

“Felt in the Blood, and Felt along the Heart”:  
Understanding a Sense of Place in the American West

Sara Almasy Porterfield



View from the top of Castleton Tower, looking northwest over Professor Valley and the Colorado River, Moab, Utah. I took this photo in October of 2011, the day before the sense of place discussion mentioned below.

October, in the desert. Red rock against blue sky. An iron-rich red and a blue so rarified it seems tangible. The unexpected gold of cottonwoods lining the creek, the brittle smell of fallen

leaves announcing winter's inevitability. Cool nights, cooler mornings, with the season's first frost on sleeping bags after an impossibly clear night watching Orion's seasonal return on the eastern horizon.

Ten of us sat under a shade tent on just such a day. As a gathering of outdoor guides from across the Southwest, we were familiar with the desert's seasonal rounds. After a long hot summer (as they all inevitably are) we welcomed this shift. Work slowed as our students and clients returned to school and jobs; now it was our turn to meet and play in the landscape that, in some fashion, we all called home.

This "home," somewhere deeply rooted in the mountains, rivers, and deserts of the West, was the topic of our conversation. We all lived peripatetic lives that often took us from foreign countries to familiar canyons to our childhood homes; we, a group of people more familiar with life lived out of the back of a Toyota truck, on a boat, or in the open air than inside walls and under roofs, had all come together to discuss something as seemingly fixed as "home." We met to talk about those places that exerted some strange force of gravity on us, that called us back no matter how long we had been gone or how far we traveled. Those of us in that circle spoke a common language of the smell of sage and dampened dust after a summer rain, of the sandpaper feel of a slot canyon wall against a bare shoulder, of the sound of a loved river slipping along its banks.

How is it that we understood one another; why did we speak this language? Why this common bond of feeling so strongly about a place that eyes teared up and voices grew husky with emotion? Because we were discussing our *sense of place*, something that however much one may attempt to intellectualize, to rationalize, is ultimately, in the words of poet William

Wordsworth, “felt in the blood, and felt along the heart.”<sup>1</sup> It is an emotional response to the sense of belonging evoked by the smells in the air, the stories associated with a certain ridge or a particular bend in the river, and the community of people who share in such experiences of place.

Herein lies the dilemma in writing about a sense of place, especially in the academic world where personal experience and emotion are often seen as incompatible with the (supposed) objectivity of our historical profession. The question is, then, as posed by writer Terry Tempest Williams, “how to write as clearly as one can from the heart and still be credible?”<sup>2</sup> As one whose academic work aligns closely and often inextricably with the landscape where I most deeply feel a sense of place, it is a quandary in which I often find myself. How, to echo Williams, to write with and about passion when the dispassionate is praised and the passionate unacceptable? In order to understand a sense of place one must necessarily *feel* it, and this feeling cannot be removed from the study of place if we are to understand the history and future of a place.

Due to the experiential and emotional qualities inherent in one’s connection to a landscape, the subject of a sense of place has most often fallen under the purview of writers such as Terry Tempest Williams, Wallace Stegner, and William Kittredge. This may be because, as Lynn Stegner writes in the introduction to *West of 98: Living and Writing the New American West*, “*how* a thing is conveyed may end up being of greater value than *what* is conveyed... it is the difference between drinking the glass of water and *knowing* the thirst. And it may be that knowing the thirst, imperfect or misguided as it can be, carries more truth finally than what’s in

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark Van Doren, ed., *Selected Poems of William Wordsworth* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), 99.

<sup>2</sup> Terry Tempest Williams, *Red: Passion & Patience in the Desert* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2001), 12.

the glass.”<sup>3</sup> The most effective way to convey a sense of place is to put the reader in that place, to describe how it smells, sounds, looks, and—most importantly—*feels* to make it come alive in order to explain why you, the writer, care about this landscape and believe that your reader should too. Literature on a strong, shared sense of place is especially prevalent in the American West, and the writers and scholars of the region have written eloquently of the *knowing* of that thirst and of the unique qualities of the West that combine to create a community of people deeply rooted in the region.

The books and essays surveyed here are part of a conversation that, for the most part, takes place outside the world of academia, and stretches across disciplines. The authors are predominantly writers—with diverse backgrounds ranging from art criticism to ranching to biology to education—but these works are in conversation with those by authors thought of more traditionally as academics: historians, anthropologists, and geologists. The subject matter is as diverse as the authors themselves: tourism, stories, place and placelessness, the art of Yosemite Valley, Chicana/o identity, citizen advocacy, ranching, and the Western Apache tribe. From William Cronon’s historiographical essay “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative” to Keith Basso’s anthropological study of the Western Apaches, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, these works connect the experience of living, writing, recreating, and working in the West to a particular sense of place that arises from a landscape steeped in mythology and characterized by the dramatic mountains, rivers, and canyons of the region and Wallace Stegner’s “inflexible fact” of aridity.<sup>4</sup> What gives these authors their common thread is that they are consciously investigating what ties them to, and gives them a sense of, particular places and landscapes. This

---

<sup>3</sup> Lynn Stegner and Russell Rowland, eds., *West of 98: Living and Writing the New American West* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), xii.

<sup>4</sup> Wallace Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell & the Second Opening of the West* (New York: Penguin Books, 1954), 229.

bond then allows me to ask the simultaneous questions of “what is a sense of place?” and “how do we write about it?”

There are distinct motifs that mark a sense of place as particularly Western and run throughout these readings: myth and story, space and transience, and home as tied to advocacy. These themes necessarily rest upon an agreement of what terms like “sense of place” and “placelessness” mean and what their implications are, and as such a clarification of these foundational concepts precedes discussion of the themes identified above. As myth, the American West is a region whose identity has long been based upon the lore of the independent cowboy, the self-reliant rancher, and the presence of pristine and unspoiled wilderness. It does not matter that these myths are easily debunked but that they stubbornly persist in the face of their debunking, and continue to exert influence on the way people live in and think about the West. These authors call for new stories to replace or rethink such tenacious myths, ones that recognize the imagined past of the West as formative for the region but then move beyond these worn legends to reimagine people’s place in the region. As William Kittredge notes, “that’s what stories are for, to help us see ourselves as we go about the continual business of reimagining ourselves” in an effort to find a more balanced relationship with the Western landscape.<sup>5</sup>

Stemming from the myth of the itinerant cowboy and the inclination of westward moving pioneers to *keep* moving is the notion of transience and mobility in the West; today, the mobility of these migratory characters continues to be invoked as characteristically Western, though those who identify with a sense of place in the West seem to be drawn into seasonal transience as they shift between where they ought to be and where they want to be. The open spaces of the West also figure prominently into the myths of the region, though they, like the idea of transience,

have adapted to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As Page Stegner writes, “the West is a lot of things, but except for pockets of oasis civilization, it is still a lot of mostly dry, mostly empty, spirit-lifting space,” still able to function as a repository of hope and an arbiter of freedom.<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, a sense of place is a search for belonging, for a home that is incontrovertibly one’s own, marked by personal experience with and emotional connection to what is—really—just a piece of ground. From visiting tourists to fourth generation ranchers, the West offers a chance at belonging to something larger than oneself, whether that be myth or bedrock. Such a desire for belonging by one is a desire for belonging shared by those who choose a place, for the place. For Terry Tempest Williams, this manifests in a community of people tied to the land and therefore “engaged in its own self-determination in choosing how to live in place, struggling to ‘create a society to match the scenery’” and tying sense of place to advocacy for conservation of the community’s chosen landscape.<sup>7</sup>

### *Place & Placelessness*

There are ultimately as many definitions of a “sense of place” as there are people in this world, which makes it a slippery concept to pin down. David Glassberg offers a rather technical, though accurate, definition in his essay “Place and Placelessness in American History.” “At the most individual of levels,” Glassberg writes, a sense of place “concerns the organization of environmental stimuli into meaningful cognitive structures.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, the physical look and feel of a place triggers an emotional response that becomes embedded in a person’s memory,

---

<sup>5</sup> William Kittredge, *Who Owns the West?* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1996), 159.

<sup>6</sup> Stegner and Rowland, *West of 98*, 369-370.

<sup>7</sup> Williams, *Red*, 15.

thus creating a connection to that particular place. In *Of Rocks and Rivers: Seeking a Sense of Place in the American West*, Ellen Wohl, a fluvial geomorphologist who studies the effects of human actions on river hydraulics, offers another definition as “perceptions of the geology, climate, ecology, and human use of resources that shape a particular landscape.”<sup>9</sup> In order for a sense of place to exist, that place must have human-made meaning ascribed to it; it must have a history, writ large or small, and it must tell stories, personal or collective, factual or fictive. “No place is a place,” observed Western writer Wallace Stegner in his essay “The Sense of Place,” “until things that have happened in it are remembered in history, ballads, yarns, legends, or monuments. Fictions serve as well as facts.”<sup>10</sup> Without a narrative, a place is simply a rock or a stretch of flowing water; a sense of place necessarily stems from the stories we tell about a place, both to ourselves and in conversation with others.

The stories told about a place influence not only people’s perception of that place, but also the place itself in a reciprocal relationship between land and people. The myth of the West as a source of limitless land and opportunity has not only framed people’s decisions and actions, but also shaped the ramifications of those actions for the physical environment. As Keith Basso notes in his anthropological study of the Western Apache tribe’s sense of place, “places, we realize, are as much a part of us as we are part of them, and senses of place—yours, mine, and everyone else’s—partake complexly of both.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it is a futile, and rather impossible, exercise to separate people and their actions from the environment itself. Terry Tempest

---

<sup>8</sup> David Glassberg, “Place and Placelessness in American History,” in *Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 113.

<sup>9</sup> Ellen Wohl, *Of Rocks and Rivers: Seeking a Sense of Place in the American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), xv.

<sup>10</sup> Wallace Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West* (New York: Random House, 1992), 202.

<sup>11</sup> Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), xiv.

Williams recognizes this reciprocity at the individual level; in her essay “The Coyote Clan,” she describes how the desert insidiously changes, through experience and narrative, those who develop a strong sense of place based in Utah’s sandstone canyons. These people are altered physically and emotionally by the landscape: if you cut your arm with a pocket knife and bleed blood, you are not truly a part of the desert yet; but “if you draw wet sand that dries quickly, then you will know you have become part of the desert. Not until then can you claim ownership.”<sup>12</sup> Claiming that a place belongs to you, then, comes with the recognition that you also belong to that place, which is an essential component of a sense of place.

The necessary opposite to someone who experiences a strong sense of place would appear to be the “placeless” person, or one who does not claim belonging or an emotional connection to a place. Wallace Stegner and others surveyed here see “placelessness” as stemming from the mythical idea of the pioneer who continually moved on in search of free and abundant land; other contemporary critics see it as the result of “the modern global economy [where] anything can come from anywhere, eroding our perception of the uniqueness of places.”<sup>13</sup> In the American West, a placeless person has been seen as one who has not established a deep connection to a place (or places) and who therefore risks doing great environmental damage because of a lack of a feeling of responsibility towards the land they inhabit. Stegner sets his idea of the “placed” person as a binary against the “displaced person”; for him there is no possibility for existing in between these two polarities and only the placed person can be of benefit to the environment. Stegner himself spent much of his childhood in motion, “envying people who had lived all their lives in the houses they were born in, and had attics full of proof that they *had* lived,” thereby equating what he saw as placelessness with “dissatisfaction and hunger” for a rooted, placed

---

<sup>12</sup> Williams, *Red*, 23.

<sup>13</sup> Glassberg, “Place and Placelessness,” 118.



life.<sup>14</sup> The un-rooted person, to Stegner, can never know a place enough to respect it, cannot fully realize the beauty and fragility of the West and is therefore the main agent of harm and environmental damage.

Stegner's son, Page Stegner, disagrees with the binary his father sets up, and argues that it is possible to be a transient Westerner and yet still feel a sense of connection and responsibility to the land. Stegner-the-younger argues that "it is possible, after all, to find out much about yourself even though you have no taproot and no attic to prove you ever lived. That sense of comfort that comes with open country and great distances, that need for elbow room, and the exaltation that comes with a hundred-mile view—these things alone will tell you a great deal, after all, about the stuff you're made of and the fact that you are not from Boston."<sup>15</sup> A sense of place, then, can be found—and cultivated—on the move, as many of the authors surveyed here prove. To take this argument further, anthropologist Keith Basso would contend that no one is without a sense of place, but that one may not realize their connection to a place "until, as sometimes happens, we are deprived of these attachments and find ourselves adrift, literally *dislocated*, in unfamiliar surroundings we do not comprehend and care for even less."<sup>16</sup> It is when something as seemingly inconspicuous as "absent smells in the air or not enough visible sky" that, for Basso, one becomes aware of the sense of place felt for where one has been dislocated from.<sup>17</sup>

Alternatively, peoples thought of as "displaced," often without even a legal tie to the landscape they inhabit, have the power to claim a space as their own, and simultaneously forge a new identity. Such is the case, as George Sánchez demonstrates in *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945*, for Mexican-American

---

<sup>14</sup> Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*, 201.

<sup>15</sup> Stegner and Rowland, *West of 98*, 370.

<sup>16</sup> Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, xiii.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

immigrants to early-twentieth-century Los Angeles. Courted by Anglo-American residents and U.S. officials to be *American* and Mexican consulates to retain their identity as *Mexican*, this migrant population “created a new borderlands in [Los Angeles’s] east side barrios in which cultural revival and re-creation were ever present.”<sup>18</sup> Mexican-American residents of L.A.’s East Side claimed a sense of place of their own making, and a “collective identity that emerged from daily experience in the United States,” proving this community to hardly lack a place or identity of their own.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the appeal of labeling someone as “placeless” or “displaced” as standing in opposition to someone who claims a strong sense of place, it is less a binary and more of a spectrum that ranges from those who feel deeply rooted to a place to those for whom their sense of place is experienced or expressed as a feeling of displacement, or whose sense of place is created by the community residing in a place. People without a strong sense of place, a deeply rooted connection to the land, have far more potential to do harm to the environment, as we will see further along, but to argue that one cannot or does not feel some degree of a sense of place discounts the myriad ways there are of connecting to an infinite number of places.

### *Myth & Story*

The West as myth and the stories we tell about it are intrinsic to claiming a sense of place in the region. Whether based on romantic notions of cowboys and wild open spaces or on a rejection of such fallacies in favor of often harsh realities, the mythic West is inescapable; according to Lynn Stegner, it has all of us—tourists, longtime residents, and newly arrived

---

<sup>18</sup> George Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 272.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

transplants—“roped, thrown, and piggin’ strung, ready for branding.”<sup>20</sup> In his sweeping history of tourism, *Devil’s Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West*, historian Hal Rothman agrees with Stegner and seeks to explain how the idea of the mythic West has influenced and motivated tourism and development in the region. For Rothman, “the West is the location of the American creation myth, the national *sipapu*, the figurative hole in the earth from which Pueblo Indian people emerged in their story of the beginning of the world. The image of the West, especially in the conquest that occurred between 1848 and 1890, serves that same mythic purpose for Americans.”<sup>21</sup> He argues that development based on tourism followed predictable patterns in towns and cities throughout the region, and that this development has ultimately been detrimental to those communities in what he calls a “devil’s bargain.” His tourists, natives, and “neonatives” are in a constant struggle over who may lay claim to “the soul of a place” and therefore be considered an authentic part of that place.<sup>22</sup> Tourism, under Rothman’s treatment, belies the often vicious and destructive contest for places like Aspen, Santa Fe, and innumerable small towns in the West, where a claim to a strong sense of place confers belonging and authenticity on the claimant, often at the expense of the place itself.

The expected experience of a tourist destination undoubtedly has historical roots, despite the desire of boosters to present their destination as a unique part of the mythic West. Tourists and residents of the West expect the natural beauty of the region to look like a painting of, say, Mountain of the Holy Cross by Thomas Moran or Yosemite Valley by Albert Bierstadt with snow-covered, craggy mountains, pellucid flowing water, and a notable absence of people. It is precisely because of these Romantic-era paintings that we expect the West to look pristine and

---

<sup>20</sup> Stegner and Rowland, *West of 98*, xx.

<sup>21</sup> Hal Rothman, *Devil’s Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 14.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

unspoiled, Rebecca Solnit argues in *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Hidden Wars of the American West*. Solnit's work ranges from nuclear tests conducted in southwestern Nevada to the violence waged against Native Americans in Yosemite Valley as she examines "how the way we picture landscape affects how we treat it, how what we believe blinds us to what is going on," and finds that the "pristine" and empty landscape had to be created out of a populated world.<sup>23</sup>

In a tale familiar in most of the West, the state-organized Mariposa Battalion violently relocated Yosemite's native Ahwahnechee tribe to a reservation far from the valley to make the region "safe" and appealing for Euro-American settlers. Members of the Battalion themselves, followed soon by painters, writers, photographers, and tourist boosters, quickly replaced this bloody narrative with one centered on the spiritual healing found in Yosemite's pristine and particularly Western aesthetic of dramatic natural beauty. For Solnit, because Yosemite is "the very crucible and touchstone for American landscape," its role as an iconic location is especially revealing of "the peculiarities, blindnesses, raptures, and problems that constitute the Euro-American experience of landscape."<sup>24</sup> This is not to say that the West isn't a heartbreakingly beautiful place. It is, and the belief in this beauty and its redemptive power are necessary for the emotional connection to a sense of place. In the mythic West, however, the story told about natural beauty more often than not has a hidden history that, uncovered, complicates notions of pristine landscapes.

In contrast to Rothman and Solnit's more distanced studies of the mythic West, William Kittredge writes from the perspective of one who lived within the myth. His *Who Owns the West?* is a memoir, as well as a call to action, that chronicles the realities of life as a twentieth century rancher and cowboy and the effects this way of life has had on the landscape. Galloping

---

<sup>23</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Hidden Wars of the American West* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1994), xi.

alongside wild mustangs, bulldozing through Indian grave sites, planting a garden sufficient to feed a family through a year, and switching from horsepower to John Deere tractors were all a part of Kittredge's childhood and early adulthood, raised as he was by the generation "who took what they wanted, and who understood themselves as a natural ruling class."<sup>25</sup> The title of the book's Prologue, "White People in Paradise," succinctly frames Kittredge's idea of the mythic West as "a place where you can have a shot at being what you want to be. You can come to terms with yourself. Freedom, in a livable community, is supposed to be the point of things. It's our prime mythology, and it sort of works out, moreso if you're white and have some money."<sup>26</sup>

But in Kittredge's eyes, this myth is increasingly unable to stand up to the demands placed upon it: intensive agriculture has made the seemingly inexhaustible soil barren, chemical fertilizers have pushed bird species to the brink of extinction, and known places have been flattened under the blade of a bulldozer.<sup>27</sup> In attempting to impose the mythic West on realities of life in the region, the environment has suffered. In turn, the communities of the region are reciprocally damaged through the loss of agriculture, timber, mining, and other "traditional" industries that have been based upon the false fantasies of the region. Kittredge paints a picture of a West that is bound up in its own mythology of freedom even as it—and he—struggles to understand how to live outside the myth and create a new relationship with the land. In Kittredge's version of the West, a sense of place doesn't mean cowboys and bulldozers, but instead a recognition of the complexity of living in place and within its natural limits.

A sense of place is ultimately forged through these myths, as well as other stories we hear and tell about a place. Humans draw information from myths in order to know or feel at home in

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>25</sup> Kittredge, *Who Owns the West?*, 37.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 29-31.

a place, but they also tell stories about places, a process which not only draws from myths but also has the power to both reinforce and alter them. Integral to this are experiences of the place, yes, but the meaning that creates an emotional connection is the result of narratives created about the landscape. As Terry Tempest Williams asks, “how do the stories we tell about ourselves in relationships to place shape our perceptions of place?”<sup>28</sup> Anthropologist Keith Basso calls this “place-making,” a process that everyone engages in on both an individual and collective level in order to make sense of his or her surroundings; it is “a way of constructing history itself, of inventing it, of fashioning novel versions of ‘what happened here’” to understand one’s place in the world.<sup>29</sup> For the Western Apache tribe, the subject of Basso’s book, stories told about the landscape are an instructive and essential guide to moral living. Places and place-names, such as “Water Lies with Mud in an Open Container,” “Juniper Tree Stands Alone,” and “Shades of Shit,” are everyday reminders for those who know the stories associated with them. This knowledge of place fuels a deep attachment for Western Apache—as well as for the twentieth- and twenty-first-century authors surveyed here—to the landscape in which they live, and is the very source of the wisdom that comes from respecting places and their histories.<sup>30</sup>

In his essay “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” environmental historian William Cronon identifies the difference between chronicle and narrative as well as the importance that these stories holds for the ways people make meaning from a place. Narratives of the Dust Bowl, such as those by Donald Worster and Paul Bonnifield, have come to drastically different conclusions about the source, meaning, and role that humans played in this event. Whereas Worster sees the Dust Bowl as fault of the people who exploited the southern Plains without regard for its inherent environmental limitations, Bonnifield paints a picture of

---

<sup>28</sup> Williams, *Red*, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 6.

human triumph and persistence in the face of a natural disaster.<sup>31</sup> While these authors draw from the same *chronicle*—the sequential list of events and facts that comprise the Dust Bowl—of the event, the *narrative* differs because they have chosen to tell different stories and make different meanings from these factual elements of the Dust Bowl.

Narrative is the way that we make sense of our environment, and therefore the primary tool in defining our relationship with the West. As Cronon writes, “it is undoubtedly true that we all constantly tell ourselves stories to remind ourselves who we are, how we got to be that person, and what we want to become. The same is true not just of individuals but of communities and societies: we use our histories to remember ourselves.”<sup>32</sup> These narratives are malleable, as illustrated by the differing conclusions about the Dust Bowl, but it is the debate that arises from different meanings that allows us, as a society, to create stories that define our collective relationship and set of values towards the land. As we have seen, the narrative of a mythic West has shaped human actions in the region and it this narrative that the writers surveyed here are working to change in order to foster a responsible relationship that is deeply rooted in place.

This reciprocal relationship between people and place is mediated through story because story is central to our definition of self and place in the world. For these writers, stories are the primary mode through which to advocate for a new and more sustainable relationship with the West, because “story bypasses rhetoric and pierces the heart.”<sup>33</sup> It is an emotional appeal that lends meaning to our place within a place; the relationship, and therefore actions, that result from story is the embodiment of a sense of place. William Kittredge sees stories as the way we make

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>31</sup> William Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” *The Journal of American History*, vol. 78 no. 4 (1992): 1348.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 1369.

<sup>33</sup> Williams, *Red*, 3.

sense of a place *and* the primary way we affect that place; by changing our stories we have the power to change the place in which we live, hopefully for the better:

We figure and find stories, which can be thought of as maps or paradigms in which we see our purposes defined; then the world drifts and our maps don't work any more, our paradigms and stories fail, and we have to reinvent our understandings, and our reasons for doing things. Useful stories, I think, are radical in that they help us see freshly. They are like mirrors, in which we see ourselves reflected. That's what stories are for, to help us see ourselves as we go about the continual business of reimagining ourselves.<sup>34</sup>

Kittredge, Williams, Wohl, all three Stegners, Cronon, Basso, and a host of others understand the power stories wield, and that using this power to change the individual and collective perceptions of a place has wide ranging implications for the West of tomorrow.

### *Space & Transience*

Closely tied to the West's mythic freedom—and persistent throughout the stories told about the West—are the region's wide-open spaces. As Wallace Stegner observes, for those who feel a strong sense of place in the West the draw to this space is instinctual and grounding. When Stegner “escapes” the city and suburbs for rural, wild country, he writes that “the smell of distance excites me, the largeness and the clarity take the scales from my eyes, and I respond as unthinkingly as a salmon that swims past the river mouth and tastes the waters of its birth.”<sup>35</sup>

Terry Tempest Williams also writes of a re-balancing and a similar emotional response to the landscape that comes with the return to open, wild spaces. In her eyes, “the wide-open vistas that sustain our souls, the depth of silence that pushes us toward sanity, return us to a kind of equilibrium. We stand steady on Earth. The external space I see is the internal space I feel.”<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Kittredge, *Who Owns the West?*, 158-159.

<sup>35</sup> Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*, xv.

<sup>36</sup> Williams, *Red*, 158.



The complicated past that has led to present environmental and social challenges is momentarily forgotten in the visceral response to vistas stretching to the horizons; these writers pause in the present moment of expansive space and allow themselves to imagine a West free of the complications of its mythic past. Sometimes this pause is forced, such as when an unreliable vehicle breaks down in western Kansas, as Antonya Nelson recounts in her essay “Two or Three Places.” Nelson’s family Jeep could be counted upon to overheat on their yearly migration across the Great Plains to Telluride, Colorado; instead of complaining about being stranded in the middle of monotony, Nelson, much like Stegner and Williams, welcomed the experience of open space. Sitting on the side of a remote highway, “the sense of both space and specialness was overwhelming and somehow glorious. The only car for many miles. The only feature on the landscape. The singularity. The solitude. The space between.”<sup>37</sup>

Space in the West allows for a connection to the natural world, for the forging of a personal, emotional relationship to the landscape. This is, in part, a way we have been taught to see the West. As Rebecca Solnit illustrated in her analysis of depictions of Yosemite Valley, though it is also an irrefutable characteristic of the region, a vista may not be untouched by human actions, but it can give that impression and in doing so create an emotional affinity for a nonhuman world. Page Stegner writes in his essay “The Sense of No Place”:

Oh sure, there are other Western things like the smell of sage, and the sound wind makes whipping through chamiso, and how many variations on the color of dun can you find in this picture. There are jackrabbits and antelope and grizzlies, and the clatter of a solitary cow pissing on a flat rock. There are magpies and meadowlarks. There’s air so dry that nose pickers have been known to bleed out before they reached help... The West is a lot of things, but except for pockets of oasis civilization, it is still a lot of mostly dry, mostly empty, spirit-lifting space.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Stegner and Rowland, *West of 98*, 35.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 369-370.

Open, wild space (or at least the perception of it), then, is an integral element in creating a sense of place in the American West, both for the mythic desire for freedom and opportunity as well as a physical, felt element that is a uniquely Western attribute and that sets it apart from other regions.

From the mythic pioneers and cowboys of the past to seasonal migrants of the present day, the open spaces of the West invite a unique mobility. Wallace Stegner admonishes this transience as the root of the West's environmental challenges in his essay "The Sense of Place"; as he describes him or her, the transient person is rootless and does not feel a deep connection to a sense of place, and therefore uses the land without thought for future consequences. "To the placed person," the nomadic Westerner, basing himself upon the mythic tradition of the pioneer and cowboy, "seems hasty, shallow, and restless. He has a current like the Platte, a mile wide and an inch deep... Acquainted with many places, he is rooted in none," and therefore has the potential to do deep ecological harm because of his lack of connection to the land.<sup>39</sup> In Stegner's view, the displaced person is both the symbol of the mythic West and the symbol of what is wrong with the *real* West; while he or she may claim identity as a cowboying Westerner, Stegner would argue that this person's lack of rootedness and respect for the land, and therefore a sense of place, is the primary agent of environmental destruction.

Antonya Nelson, of the broken-down Jeep, portrays a brighter side of transience. She agrees with Stegner that wanderlust is a particularly Western characteristic, but argues instead that it is reflective of a deep sense of place, not in opposition to it. Nelson has "always lived in at least two places," initially in her childhood on her family's seasonal rounds from Kansas to Colorado then as an adult working on the academic calendar.<sup>40</sup> Though pulled by work to other locales

---

<sup>39</sup> Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*, 200.

<sup>40</sup> Stegner and Rowland, *West of 98*, 33.

during the school year, she continues to return to Telluride in the summer, her sense of place exerting its own gravitational force on her perambulations. Nelson's wanderings may characterize her as a "displaced person" to Stegner, but, as she writes, "I never stopped thinking of that place, the one that occupied the time between the end of Spring Semester and the beginning of Fall Semester, as one where I belonged."<sup>41</sup> This new kind of transience, then, stands as a counterpoint to Stegner's: it is through mobility that one finds a deeply rooted sense of place. My own experience, and that of many of my outdoor guide friends, bears this out. Had it not been for my family's own road trips to the desert Southwest throughout middle and high school, I would not have found the place that is my touchstone and source of personal and intellectual grounding and inspiration. One does not need to live permanently in a place in order to feel a part of it.

### *Home & Advocacy*

Whether returning repeatedly to one place in the West as part of a transient circuit or settling (more or less) permanently in one place, those who claim a strong sense of place in the West feel as though they are "home" when in that place. As geologist Ellen Wohl writes in *Of Rocks and Rivers*, there is a feeling of belonging that comes with a sense of place. This belonging "grows from love and understanding and from recognition of limitations and responsibilities. These can only come from looking at the country and thinking about how its past and its present can together shape its future. This is knowing" a place as home.<sup>42</sup> For Wohl, the knowledge of a place, its history, its present, and what these mean for the future, both stems from and contributes to a visceral attachment to a particular place. Terry Tempest Williams recognizes this same

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>42</sup> Wohl, *Of Rocks and Rivers*, 234.

connection to place when she writes, “each of us belongs to a particular landscape, one that informs who we are, a place that carries our history, our dreams, holds us to a moral line of behavior that transcends thought.”<sup>43</sup> Not only is a place a home (permanently or transiently), it is also a directive: through knowledge of a place and experience in and of it, residents understand that there are grave implications for the future; for Wohl, this means a recognition of limits, for Williams, abiding by an implicit morality.

There is a sense of urgency, resulting from this morality, to advocate on behalf of the landscape that these authors call home. “This place,” the West, for Lynn Stegner, “is worth saving, worth cherishing, because this place is now home”; from the knowledge of the region’s mythic past and its residents’ historic and current refusal to recognize environmental limits, those who claim a sense of place agree that people must learn to live differently in the West.<sup>44</sup> Wallace Stegner locates the roots of this in the mythic West’s propensity to ignore the region’s natural limitations by seeing the West as an ahistorical blank slate:

History was part of the baggage we threw overboard when we launched ourselves into the New World... Plunging into the future through a landscape that had no history, we did both the country and ourselves some harm along with some good. Neither the country nor the society we built out of it can be healthy until we stop raiding and running, and learn to be quiet part of the time, and acquire the sense not of ownership but of belonging.<sup>45</sup>

Equally—and perhaps more—important, in Stegner’s eyes, to the history that has shaped the region’s current state are the prospects for the future. Stegner advocates for an end to the “raiding and running” of the West, and instead calls on residents and visitors to pause, look

---

<sup>43</sup> Williams, *Red*, 19.

<sup>44</sup> Stegner and Rowland, *West of 98*, xxiii.

<sup>45</sup> Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*, 206.

around, and seek a deeper understanding of the place in which they live in order to create a more sustainable relationship with the land.

William Kittredge echoes Stegner's belief that the practices of the late-nineteenth and twentieth-century West have led to present-day environmental degradation, as we have seen in his treatment of the myth of the West. Faced with a dying out of "traditional" Western industry, such as logging and mining, many Westerners nostalgically look back to the ideals of the mythic West, though Kittredge argues that this does no benefit to them or to the landscape. For him, the only choice is to work for a new vision of the West that embraces both environmental and social realities. As he notes, "people—out-of-work redneck timber-fallers and stockbrokers and lady veterinarians, laughing boys, dancing ladies, all of us—have no choice but to reimagine and embrace the future."<sup>46</sup> A sense of belonging and of home, then, arises from a deeply ingrained knowledge of a place's history, and for these authors, a sense of place not only means a feeling of home but also a necessity for rethinking the way they live in that home.

Terry Tempest Williams's *Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert* is an extended call to action to do just that, beginning with the redrock country of the Colorado Plateau. Williams makes an explicit plea through advocacy for America's Red Rock Wilderness Act, a bill that has been continually presented to Congress since 1989 and that is the subject of the book. By preserving the unique landscape of southern Utah as a wilderness area, Williams argues, we will have done our "home work... a participation in public life to make certain all is not destroyed under the banner of progress, expediency, or ignorance. We cannot do it alone. This is the hope of a *bedrock democracy*, standing our ground in the places we love, together."<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> Kittredge, *Who Owns the West?*, 7.

<sup>47</sup> Williams, *Red*, 19.

Similarly, Wallace Stegner's call for Westerners to create a "society to match the scenery" is based on a belief that Westerners, "within a generation or two, will 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."<sup>48</sup> Stegner and Williams, along with Kittredge, Wohl, and others not surveyed here,<sup>49</sup> are people who love the West, who feel a strong sense of connection to place and who are writing about and speaking out on behalf of the region, and therefore feel it is their inescapable duty to advocate for a new way of living in the region. It is a deep, emotional, personal experience of the region that leads these authors to speak out for the landscape; without an intensely rooted sense of place, there would likely be no advocacy for the natural world to exist on its own terms.

Chicana author Gloria Anzaldúa presents a very different, though equally powerful, view of home and advocacy in her groundbreaking work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* first published in 1987. Anzaldúa feels a similar connection to "*la madre naturaleza* [Mother Nature] that succored me, allowed me to grow roots that anchored me to the earth" and holds closely images of the "mesquite flowering, the wind, *Ehécatl*, whispering its secret knowledge" of her childhood home on the Texas-Mexico border.<sup>50</sup> Place for Anzaldúa is not simply a physical location, but an integral part of her identity as a Chicana, a woman, a lesbian. Her book defines what it means to find a sense of place and identity at the convergence and clash of the borderlands between two cultures. Anzaldúa takes this sense of place with her, and it is the source of her strength and motivation for her advocacy; as she writes, "in leaving home I did not

---

<sup>48</sup> Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*, xxii.

<sup>49</sup> These include Charles Wilkinson, Stephen Trimble, Edward Abbey, Gretl Ehrlich, Gary Snyder, and countless others...

<sup>50</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007), 19-20.

lose touch with my origins because *lo mexicano* is in my system. I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry ‘home’ on my back.”<sup>51</sup>

As much as place is an inextricable part of Anzaldúa it also represents the mental, emotional, and physical geography of the borderlands she inhabits, even after she leaves them behind and moves away from southern Texas. The advocacy that arises from Anzaldúa’s home is an advocacy for power, against those she sees as oppressors—whites, men, homosexuals—and for the inhabitants of borderlands—Chicana/o, women, homosexuals, and any others defined as “non-normal” or in-between by those in power. Anzaldúa’s advocacy may not look like the previous authors here in that it is not a defense of a physical landscape, but it is such a landscape that inspires and informs Anzaldúa’s advocacy. In one of the many poems in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa describes both a physical border and an intangible one:

Wind tugging at my sleeve  
Feet sinking into sand  
I stand at the edge where earth touches ocean  
Where the two overlap  
A gentle coming together  
At other times and places a violent clash.<sup>52</sup>

Anzaldúa belongs to the border, just as much as Terry Tempest Williams does to the desert, and it is from each woman’s deeply rooted sense of place and identity in that real or imagined place that her inspiration to advocate for change sources itself. Perhaps it is that a strong sense of place gives those who have it a tandem sense of something outside of and bigger than themselves, and therefore something worth fighting for.

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 23.

The themes explored here—myth and story, space and transience, home and advocacy—are integral components of a sense of place as described by these collected authors. But these motifs are especially powerful markers of a sense of place because they function on an emotional and personal level: I and others I know who were or could have been in that discussion under the autumnal Utah sun nod our heads in agreement when reading Antonya Nelson’s account of her seasonal migrations or Terry Tempest Williams’ call to action on behalf of the Colorado Plateau’s redrock wilderness. To quote that sage of the sandstone desert, Edward Abbey, “sentiment without action is the ruin of the soul.”<sup>53</sup> That sentiment that moves so many, who love the West and call it home, to action is rooted in a deep sense of place. I am with these authors in agreeing that it is only through feeling a deep connection to the land, in the ways described here and in a myriad of others, that there will be a new way of living in this region that embraces its mythic past while sensibly looking to a future lived within its naturally imposed limits.

---

<sup>53</sup> Edward Abbey, *A Voice Crying in the Wilderness (Vox Clamantis in Deserto): Notes from a Secret Journal* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), 40.



## Works Cited

- Abbey, Edward. *A Voice Crying in the Wilderness (Vox Clamantis in Deserto): Notes from a Secret Journal*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 3rd ed. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007.
- Basso, Keith. *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996.
- Cronon, William. "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, & Narrative." *The Journal of American History* 78, no. 4 (March 1992): 1347–1376.
- Glassberg, David. "Place and Placelessness in American History." In *Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001.
- Kittredge, William. *Who Owns the West?* San Francisco: Mercury House, 1996.
- Rothman, Hal. *Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998.
- Sánchez, George. *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Solnit, Rebecca. *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Hidden Wars of the American West*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1994.
- Stegner, Lynn, and Russell Rowland, eds. *West of 98: Living and Writing the New American West*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011.
- Stegner, Wallace. *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West*. New York: Penguin Books, 1953.
- . *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West*. New York: Random House, 1992.
- Van Doren, Mark, ed. *Selected Poetry of William Wordsworth*. New York: The Modern Library, 2002.
- Williams, Terry Tempest. *Red: Passion & Patience in the Desert*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2001.

Wohl, Ellen E. *Of Rocks and Rivers: Seeking a Sense of Place in the American West*. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2009.