



**"A SIMULTANEOUS AND JOINED IDENTITY"
The Eco-communitarian Ideal in
Wallace Stegner's American West**

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Our challenge is how to create sustainable lives and sustainable communities in a dance with wildness.

———Terry Tempest Williams

When the West fully learns that cooperation, not rugged individualism, is the quality that most characterizes and preserves it, then it will have achieved itself and outlived its origins. Then it has a chance to create a society to match its scenery.

———Wallace Stegner

Myth-making is simultaneously a psychological and a social activity. The myth is articulated by individual artists and has its effect on the mind of each individual participant, but its function is to reconcile and unite these individualities to a collective identity.

———Richard Slotkin

The notion of "community" within the multicultural context of the American West has historically been subject to contrasting and often contradictory analyses. Such differing appreciations may stem from the fact that they are culture-bound, consciously (or not) grounded in a particular interpretive framework which enables community consciousness to emerge precisely in terms of what it is not. Cultural, linguistic, religious or ethnic cohesiveness is thus precipitated by a real or imagined "other" element, unknown tribe or uncharted territory, whose threatening presence indirectly fosters a desire for social harmony and group identity based on a developed and privileged relationship to place. The gradual imposition of the Anglo-American ideological model, with all of its cultural, political, economic and ecological repercussions, responds no less to a communitarian aspiration,

albeit of continental proportions. The history of the territorial incursion and simultaneous development of Anglo-American civilization in the western reaches of a continent already long-inhabited by Indians and descendants of the Spanish empire—a dynamic process traditionally referred to as “the Frontier”—reveals the unfinished becoming of a community consciousness bent on subsuming all other preexisting cultural realities in the West. In sharp contrast to previously established communities whose existence and vitality centered on an inherited impulse to preserve a communal order intrinsically, even spiritually, linked to the physical environment in which it flourished, Anglo-American frontier communities were driven by what John Faragher has called “a common belief in the values of improvement and expansion” and by “the prevailing ethic of progress.”¹ Inspired by a synergetic mélange of New World mythology, biblical interpretation, romanticist aesthetics, nationalist ideology and capitalist imperatives, the gaze that Anglo-American newcomers project upon the vast expanses of the West—already their West—reflects a fundamental ambivalence, at once utilitarian and utopian. Fixed upon settlement and appropriation, it is nonetheless a gaze born of movement as opposed to stasis, what Jean Baudrillard might have labeled a *fuite en avant*, betraying an inherent incapacity to establish a meaningful, durable identification with place². As poet Robert Frost once wrote, “the land was ours before we were the land’s,”³ thus attesting to the fundamental irony that underlies a community consciousness bereft of the more primordial, organic legitimacy once enjoyed intuitively by indigenous peoples. In their restless quest to consolidate a “homeland,” Anglo-Americans established a frontier of exclusion that simultaneously acknowledged and disregarded the presence of the barbaric other. Manifest Destiny provided the ideological framework for the maintenance of the founding myth of primordality whereby a new civilization could rise up from “virgin” soil.

There results from this relational paradox an ambivalence toward history that has placed contemporary writers of the American West in a delicate and challenging position. Caught as it were between the forces of myth and history, between legend and empirical reality, western writers harbor a legitimate desire to ground their work in a simultaneous act of personal and regional identification, to cultivate a literary landscape that invites readers in turn to participate emotionally in their shared place of living, to further the unfinished business of community consciousness.

This article purports to examine the peculiar ethical stance concerning the concept of community in the contemporary American West as it is conveyed in the works of renowned novelist, educator and environmental

¹ John Faragher, “Americans, Mexicans, Métis: A Community Approach to the Study of North American Frontiers,” in *Under An Open Sky: Rethinking America’s Western Past*, William Cronon *et al.*, ed. (New York: Norton, 1992) 105-106.

² Reflecting on the rapidity with which the American continent was overcome and reappropriated, Baudrillard muses: “Speed is the triumph of effect over cause, the triumph of the instantaneous over the depth of time, the triumph of the surface over the depth of desire [...] of oblivion over memory.” (From Jean Baudrillard, *Amérique*, Paris: Grasset, 1986, 6, my translation).

³ From Robert Frost, “The Gift Outright,” 1942, in *Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin, 1973).

advocate Wallace Stegner (1909-1993). Although much of Stegner's autobiographically-inspired fiction centers on the predicament of individuals and seems to address community concerns only obliquely, the theme of community is accorded greater attention in the author's numerous essays published between 1945 and his death. Friend and great admirer of Frost, Stegner was particularly sensitive to what may be termed the "dilemma" of community in the country's newest, vastest and hitherto least populated region, all the more so as this most western of Westerners⁴ had spent several years (including every summer holiday until his death) in rural New England and was thus led to reflect on the differences and similarities between the two regions. Weathering the cultural and intellectual upheaval of the 1960s—a period during which the contradictions of American society and its particularly aggressive brand of materialist individualism were the object of vigorous reappraisal—Stegner, a referential figure of the academic establishment, rejected what he viewed as the voguish allure of provocative militantism and esoteric philosophy, and published a string of essays in which the author staunchly defends aspects of Western cultural, geographical and ecological heritage as determining elements of community not only in the West itself, but applicable to American democracy at large. In a tradition beginning with Walt Whitman, and later reinforced by the frontier theses of the late nineteenth-century historian Frederick Jackson Turner, Stegner points in particular to the vital role of the educational institution and of the informed, literary culture it upholds, as custodians of the democratic process, necessary prerequisites to social cohesion.

At a time when American literary tastes were decided in East Coast institutions, Stegner unabashedly commended a Western literature that might give rise to a community of readers able to partake in the realization of a "sense of place,"⁵ a deeper, more intuitive understanding of the importance and intertwining of historical or geographical research and individual experience in specifically Western locales. In a balancing act not unlike that undertaken by Whitman, Stegner posits empirical, first-hand experience as a foundation for the extrapolation of a communitarian ideal which seeks to reconcile the "traditional values" of Jeffersonian pastoralism and the heroic innocence of Turnerian frontier democracy, with the ecological prerequisites of contemporary environmentalism. Hence, Stegner is arguably the first well-known writer of the modern American West to embrace the vision of an eco-community, and the graceful, well-informed didacticism of his writing can be traced to that of Henry David Thoreau, John Muir or Aldo Leopold.

Stegner's communal vision for the West is expressed in two distinct yet complementary forms. On the one hand, a more "pragmatic" implementation of the ideal community reveals a somewhat roughly articulated blueprint for mid-sized, self-sufficient university towns situated in proximity to large areas of undisturbed wilderness; on the other hand, a more "utopian" vision of a trans-regional literary culture that would serve

⁴ Stegner was dubbed "the Dean of Western Writers" by the *New York Times Book Review* in 1972.

the intellectual and spiritual needs and mobilize the energies of a growing "community of readers" throughout an environmentally-conscious West keen on preserving a unique geographic heritage. Throughout his work—fiction and non fiction—Stegner had clearly emphasized unity over fragmentation, tradition over experimentation, often viewing the latter as potentially reckless threats to an idealized communal identity. To be sure, Stegner's "democratic vista," to apply Whitman's phrase, contrasts with more recent multi-cultural analyses of Western history in which the often subliminal hegemony of Anglo-American ethnocentricity is more blatantly challenged. But the author of *Angle of Repose* and *The Sound of Mountain Water*⁶ can be rightly credited with having raised the all-too-often neglected question of individual and community responsibility in a pristine environment that has historically been taken for granted as much by its own inhabitants as by outsiders. It is commonly agreed that Stegner was among the first writers to reflect critically on the suicidal absurdities of unlimited growth in an environment of finite resources and fragile beauty, advocating reduction and restraint—a policy that has since been named "sustainable growth." By questioning the twin imperatives of mobility and expansion, Stegner clearly positioned himself as a positive revisionist, as an adversary of those who would "mindlessly rape the land," and thus as an acknowledged precursor of the New Western historians.⁷ In the wake of Stegner's literary accomplishment, which includes 35 published books and over 250 articles and essays, scores of local voices representing a wide variety of communities and concerns—the so-called "new Western" writers—have contributed to the blossoming of a new and expanding branch of contemporary literature dedicated to the preservation of Western places, to the intellectual development of Western communities, and to the reeducation of Western minds. The majority of them have openly acknowledged the determining influence that Stegner's writings have had on a growing realization throughout the West of the vital connection between human settlement and ecological well-being, a connection upon which the very future of the West depends.

"The dignity of rareness": individuals, communities, and the Frontier

In his own words, Stegner was an incurable realist, a believer in Lockean empiricism and in the transparency of the linguistic sign, in the capacity of the individual to translate apprehended reality into intelligible, albeit poetic, terms and to communicate thought directly and unambiguously. One of the overriding characteristics of Stegner's writing, both fiction and non fiction, is certainly the preponderance of the subjective voice. This empirical stance is first established in *Wolf Willow: A History, A Story and A Memory of the Last*

⁶ No doubt Stegner's best-known work, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Angle of Repose* (1971) relates the life and times of a sensitive Eastern female artist-author who witnesses the transformation of the Western frontier during the late XIXth century. *The Sound of Mountain Water* (1969) assembles some of Stegner's most provocative and seminal essays on Western history, identity and environment.

⁷ "We are much in his debt because he said things so clearly and so forcefully, before many others were saying them, or even thinking them." Patricia Nelson Limerick, "Precedents to Wisdom," in Page Stegner, ed., *The Geography of Hope* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1996) 24.

Plains Frontier (1962), wherein the narrator functions as a discerning conscience at the intersection of coincidental genres, history, literature and autobiography: "From my center of sensation and question and memory and challenge, the circle of the world is measured [...] I may not know who I am, but I know where I am from: I am a product of the American earth."⁸ Extrapolated from this emphasis on an organic identification with place is a tacit understanding between subject and object whereby the environment is designated as both source and reflection of basic human values. The organic metaphor enables the writer to posit himself as a virtual work-in-progress the elaboration of which is intimately linked to the discovery and intellectual integration of place. Stegner's subjective empiricism ("the only experience to which we can bear witness is that which we have personally endured or observed"⁹) is justified by the author's project: to achieve a sense of identity and permanence in a place where rootlessness and discontinuity have dominated.

This individualistic perspective intended as a guarantee of narrative authenticity is invariably challenged from within by the author's didactic impulse to speak for an entire region and its inhabitants. The autobiographical novels, short stories and essays are contributions that respond to a higher imperative, to rehabilitate the West by saving it from its own obscuring myths. Yet there emerges in Stegner's writing a duality wherein mythic residues simultaneously uphold and undermine the coherence of empiricist discourse. Lending substance to the frontier theses of Frederick Jackson Turner, Stegner's own experience had sufficiently taught him that the West was largely an "unrecorded, history-less, artless new country"¹⁰ waiting for historical and cultural legitimization. But for Stegner the time-worn myth of rugged individualism is as ruinous as it is edifying. Both stigmatized and strengthened by a precarious frontier childhood, Stegner's own acute desire for stability and human interaction would lead him to reject the self-righteous aspects of individualism that had caused the downfall of his own father, labeled "a frontiersman *manqué*" by the writer, a "footloose, rainbow-chaser" with little regard for family or community.¹¹ At the same time, Stegner just as intuitively defends the legendary ruggedness that for him remains part and parcel of the distinctly Western character, having corroborated that aspect of the "myth" through his family's effort to survive.

All in all Stegner interprets the business of pioneering in essentially Turnerian terms, as a plunge into primitivism at "the meeting point between savagery and civilization,"¹² where isolation, simplicity, coarseness, strength, inquisitiveness, and frontier pragmatism are cited as prototypically democratic virtues prompted by the unchallenged existence of "free land,"

⁸ Wallace Stegner, *Wolf Willow*, 1962, (New York: Penguin, 1992) 19.

⁹ W. Stegner, "Coming of Age: The End of the Beginning" in *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs* (New York, Penguin, 1992) 141.

¹⁰ W. Stegner, "Born A Square," in *The Sound of Mountain Water*, 1969, (New York: Penguin, 1997) 172.

¹¹ W. Stegner, *Conversations on Western History and Literature* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1986) 47.

¹² Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *The Frontier in American History*, 1920 (New York: Dover, 1996) 358.

and where the "true" American character is born of a strenuous but satisfying confrontation with a hostile environment. Yet while Turner's essentially progressive vision cautions the excesses of the frontier period and elevates unassuming western pioneers to the status of national heroes, archetypes in the historical drama of America's rise to greatness, Stegner's personal experience can only reveal a more troubling, parallel reality. Bent on constructing "an epic about how [his] corner of the continent was peopled and brought into the civilized world," Stegner exposes the "reckless, wild and greedy"¹³ tendencies that more often led to shameless exploitation, social disorder and environmental calamity.

Historian Richard Etulain attributes such ambivalence toward myth to the fact that Stegner's life and work are situated between two major tendencies or periods in Western literary history, providing as it were a "crucial link between western regional and post-regional literatures."¹⁴ Thus, Stegner's writings occupy a transitional space itself characterized by instability and readjustment, and reflect contrasting yet ultimately complementary attitudes toward Western history according to which the latter is viewed, in the terms proposed by Patricia Limerick, as either process or place. The opening of an interpretive, dialectic space between movement and stasis, the mythic and the real, heritage and desire, singularity and plurality, between "I" and "we," enables the writer to conjugate oppositional attributes—what the writer refers to as "bridge-building"—in an attempt to go beyond the limitations of either pole in his search for truth:

The West does not need to explore its myths much further; it has already relied on them too long. It has no future in exploiting its setting either, for too consistently it has tried to substitute scenery for a society. All it has to do is to be itself at the most reasonable pitch, to take a hard look at itself and acknowledge some things that the myths have consistently obscured.¹⁵

One of the major preoccupations of Stegner is thus the manner in which collective, communal endeavors have been obscured or deformed by the myth of rugged individualism. As Elliott West has observed, the traditional view of Western history "basically begins with Lewis and Clark and ends with the Populists, and virtually everything in between is accomplished by white adult males."¹⁶ To be sure, the mythic interpretation of Western expansion is itself construed largely as a function of gender, playing off the "accomplishments" of the enterprising, violent, anti-social, individualistic male against the overall passive acquiescence of the protective, cooperative, altruistic and civilizing female. Stegner's attempt to demystify the "noble virility" of the legendary West is in one sense considerably facilitated by personal experience. Posthumously addressing his mother, Stegner writes: "You believed in all the beauties and strengths and human associations of place; my father believed only in movement. You

¹³ W. Stegner, *Wolf Willow*, *op. cit.*, 31.

¹⁴ Richard Etulain, *Re-imagining the Modern American West* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996) 187.

¹⁵ W. Stegner, "Born A Square," *op. cit.*, 183.

¹⁶ Elliott West, "A Longer, Grimmer, but More Interesting Story," in *Trails: Toward a New Western History*, Patricia Limerick *et al.*, ed. (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1991) 105.

believed in a life of giving; he in a life of getting."¹⁷ At the same time, Stegner's bipolar, gender-based analysis cannot entirely dislocate itself from a more mythic interpretation handed down by that quintessential literary legend-maker, Owen Wister, whose restless but righteous Virginian is inevitably domesticated by the comprehensive and civilizing "schoolmarm," Molly Wood.

During the more stable periods of the Stegner family's otherwise transient existence on the northern plains, it was indeed the mother who, by virtue of her "natural" inclinations toward sharing and socializing, impressed upon the budding writer the importance of community in a particularly forbidding environment that demanded human cooperation. Stegner would have more ample opportunity to corroborate first-hand the virtues of community in a West which, according to popular myth, was the last bastion of individual freedom. Dragged along by the hapless whims of an outlaw father engaged in bootlegging, Stegner ended up spending much of his adolescence and young adult life in Salt Lake City. Having experienced the painful absence of social interaction and the utter lack of strong community ties, Stegner was infinitely more impressed by the tight-knit structure and generosity of Mormon society than by the actual religious doctrines of the Church of the Latter-Day Saints.¹⁸ In his search for "a past to which [he] could be tribally and emotionally committed,"¹⁹ Stegner discovered within the Mormon community several positive characteristics that, taken together, constituted an antidote to the dominant myth of adventurous individualism that had robbed the Stegner family of durable, satisfying community relations and, by extension, prevented the West from realizing its true potential. Among the Mormons, the supreme virtues of family, community solidarity, history and tradition would contribute significantly to the elaboration of Stegner's concept of the sense of place.²⁰ In addition, observation of Mormon life would catalyze one of the major tenets of Stegner's personal philosophy, the notion of a "usable past," alone capable of providing a meaningful foundation to community development in a West that "has too long made a tradition out of mourning the passing of things we never had time to know, just as we have made a culture out of the open road, out of movement without place."²¹ The Mormon accomplishment is all the more exceptional and praiseworthy in Stegner's eyes as the overpowering physicality of Western space has seemingly encouraged "a fatal carelessness and destructiveness, because what is everybody's is nobody's responsibility."²² The Mormon experience is analyzed by Stegner

¹⁷ W. Stegner, "Letter Much Too Late," in *Where the Bluebird Sings*, *op. cit.*, 33.

¹⁸ "Some find the events related in the Book of Mormon preposterous. I find them incredible." (W. Stegner, *Conversations on Western History and Literature*, *op. cit.*, 111.

¹⁹ W. Stegner, *Wolf Willow*, *op. cit.*, 110.

²⁰ W. Stegner would go so far as to write: "Nowhere in the United States is the community spirit stronger or the respect for tradition greater" (*Sound of Mountain Water*, *op. cit.*, 284).

²¹ W. Stegner, "The Sense of Place," in *Bluebird*, *op. cit.*, 204.

²² W. Stegner, "Variations on a Theme by Crèvecoeur," in *The American West as Living Space* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987) 81.

in two major works²³, and cited as a shining example of what human cooperation can accomplish in adverse, frontier conditions.

The brand of communitarian responsibility exemplified by the Mormon settlements can also be assimilated to the smaller, more distinct "units of cooperation" that punctuate the rural landscapes of the West, symbolic remnants of Jeffersonian pastoralism. The virtuous transformation of "virgin land" into a prosperous, self-sufficient garden, what Henry Nash Smith refers to as "one of the dominant symbols of nineteenth-century American society, a collective representation, and a poetic idea that defined the promise of American life,"²⁴ retains for Stegner the myth-buster much of its original attractiveness and legitimacy. Thus, the farmer who "wears paths into the earth's rind" does so as "an intimate act of love, one that is denied to the city dweller who lacks the proper mana for it, being out of touch with the earth of which he is made."²⁵ Stegner favorably appraises the integrity of these communal offshoots of western expansion, human enclaves devoted "not to marching onward but to cultivating the earth,"²⁶ planting deep roots, inaugurating a collective identity based on an intimate relationship with place. Much like Turner before, for whom the pioneer experience exudes a "neighborliness" characteristic of American democratic values, Stegner honors the honest homesteader, the small-scale rancher, and the modest-sized towns nested in out-of-the-way places, all of whom possess "the dignity of rareness"²⁷ and who in theory espouse the natural rhythms of the land they inhabit. Communities that "live off the land" and that are located well on the periphery of potentially degrading social and technological influences lie at the very heart of a somewhat abused but time-honored aspiration, what Lawrence Buell has termed "the dream of an unencumbered, stripped-down life," the persistence of an American pastoralism that has "become an ultra-respectable plank in American civil religion, as much of a placebo as *e pluribus unum*."²⁸ Persistent in Turner's "pioneer principle," and hence in Stegner's interpretation of it, is the prescription for a shared heritage that bears the possibility for individuals to realize the social cohesiveness of their self-reliant and mutually benevolent actions since "in the community spirit of the pioneer's house-raising lies the salvation of the Republic."²⁹ In one of Stegner's major novels, it is a pioneering female protagonist who enthusiastically implores a distant east-coast friend to take part in a pastoral dream that reaffirms the hope of a nation: "Don't you want to join us and take part in the making of a new country?". Likening her project to that of a Brook Farm "without social theory," she remarks:

There are indications that the West which so lightly and cruelly separates and scatters people can bring them together again, that the

²³ Cf. W. Stegner, *Mormon Country*, 1942, (Lincoln: Bison Press, 1981); *The Gathering of Zion*, 1964 (Lincoln: Bison, 1981).

²⁴ Henry Nash Smith, , *Virgin Land* (Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 1978) 123.

²⁵ W. Stegner, *Wolf Willow*, *op. cit.*, 8.

²⁶ Henry Nash Smith, *op. cit.*, 124.

²⁷ W. Stegner "Variations on a Theme by Crèvecoeur," *op. cit.*, 81.

²⁸ Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996) 42.

²⁹ Frederick Jackson Turner, "Middle Western Pioneer Democracy," in *The Frontier in American History*, *op. cit.*, 358.

binding force of human association is as strong, perhaps, as the West's
bigness and impersonality.³⁰

Here, the heroine's communal vision promotes the gentle reconciliation of myth and reality, indiscriminately reaching out to both servitor and victim of a rugged individualism that has lost its pertinence, and promoting rather a lasting sense of place that might enable Western communities to match the magnificence and harmony of their physical environment. Yet articulated from a mid-nineteenth-century perspective, one cannot help but recall the ideological context of Manifest Destiny that saw in the West the opportunity for national fulfillment as well as an arena for the ultimate realization of human (Anglo-American) potential, and the restoration of man's lost harmony with nature; in a word, what Stegner refers to as "the geography of hope."³¹ Indeed, the American West continues to symbolize the final station on the line originating in the Renaissance myth of the New World. The region posits itself at present as the living stage on which the dramatic becoming of America may perpetually be not merely re-enacted but perfected. While Stegner is quick to criticize the stronghold of myth on the region and its mentality, he nonetheless contributes to perpetuating the mythic historicism—and heroism—of Crèvecoeur, Theodore Roosevelt and Frederick Jackson Turner:

For an American, insofar as he is new and different at all, is a civilized man who has renewed himself in the wild [...] that gave us our hope and our excitement, and the hope and excitement can be passed on to newer Americans, Americans who never saw any phase of the Frontier.³²

In adhering to the opinions of his illustrious predecessors, it is imperative for Stegner that such a fundamental hope be preserved. The emphasis has shifted imperceptibly from the subjective "I" to the all-inclusive "we" and in doing so reactivates historical antecedents. Nothing here suggests that these "newer" Americans should have reason to challenge the original configuration. In other words, Stegner implicitly refers to the successive generations who have willingly integrated the pioneer saga as their own, rather than to the successive waves of immigrants or, even less, to the historically excluded Hispanophone enclaves and indigenous tribes that have for centuries considered the region as their homeland, viewing the Frontier from the "wrong" side of the fence. In effect, Stegner's rhetorical didacticism remains manifestly and to his own avowal "in consonance with the frontier condition and image."³³ When it comes to the most valued characteristic of the Western environment, the physical representation of hope itself—the untouched expanses of wilderness—Stegner will remain singularly attached to a blend of frontier and pseudo-nationalist values that condition his formulation of a communal project based on ecological holism.

³⁰ W. Stegner, *Angle of Repose*, 1971 (New York, Penguin, 2000) 390.

³¹ W. Stegner, "Wilderness Letter," *op. cit.*, 153.

³² W. Stegner, "Wilderness Letter," in *Sound*, *op. cit.*, 149.

³³ *Ibid.*, 151.

"A society to match its scenery": environment, education and the ideal community

Although the term has been subject to a wide variety of applications, the concept of "community" has invariably implied relationships that are often perceived or depicted as stronger, more immediate, more primordial than those inherent in the somewhat more artificially politicized notion of "society." Generally speaking, we may affirm that "community" connotes a voluntarily expressed sense of belonging and a subjective, conscious realization of common interests between members of a group who enjoy and entertain affective bonds in either a physical or a virtual proximity. Since Ferdinand Tönnies's distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* advanced in the late 1880s, the oppositional logic governing the categorization of human groups has been founded on a progressive interpretation of history wherein "community" is often recognized as an earlier, more bucolic moment in human social evolution, and thus represented in a nostalgic light. Association, kinship, locality, and neighborhood all suggest an implicit, organic link to rurality, as opposed to the more urbanized notion of "society." In addition, "community" points to the broader, encompassing realm of human ecology: a shared space toward which members of the group develop a sense of collective identity with respect to their natural surroundings, an identity constantly undermined by the corrupting onslaught of urbanization and over-technologization. Inasmuch as Stegner's writing is often characterized by the superimposition of a personally recalled, idealized community-based pastoral set against present-day dilemmas, as well as against the exceedingly complex history of human interaction in the American West, the author's own criterion of historical objectivity is at best only partially observed. Moreover, Stegner's particular interpretation and application of Jeffersonian pastoralism strategically emphasizes the collective entity as opposed to the individual prerogatives. To be sure, Jefferson's conception of the "just society" was firmly based on the ideals of self-sufficiency but also, more importantly for Stegner, on the notion of "spiritual unity" with respect to the processes of nature. For the author of *Notes on the State of Virginia*, working the land was to provide moral insight through an intuitive realization of the importance of place, thus laying the foundation for the development of a just society composed of autonomous yet ideologically related communities, commonly governed by mutual respect and cooperation. References to the pastoral ideal and the manner in which it quite naturally survives throughout the contemporary American West demonstrate Stegner's desire to ground his particular brand of ecology within the context of American democratic traditions and values.

Yet in subscribing to the timeless validity of the redeeming qualities inherent in Western wilderness, and by advocating the need to preserve the open, untouched, "virgin" "lands so that Americans may at all times be reminded who they are and what they are made of,"³⁴ Stegner is hard-pressed to explain his own growing discursive reliance on Native American attitudes. It is as if Stegner's faith in the frontier heritage—inherited and

³⁴ W. Stegner, "Talking with the Conscience of the West: Interview with Wallace Stegner," Donald Bergmann, *Los Angeles Times* (14 Nov. 1991) 21.

duly retransmitted, in harmony with the author's concept of a "usable past"—had blinded him from explicitly acknowledging the omnipresent "other," non-Anglo-American communities richly endowed with a sense of place both functional and spiritual. For the Indian, according to Stegner's contemporary, noted scholar Angie Debo, "the familiar shapes of earth, the changing sky, the wild animals were joined with his own spirit in mystical communion;"³⁵ and the native implementation of the notion of community was from the outset extended to include the non-human realm in a almost undifferentiated vision of universal and organic interaction.

Stegner once justifiably commented that he had no particular intention of expounding at length on the subject of Indian society simply because he felt he was too "vulnerable and ill-informed on this Indian business."³⁶ But in his later writings, the references to and borrowings from Native American ecological philosophy increase considerably, just as environmental science and spiritual holism slowly recognize their communal bonds. The widely-admired eco-biologist Barry Lopez expresses this rapprochement thus: "The more knowledge I have, the greater becomes the mystery of what holds that knowledge together, this reticulated miracle called the ecosystem."³⁷ Stegner's inclination to bridge the gap between an unfulfilled pastoral dream and the humility of native wisdom enables him to advocate a new behavioral model wherein individual civic responsibility toward the environment can be made to rhyme with collective spiritual fulfillment, both essential ingredients to the realization of the sense of place. Stegner's later years will be marked by the destabilization of his own ideological certainties as he comes to embrace, much as Aldo Leopold before him, the holistic vision of "one great community where humans and nature are bound together through principles of moral reciprocity, respect and restraint."³⁸ Henceforth, those self-reliant and self-restraining ranching communities that earn Stegner's praise are precisely those that show "a respect for their native country in essentially Indian terms."³⁹ Like Leopold, whose formulation of the principle of the land ethic⁴⁰ will greatly influence Stegner's migration from a uniquely pioneer-based perspective to a more humble and comprehensive outlook, the latter views public education as the only viable solution to foster long-term ethical change.

The importance and influence of public educational institutions of higher learning in the context of the frontier West had already been recognized and supported by leading Frontier historian Frederick Jackson Turner, for whom the university's fundamental role was "to clasp hands with our common life [...] to be a radiant center enkindling the society in

³⁵ Angie Debo, *History of the Indians of the United States* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970) 4.

³⁶ W. Stegner, *Conversations*, *op. cit.*, 138.

³⁷ Barry Lopez, Terry Tempest Williams, & Richard Nelson, *Patriotism and the American Land* (Orion: Great Barrington, 2002) 25.

³⁸ W. Stegner, "Talking with the Conscience of the West," *op. cit.*, 22.

³⁹ W. Stegner, *American Places* (New York: E.F. Hutton, 1981) 115.

⁴⁰ Aldo Leopold, whose *Sand Country Almanac* (1949) figures as one of the seminal texts of the contemporary ecology movement, defined the land ethic as "a mode of guidance [...] that changes the role of Homo Sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it" (New York: Ballantine, 1966, 240).

which it has its being,"⁴¹ and to make an inventory of the country's past so that a better future may be envisaged. From Turner's perspective Stegner will inherit an emphasis on historical research and the importance of recorded experience, prerequisites to an essential part of identity preservation, the transmission of a common heritage. In addition to the essentially retrospective function of university research, the institution of higher learning plays an anticipatory role in human intellectual and social evolution in that, as Turner states, it contributes to producing "more fertile and responsive soil for a higher and better life" through scientific discovery and the training of competent leaders.⁴² Indeed, as the Rocky Mountains and the Far Western regions were settled and organized into territories, states' constitutional drafters considered the university as an indispensable institution that needed to be established immediately. Hence, between 1839 and 1915 a network of no fewer than 40 state universities and colleges were founded throughout the West, as a means of precipitating regional cohesion and identity, but also as a reflection of the greater, national effort to consolidate Anglo-American cultural values and scientific prerogatives in all areas of the continent. One of the first presidents of the University of California specified the need to harmonize the University's objectives with the demands of its local constituency.

For Aldo Leopold, it is precisely the research capacity of a well-equipped university that ensures community well-being, through the institution's encouragement of pluridisciplinary collaboration between the related fields of botany, biology, geography and hydrology, meteorology and organic chemistry, but also the indispensable and enlightening participation of the humanities, history, law and literature. In Leopold's view, the university community should reflect the delicate balances and intricate harmonies existing in the natural community of which man is but a part. By definition, then, the university's function is to nourish and uphold an "ecological consciousness"⁴³ that accounts for the biological as well as the moral well-being of the region and its inhabitants.

For Wallace Stegner, "colleges were the true harbingers of civilization in the new raw territories,"⁴⁴ and the role attributed to the public university answers all cultural demands representing a kind of dynamic, social laboratory that requires the interaction of a plurality of interests all of which contribute to the common good. In the vast, sparsely populated West where the mythic heritage of supreme optimism is an indelible part of regional identity, the primary function of the institution is double: on the one hand, to ensure the continuity and safeguard of national democratic ideals through its contribution to research, knowledge and progress; on the other hand, to promote a lasting sense of place as a regional pole of reference and a vector of a new Western identity. To the university is entrusted the task of analyzing and understanding regional needs above and beyond the abilities of untrained locals whose inherited knowledge of the terrain does not serve

⁴¹ Frederick Jackson Turner, "The West and American Ideals," in *The Frontier in American History*, *op. cit.*, 292.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ A. Leopold, *op. cit.*, 244.

⁴⁴ W. Stegner, Prologue, *The Stanford Century* (Palo Alto: Stanford Alumni Association, 1991) 2

the higher needs of the community: "I would trust a Bureau of Land Management (national) official who has taken a degree in range management at the University of Utah a whole lot ahead of any of those ranching cowboys."⁴⁵ Even active associations such as the Sierra Club or the Wilderness Society realize their full potential only when they are supported by the socially legitimized university institution, "because like universities the manifest purpose of groups such as these has to be public education."⁴⁶ Finally, the role assumed by the educational institution is grounded on the morality of humanistic epistemology in that

beyond the mere dissemination of knowledge, it is a university's function to lead students to synthesize their experience and their book knowledge into workable patterns of belief and conduct.⁴⁷

In a similar manner, beyond the education of socially responsible individuals, sensitive to the needs of their communities and to the realities of their environment, the university acts collectively in the defense of community values, in the preservation of natural sites worthy of public interest, in the active promotion of the cultural development of the community through conferences and seminars. The actions undertaken by the university in the defense of the public interest are analogous, in Stegner's appraisal, to the role of the federal government in its opposition to individualist, private interests in ecologically sensitive zones of the West, both working for the benefit of the larger communities—human and ecological—they serve. In this sense, the university represents the last true bastion of progressive thought and action where the arts, letters and sciences together participate in the humanistic project of the reconciliation of human and natural communities as one, indivisible and interactive unit, the expression of an eco-communitarian ideal.

Stegner's vision of an eco-community, sponsored to a great extent and legitimized by the university as referential pole of research and analysis, integrates frontier values that have been freed of detrimental mythic clichés. Of modest size, dictated by the imperative of sustainable growth as opposed to unbridled growth for growth's sake, Stegner's ideal community cultivates its capabilities yet remains conscious of its limits. Far from the notion of a pre-fabricated, "planned community" that exists in defensive isolation, Stegner's ideal community thrives on the implementation of informed action undertaken by the collaboration of educational, associative and political entities. This is the most feasible form of civic organization that responsibly and effectively answers the particular needs of Western communities that depend on a deeper understanding of the fragility of their natural environment:

When I speak of the West, I guess I am thinking of the West I wish would grow up and get stable and develop some kind of continuous, sustainable life—an economic life that would keep a stable population. I am thinking of towns like Missoula, Bozeman, Boise and so on,

⁴⁵ W. Stegner, "The Artist as Environmental Advocate," interview by Ann Lage (Sierra Club History Series, University of California, Berkeley, Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, 1983) 38.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ W. Stegner, *The Writer in America* (Brooklyn: Haskell House, 1977) 58.

where a steady living for a modest population without the fevers and collapses of boom-and-bust. And there is likewise something absolutely essential to leaven the lump, an academy of some kind, a college or university. My favorite places in the West are relatively small university towns. Villages are often unkempt, half-savage and relatively impermanent. The cities are characterless. But those towns that have their own quality and the future of the West seems to me to lie in them.⁴⁸

The qualities attributed to Western university towns of modest proportions reside in their privileged geographical situation and their proximity to preserved, natural spaces that make them particularly attractive. Characterized as open-air museums, heritage sites of the pioneer West, but equally as reminders of the mindless abuse and exploitation of the region's fragile resources, these uniquely American places serve as a testimony to the need for sustainable growth as the only viable alternative for establishing a coherent civilization. Such a society owes its flourishing existence to the excavation of positive traditions from a scrupulous analysis of the past, to coherent ecological research undertaken by individuals who invest themselves in the survival of the community, as well as by artists and writers who have actively contributed to the building of a collective conscience. For Stegner, the presence of an institution of higher learning appears as the cornerstone of his social vision, for it generates "a vigorous life-flow, as many towns take most of their character from the academies they foster."⁴⁹ Even in the face of hereditary conflicts due to differing interpretations of the relationship between land and people in the West, conflicts that oppose traditional rural communities and the influx of new residents stemming from the urban exodus that has marked the past two decades, the university is called upon to play a key role, one that can facilitate the cohabitation of interests in "America's most fashionable and yet socially divided region."⁵⁰ The future of the West, according to Stegner, rhymes with compromise.

In Stegner's view, representative of the opinions of a growing number of intellectuals rallying around the environmental cause, communities have the responsibility of implementing a change in priorities that has too long been retarded by the retroactive forces of material gain, and by those who contest a holistic vision of place. Among these opponents, spurred on by conservative states' rights politicians, are those inhabitants of the region whose westernness resides in their repeated hostility to outside, i.e. federal government authority. On this point, the reader is struck by a certain elitism, or an excess of paternalistic didacticism, in Stegner's reasoning, with respect to Westerners whom he suggests are unworthy, uncultured inhabitants of remote areas the underlying ecological realities of which they fail to grasp, areas which lie well outside the theoretically beneficial impact of regional educational centers. Stegner readily admits:

In a way, it is elitist, but God help us, the world is. If it weren't for elitists, the world would be full of barbarians [...] civilization, culture, intelligence, literature, everything worthwhile is promoted by special

⁴⁸ W. Stegner, *Conversations*, op. cit., xiv.

⁴⁹ W. Stegner *The Stanford Century*, op. cit., xvii.

⁵⁰ Michael Elliott, "The West at War," in *Newsweek* (July 31, 1995) 26.

people [...] I would rather be Aristotle than the spearman who killed him.⁵¹

As to the identity of the "good" and "bad" elements of human society, the elitist is not the one who enjoys uninhibited access to culture, but the one who freely expresses the desire to do so, ready to furnish the effort and sacrifice necessary to promote a greater good than his own. By contrast, the "barbarian" is characterized as the one who shows outright disdain for the very existence of a sphere of thought that might challenge his illusion of self-sufficiency, a false identity based not on the inheritance of a useful past, but rather on unmediated animal instinct. In this show-down scenario that takes place under the empty plateaus and snowy heights of the eternal West, the traditional heroic roles have been reversed and parodied:

I don't know how long it is going to take to cure the cowboys and the miners who are I should say the least enlightened element in the American populace, with the most arrogant leftover attitudes from the XIXth century. Good old American initiative.⁵²

Stegner's deliberate use of the term "cowboy" refers not to the rehabilitated and noble activity of pastoral ranchers who have intelligently adapted themselves and their activity to the contours and the limits of their environment. The term here designates rather metaphorically, in oblique reference to convoluted myth, "the plenty of people in the West, millions probably, 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."⁵³ Pejorative cowboys, robber barons, sagebrush rebels, real estate moguls of modern times, the objects of Stegner's sarcasm demonstrate the persistence of the negative influences of the Western myth, and illustrate Patricia Limerick's remark that the West in a sense remains "a place undergoing conquest and never fully escaping its consequences."⁵⁴ The popular and strategically marketed mythic illusion of unbounded freedom continues to feed the desire for conquest as an outdated, deformed, perverted reflex understood by too many, yet as a God-given right. The barbarianism that incited Stegner's wrath is the same that has mobilized the civic efforts of writers and thinkers and others devoted to the true implementation of ecologically sound community values, and the realization of a true frontier democracy. It is henceforth the writer, endowed with a public mandate, who takes on the role traditionally attributed to the town sheriff or, better, to the textually-informed man, much like the figure of Ranson Stoddard in John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, defender of civic order invested with the confidence and hope of the community. It is for this reason that the ideal Western community would be incomplete without the consolidating presence of a native-born writer, "some Norman MacClean or James Welch or Raymond Carver, to serve as culture hero, the individual who transcends his culture without abandoning it."⁵⁵

⁵¹ W. Stegner "The Artist as Environmental Advocate," *op. cit.*, 30.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵³ W. Stegner Introduction, *Bluebird*, *op. cit.*, xxii.

⁵⁴ Patricia Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, *op. cit.*, 26.

⁵⁵ W. Stegner "Variations on a Theme by Crèvecoeur," *op. cit.*, 115-16.

Stegner's desire to ascribe meaning to his own off-uprooted relationship to place is an attempt to reconcile in writing his uncertain position between nostalgia and adaptation. In one very clear sense, Stegner remains avowedly close to the precepts of frontier mythology since they have been interpreted as coinciding with his own past: "I really don't want to see the West change from the way it was when I liked it."⁵⁶ Stegner's instinctive attachment to the cultural values of the frontier past, values that his personal life enabled him to corroborate, gives way to a discursive subjectivity that nonetheless consciously seeks to transcend his own experience and embrace the nostalgia as well as the aspirations of a region undergoing profound changes from within and from without. A writer's creativity is made possible only through a shared language that Stegner aptly describes as a "community of acceptance." Throughout the elaboration of his multiple, overlapping literary projects which include autobiography, history and fiction on themes as varied and interrelated as the self, regional identity and national cohesion, Stegner will inevitably come to acknowledge the synergetic nature of Western character where myth and reality seem inextricable elements in a composite whole. Stegner's "community of acceptance" is a further testimony to the synergy at work in contemporary Western cultures that have, largely through the efforts of literature, realized the importance of a shared heritage wherein, as Richard White has suggested, writers of diverse origins "assume the right to inhabit and retell a common past, thus expressing a unity among us that transcends, without erasing, our differences."⁵⁷

In his later years, and as the result of a systematic and coherent examination of Western traditions and hopes, Stegner comes to the realization that a writer's value lies in his individual way of re-forming, re-shaping and re-phrasing tradition. Stegner's renewed vision of a more inclusive community of writers—and of readers—in the West is marked by the reconciliation of pioneer aspirations, the hopes of an ecologically oriented youth, as well as the neglected dreams of native peoples, first inhabitants of the grandiose landscapes of the legendary West, and now among the most audible and outspoken voices in contemporary Western literature in whose writings members of many other Western communities have found solace.

The dissolution of ideologically-based binary oppositions operating within the historical concept of the Frontier is already in itself a gesture toward unity, one that envisages another, more productive and progressive form of community than the one imposed by myth. It is only by virtue of such an opening that the West's self-assigned role as "the geography of hope," home to a renewed vision of a trans-regional, ecological community of civic-minded individuals—"naturalists of the modern era" in Barry Lopez's words—may continue to be nourished. For Wallace Stegner, and the scores of writers who claim him as their mentor, among whom Lopez, Rick Bass, Terry Tempest Williams, N. Scott Momaday, Wendell Berry, Gretel Ehrlich, et al., it is a question of promoting a new kind of primordial

⁵⁶ W. Stegner *Conversations, op. cit.*, xxiii.

⁵⁷ Richard White, Patricia Limerick, *The Frontier in American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 55.

American patriotism, one that rejects the frontiers of exclusion that have too long characterized Western attitudes. The new American "ecological" patriotism places community integrity before national defense priorities, and the exploration of one's own contradictions before blindly condemning the "other." These writers, in their multilateral attempt to mobilize the shared interests of the greater western community, seek not to reappropriate Native American traditions but rather to reaffirm their pertinence. Thus Richard Nelson describes the spirit of the greater community:

We are united in [...] creating, as did the Native Americans long before us, a patriotism based on ecological knowledge, moral consideration, ethical principle, spiritual belief, and a profound love for the earth underfoot.⁵⁸

Whether or not Stegner would have approved of such a patriotic stance singularly devoid of nationalist objectives remains an open question. Regardless of the answer, it remains unequivocally clear that Stegner played a determining role in the ultimate elaboration of the current importance of environmental thought and writing.

For this reason, Stegner's works can rightly be placed alongside those of Thoreau, Muir, Leopold, and Rachel Carson, for whom "if ever an enterprise needed to be illuminated with a sense of history and meaning of the landscape, it is the unthinking bludgeoning of the West." For Carson, as for Stegner, the community's very existence and welfare lies in its capacity and willingness to read the landscape "like the pages of an open book"⁵⁹ and to reach a common understanding of natural phenomena. Stegner's oft reiterated assertion of a "simultaneous and joined identity" is none other than the expression of such an act of reading, the first step in the realization of a sense of place, and of the importance of a usable past, history and myth. It is a trans-temporal plunge into the interrelated strata of place as palimpsest, a hand extended to the "other," mirror image of the self's estrangement. In a variation on a theme by Thoreau, but most certainly in line with the latter's thinking, Stegner might have quipped "in reading lies the salvation of the world." It is this perspective that Western writers—novelists, essayists, historians—have adopted of late. Without becoming mere advocates, it is the task of such writers to formulate a plurality of stories and histories that speak to each community, as well as a common story that is true to all. This may well be the harmonizing standard by which future generations judge the pertinence of these writers' works in centuries to come.

⁵⁸ Richard Nelson, "Patriots for the American Land," *op. cit.*, 9.

⁵⁹ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, 1960 (New York: Ballantine, 1979) 27.