed from desert blond to semitropic green” (2).
- 5 Urban growth has certainly also contributed to the increasing need for water (which in such an arid environment must be transported over great distances), but, as Reisner takes care to note, in the 1980s eighty percent of California’s use of water went to irrigation rather than people, a percentage that was even higher in many other Western States. According to Worster, the typical irrigator of the West “is not merely trying to enhance his production by buying a little water now and then. He is critically dependent on that single resource and, to survive, must have it delivered on a steady, reliable basis” (*Under Western Skies* 29-30). Reisner accentuates the fact that even though California’s waterways carry ten times the runoff of Colorado’s, all its rivers and reservoirs satisfy “only 60 percent of the demand. The rest of the water [...] pumped out of the ground is as nonrenewable as oil” (9). As Stegner notes when discussing the same statistics, “Pumping exceeds replenishment by a half trillion gallons a year” (*Where the Bluebird Sings* 93).
- 6 The above-mentioned writers all note that this development is a far cry from the Western myth of agrarian democracy and self-reliant individualism. The irrigation culture of the West has very little to do with pastoral cowboy and homesteader visions; it is instead the creation of capitalist and government power elites. According to Reisner, even in its early and somewhat modest beginnings the Bureau of Reclamation “found itself working on behalf of the wealthy and powerful and against the interests of the constituency it was created to protect, the small western irrigation farmer. In California, to a surprising degree, it has done so ever since” (102). In Worster’s view, the hydraulic culture of the West has served to engender ever greater class differences between land owners and the landless and has first and foremost “promoted the cultish ideas of the collective domination of nature” (32).
- 7 The dream of the freedom of the West rests, as Worster argues, on the paradox of scarcity. The expanses of the West are wide and empty precisely because of their aridity, which Westerners subsequently have tried to counteract by a high-tech hydraulic society, which in turn implies the loss of freedom, a total dependence on a combination of corporate and government management of water. As Stegner puts it in *Wolf Willow*, “The vein of melancholy in the North American mind may be owing to many causes, but it is surely not weakened by the perception that the fulfillment of the American Dream means inevitably the death of the noble savagery and freedom of the wild” (282). The depletion of their water resources is the penalty Westerners have begun to pay for their pursuit of an American Dream founded on the disregard of environmental sustainability. In Reisner’s words, “We set out to tame the rivers and ended up killing them. We set out to make the future of the American West secure; what we really did was make ourselves rich and our descendants insecure” (486). This problem has of course grown even more urgent in the course of the last couple of decades since the publication of the above-mentioned books. The caption of an article in *The National Geographic* in 2008 entitled “Drying of the West” reads: “The American West was won by water management. What happens when there’s no water left to manage?” The writer, Robert Kunzig, points out that between the years 2000 and 2006 the seven states of the Colorado basin experienced a population increase of five million, a ten percent augmentation; the inhabitants of Las Vegas at the same time skyrocketed into almost two million; and population growth was outstripping water resources nearly everywhere in the West. Whereas the 20th century was the wettest century of the past millennium, many scientists argue that a dryer climate is setting in,

which will be intensified by global warming: Precipitation will decrease, snow will come later and melt earlier, and Dust-Bowl conditions will by the norm by mid-21st century (Kunzig).

8 This combined effect of population growth and climate conditions makes Reisner's, Worster's, and Stegner's books seem prophetic. Stegner himself has according to Jackson J. Benson written altogether "some sixty articles devoted partially or entirely to conservation, preservation, and environmental problems" (Benson 38), and in quite a few of them, Stegner argues that aridity is the overwhelming environmental fact that has served to define the West. His discursive prose amply testifies to the fact that Westerners turned the nature of their region into a cultural construction, both literally and metaphorically – both in terms of engineering and in terms of the ideology of the conquest of nature, propelled by the myth of the desert-turned-garden.

9 Spending parts of his childhood "right on the Saskatchewan-Montana border" (*Wolf Willow* 8) made Stegner particularly sensitive to the paradoxes and disastrous environmental consequences, on both the individual and the collective level, of Western culture. As Brett J. Olsen notes, "he derived his primary understanding of the land from the empirical, practical fact of growing up in the West" (125). In the words of Charles Wilkinson, "If Stegner's depictions of the West were utterly authentic, it is because he saw so much of it. Saskatchewan in the 1900s was a frontier – about like eastern Oregon, Idaho, Wyoming, or eastern Colorado in the 1870s or 1880s. Stegner then saw the west of the 1910s and 1920s, involuntarily, dragged around by his father" (8). His father's relentless pursuit of the dream of prosperity repeatedly came to nothing. As Stegner writes about his mother's state of mind already at their ramshackle prairie farm in Saskatchewan, she knew that "it was failure we were living" but did not realize, "then or ever, that it was more than family failure, that it was the failure of a system and a dream" (*Wolf Willow* 280).

10 As Stegner goes on to note, it would not have occurred to her that,

she and hers had been victimized by the folklore of hope. She had not education enough to know that the mass impulse that had started her parents from Ulvik on the Hardanger Fjord [in Norway], and started her and my father from Iowa into Dakota and on across the border, had lost its legitimacy beyond the hundredth meridian. She knew nothing about minimal annual rainfall, distribution, isohyetal lines. All she knew was that we were trapped and licked, and it would not have helped her much to be told that this was where a mass human movement dwindled to its end. (*Wolf Willow* 281)

11 In his non-fictional writings Stegner provides a trenchant analysis of how the American dream, when wedded to the Western landscape, represented a "folklore of hope" that in itself served as a repudiation of the natural limitations of the region. At the same time "a whole folklore of water" on the prairie kept testifying to the overwhelming reality of its climate and land:

People said a man had to make a dipperful go as far as it would. You boiled sweet corn, say. Instead of throwing the water out, you washed the dishes in it. Then you washed your hands in it a few times. Then you strained it through a cloth into the radiator of your car, and if your car should break down you didn't just leave the water to evaporate in its gullet, but drained it out to water the sweet peas. (*Wolf Willow* 278)

12 Stegner vividly evokes the longing for shade in the burning sun and the dry winds that hit the Plains "like the breath of a blowtorch": "Searing wind, scorching sky, tormented and heat-warped light, and not a tree" (278). Stegner's own biography of John Wesley Powell, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, together with the books by the writers discussed above, certainly helped refine his intellectual understanding of aridity as the keystone of Western culture, but the wellspring of that perception is his own childhood homestead.

3. Western Ideology as the Instrument of Environmental Exploitation

13 In both *Wolf Willow* and *Where the Bluebird Sings* Stegner sees his family's story of attempting to farm the arid land as a prototypical representation of the collective history of the West. It is Stegner's accentuation of the role of ideology that in my view makes these two (semi)autobiographical books particularly illuminating – the way he locates the root causes

of the abuse of the land in the very character of Western culture itself. According to Stegner, what the Plains homesteader could not learn “short of living it out, was that no system of farming, no matter how strenuously applied, could produce crops in that country during one of the irregular and unpredictable periods of drought” (*Wolf Willow* 254). Stegner explains that “the large lesson that he [the prairie farmer] would have found most useful – the marginal nature of agriculture on the arid Plains – was precisely the one that as a pioneer he found unacceptable, because it denied his hope” (255).

14 This cultural negation of natural facts in the West was aggravated by the individual bonanza dreams that Stegner regards as peculiarly Western. His critique of the spirit of opportunism in the West has grown particularly acerbic in *Where the Bluebird Sings*, epitomized in his portrait of his own father. His mother was, as he puts it, “always hopefully, hopelessly, trying to nest” in all the places to which they moved in Stegner’s boyhood and adolescence, whereas his father was “a boomer, a gambler, a rainbow-chaser, as footloose as a tumbleweed in a windstorm” (*Where the Bluebird Sings* 3). As Stegner writes in the essay entitled “Letter, Much Too Late” addressed to his mother, “You believed in all the all the beauties and strengths and human associations of place; my father believed only in movement. You believed in a life of giving, he in a life of getting” (*Where the Bluebird* 33). There are plenty of people in the West, Stegner notes, “who still think like my father, and who approach western land, water, grass, timber, mineral resources, and scenery as grave robbers might approach the tomb of a pharaoh” (xxii). Many of the boosters as well as the suckers of the West have in Stegner’s words been “deluded deluders, true believers, wishful thinkers, blindfold prophets, at once the agents, the beneficiaries, and the victims of the vast speculative real estate deal that is American and western history” (xix). As Jackson J. Benson remarks, Stegner realized that the American Dream “has not only twisted our lives and corroded our values but also despoiled the very land that has given us such hope” (41).

15 In view of the fact that Stegner’s writing also links the exploitation of the West to the general American ideology of material success, his insistent preoccupation with boosterism and opportunism as a prototypically Western trait may be argued to be somewhat of an overstatement. As Michael E. McGerr observes when discussing the historical reading of the West as a “hydraulic society,” “[Donald] Worster’s tale of corporate exploitation in the West resembles tales of exploitation in the cotton fields of the South, the sweatshops of New York, and the factories of New England. Capitalism is capitalism. The desert West is unique, but is the urban West or the capitalist West different enough from the rest of the country?” (246). Stegner himself touches upon a related point when, after speaking of the distinctiveness of the Western desert settings, he goes on to argue that the homogenization exerted by a modern American life-style has perhaps been far more influential in shaping the Westerners’ minds than the natural environment itself. Like Americans elsewhere, Westerners

eat the same Wheaties and Wonder Bread and Big Macs, watch the same ball games and soaps and sitcoms on TV, work at the same industrial or service jobs, suffer from the same domestic crises and industrial blights, join the same health clubs and neighborhood protective associations, and in general behave and misbehave much as they would in Omaha or Chicago or East Orange. The homogenizing media have certainly been at work on them, perhaps with more effect than the arid spaciousness of the region itself, and while making them more like everybody else have also given them misleading clues about who they are. (*Where the Bluebird* 104)

16 Interestingly enough, Stegner’s final observation seems to suggest that Westerners, in their interaction with the Western landscape, somehow *ought* to have adapted values different from the ones they have actually been misled to pursue in their life style and outlook. In this manner the compulsions of the American dream of social mobility, coupled with the pressures of the modern consumer society, have served to override the temperance that the nature of the arid West actually calls for.

17 The entire history of the American continent is of course originally a story of conquest through migration, but in Stegner’s view New England, the Midwest, and the South have nonetheless, over time, developed rooted communities. According to Stegner, only a few towns in the West (like for instance Missoula in Montana or Corvallis in Oregon) have managed to do the same

and thus acquired their own local identity; it is primarily in places like these that “the West will realize itself, if it ever does: these towns and cities still close to the earth, intimate and interdependent in their shared community, shared optimism, and shared memory. These are the seedbeds of an emergent western culture” (*Where the Bluebird* 116). The caveat “if it ever does” indicates that Stegner’s belief in the future of an authentically Western culture is severely qualified, which is also reflected in the fact that *Where the Bluebird Sings* spends the major part of its intellectual energy describing the ideology that *prevents* people of the region from evolving what could have been a genuinely Western ethos.

18 It is Stegner’s analysis of the pressures that make Westerners go ideologically astray and destroy their own environment that in my opinion is the most interesting aspect of his non-fictional nature writing, not least its extensive examination of the environmental consequences of migration and rootlessness, which he sees as the dominant cultural characteristics of Western life:

Migrants deprive themselves of the physical and spiritual bonds that develop within a place and a society. Our migratoriness has hindered us from becoming a people of communities and traditions, especially in the West. It has robbed us of the gods who make places holy. It has cut off individuals and families and communities from memory and the continuum of time. (*Where the Bluebird* 72)

19 Stegner’s story of his own childhood and youth is again the direct illustration of this type of restless mobility: After the failure of their Saskatchewan farm his family moved to Great Falls, Montana, and then to Salt Lake City, and then back and forth between the Mormon capital and various places, including Hollywood and Reno: “Between my twelfth and twenty-first years we must have lived in twenty different houses” (*Where the Bluebird* 15). The experience among Westerners of constantly becoming uprooted, observes Stegner, has left “at least some of us with a kind of spiritual pellagra, a deficiency disease, a hungering for the ties of a rich and stable social order [...] the American community, especially in the West, is an overnight camp” (72). Stegner regards this type of transientness as the principle reason why Westerners have “tried to make country and climate over to fit our existing habits and desires. Instead of listening to the silence, we have shouted into the void” (78).

20 Adaptation, on the other hand, which in Stegner’s view is intimately connected with a genuine sense of place, is the result of being rooted in the land. Again Stegner’s own personal boyhood history of transientness is an illustration of the problem of Western culture at large: “Some towns that we lived in were never real to me. They were only the raw material or places, as I was the raw material of a person. Neither place nor I had a chance of being anything unless we could live together for a while” (*Where the Bluebird* 201). Lack of a sense of place, then, implies at the same time a lack of identity. According to Stegner, a lot of people in the West “have never stayed in once place long enough to learn it, or have learned it only to leave it” (204). Although a culture, in Stegner’s definition, is the result of a particular kind of wilderness that “forces on people a different set of adaptations and creates a different pattern of life, custom, and belief,” this process demands time, and in the West “change, both homegrown and imported, has overtaken time, time and again” (99). To Westerners adaptation seemed furthermore unnecessary in their new environment: “As invaders, we were rarely, or only temporarily, dependent on the materials, foods, or ideas of the regions we pioneered” (101).

21 It is tempting to use Stegner’s own argument here to explain why the prose of *Where the Bluebird Sings* so convincingly depicts the ideological forces that *impede* the construction of a Western identity rooted in the land, whereas it seems less able to define the particularities of a Western character that – potentially at least – should somehow be shaped by nature itself. Stegner declares that, “If there is such a thing as being conditioned by climate and geography, and I think there is, it is the West that has conditioned me” (58). He is, however, hard put to express the cultural implications of such a conditioning, although he mentions some examples: A Western outlook means that you “get over the color green,” stop “associating beauty with gardens and lawns,” and “get used to an inhuman scale” of vast spaces (54). Sagebrush is, as he puts it, “an acquired taste, as are raw earth and alkali flats” (53). However, aside from describing the characteristic light and color of Western semidesert landscapes and discoursing on the limitations inherent in their aridity, Stegner’s *Where the Bluebird Sings* does not quite

manage to give an account of what a “naturally constructed” Westernization actually would entail.

- 22 Although Stegner’s book generally fails to provide a theory of how nature in the West may become culturally constitutive, his comments on the significance of Western space represent an exception. In several of the essays in *Where the Bluebird Sings* Stegner discourses on the effect of Western spaciousness, suggesting that “space is a continuing influence on their [Westerners’] minds and senses. It encourages a fatal carelessness and destructiveness because it seems so limitless and because what is everybody’s is nobody’s responsibility” (112). It comes somewhat as a surprise to the reader, to put it mildly, that Stegner’s most extensive “natural” interpretation of Western culture actually helps attribute its restiveness and rootlessness to the character of the Western landscape itself. In his view Western space “does something to the vision. It makes the country itself [...] into something formidable, alluring, and threatening, and it tends to make human beings as migratory as antelope” (138). Thus it is not only ideology that is instrumental in producing in Westerners a disregard of the environment. Stegner seems to imply that general American belief patterns (of social mobility) and the character of the Western landscape mutually reinforce each other. If Western spaciousness helps generate people’s restlessness and continuous migration, then nature itself becomes complicit in creating the lifestyle and mindset that contributes to its ruination and exploitation. Such a paradoxical interpretation implies that it is “naturally” difficult for Westerners to put down roots in the land. In their attempts to adapt to nature, they must at the same time, it seems, resist inclinations that the land itself gives rise to.
- 23 No matter, however, whether Western restlessness is engendered by culture or by nature, a central point of Stegner’s book is that, in most of the West, space needs to be turned into places. In this connection he refers the reader to Wendell Berry’s argument that “if you don’t know where you are you don’t know who you are. [...] He [Berry] is talking about the kind of knowing that involves the senses, the memory, the history of a family or a tribe” (205). A sense of place involves listening to the land itself, heeding it, and becoming part of it. As Stegner concludes, “Only in the act of submission is the sense of place realized and a sustainable relationship between people and earth established” (206).
- 24 With his emphasis on the importance of place Stegner aligns himself with bioregionalist writers such as Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder, whose radical emphasis on the local has recently been criticized by Ursula Heise for assuming that “individuals’ existential encounters with nature and engagements with intimately known local places can be recuperated intact from the distortions of modernization” (54); she suggests that “what is crucial for ecological awareness and environmental ethics is arguably not so much a sense of place as a sense of planet – a sense of how political, economic, technological, social, cultural, and ecological networks shape daily routines” (55). Stegner’s perspectives fall short of the kind of “eco-cosmopolitanism” that Heise advocates, but his concern with the forces of modernization in the West, as well as his work for the Sierra Club and for Stewart L. Udall, Secretary of the Interior (by researching and drafting parts of *The Quiet Crisis*) illustrates, first, his awareness of the impact that political, economic, and social institutions have on the environment, and second, his subsequent willingness, at least in some instances, to participate in public life in order to institute change.
- 25 Although Stegner accentuates the idea of local and regional rootedness as a prerequisite for the stewardship of nature, he looks at the same time with considerable favor on the federal government’s involvement with land management throughout the region: “Half of the West is in their hands” (*Where the Bluebird* 83). As noted in the first part of this article, Stegner spurns and debunks the Bureau of Reclamation for its hydraulic exploitation and radical depletion of water resources in the 20th century West, but he regards most of the federal land bureaus, walking “a line somewhere between preservation and exploitation” (82), as having an important protective function:

Neither state ownership nor private ownership – which state ownership would soon become – could offer anywhere near the usually disinterested stewardship that these imperfect and embattled

federal bureaus do [...] They have been the strongest impediments to the careless ruin of what remains of the Public Domain, and they will be necessary as far ahead as I, at least, can see. (85)

26 In this respect Stegner's stance is radically different from that of Gary Snyder, with whom he strongly disagreed about environmental politics (confer Fradkin's biography of Stegner 154-56); in his essay "The Place, the Regions, and the Commons" Snyder champions an exclusively local and regional stewardship and declares that the central State "is inherently greedy, destabilizing, entropic, disorderly, and illegitimate" (41). Stegner may in this connection perhaps be regarded as the greater political realist of the two, suggesting that both local and central management is needed to protect Western environments.

27 Stegner's most trenchant contribution to the study of Western culture lies in an analysis that links environmental exploitation (particularly of water resources) to the migratory and transient character of Western life. As he remarks about his family's Saskatchewan farm at the Montana border: "The homestead, though it was a stead of sorts, was never a home" (*Woolf Willow* 273). A place that is not a home invites environmental irresponsibility. His own father's life typified to Stegner the collective story of all those in the West who simply travelled through and "came to pillage, or to work for pillagers, rather than to settle for life. When the pillaging was done or the dream exploded, they moved on, to be replaced in the next boom by others just as hopeful and just as footloose" (*Where the Bluebird* xvii). As Stegner demonstrates, in the arid environment of the West the most disastrous large-scale pillaging – with federal initiative and support – is that of rivers and aquifers. Sustainability in such surroundings is first and foremost synonymous with the conservation of water, which is inimical to Western agribusiness as well as lifestyle. Unfortunately, in Stegner's words, "In the dry West, using water means using it *up*" (*Where the Bluebird* xviii). And as Marc Reisner similarly puts it, "In the East, to 'waste' water is to consume it needlessly or excessively. In the West, to waste water is *not* to consume it – to let it flow unimpeded and undiverted down rivers. [...] To Easterners, 'conservation' of water usually means protecting rivers from development; in the West, it means building dams" (12).

28 Stegner's ultimate point in *Where the Bluebird Sings* is that human societies and cultures will remain vigorous and dynamic only to the extent that they are able to adapt themselves to their environment. Stegner's introduction to his volume expresses his hope that Westerners, "within a generation or two," will be able to "work out some sort of compromise between what must be done to earn a living and what must be done to restore health to the earth, air, and water" (xxii), but in several of the subsequent essays his discussion of the politics of water makes his vision of the West far less optimistic, as "neither nostalgia nor boosterism can any longer make a case for it as the geography of hope" (98). The failure of Westerners to submit to nature by allowing it to help shape their way of life is in Stegner's opinion the key explanation for the dire plight of their lands:

[...] there is plenty of evidence against the long-range viability and the social and environmental desirability of large-scale irrigation agriculture. Nevertheless, millions of Americans continue to think of the water engineering in the West as one of our proudest achievements, a technology that we should export to the backward Third World nations to help them become as we are. (*Where the Bluebird* 87)

29 The increasing water shortage and population growth throughout the West in the eighteen years since the publication of *Where the Bluebird Sings* have heightened the urgency of Stegner's pronouncements. Far from being the embodiment of utopian progress and serving as the future technological model for the cultivation of the Earth, the American West at the beginning of the 21st century instead threatens to become its most highly developed environmental dystopia.

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Abstract

This article is chiefly concerned with Wallace Stegner's ideas of aridity as the key to the understanding of the history and culture of the American West. It first examines the arguments of some major books published in the 1980s that helped strengthen Stegner's conviction that the West was heading towards environmental disaster due to the rapidly increasing depletion

of its rivers and aquifers, a projected ecological crisis that has grown even more acute at the beginning of the 21st century. The subsequent focus of this article, however, is on Stegner's predominant proposition that the abuse of the arid nature of the West – the rampant disregard of its environmental limitations – is a product of a mindset and a culture that he finds particularly Western. In the course of his analysis, Stegner sees the rootlessness that typified his own family history as a direct reflection of the transientness characteristic of the collective history of the American West, which served to hamper the evolution of a sense of place that in his view is the prerequisite for a genuine stewardship of the land.

Keywords : American literature, Wallace Stegner, nature writing, the American West, environmentalism, ecology, aridity