

Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays

A Tribal Voice

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Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner

The invasion of North America by European peoples has been portrayed in history and literature as a benign movement directed by God, a movement of moral courage and physical endurance, a victory for all humanity. As the face of Europe (as well as Asia and Africa) changes at the close of the twentieth century, this portrayal of colonialism and its impact on the unfortunate Indians who possessed the continent for thousands of years before the birth of America, seems to go unchallenged either in politics or letters by most mainstream thinkers. It arrives in academia unscathed, to be spoonfed to future generations.

Few writers of fiction so eloquently and un-self-consciously examined this portrayal as did Wallace Stegner, the novelist and essayist who saw himself as "native" to the Dakota states, to Iowa, the Montana and Canadian border country, that is, the northern plains. "If I am native to anything, I am native to this," he said of the Cypress Hills country of Canada. Having written twelve novels and seven nonfiction works, as well as countless articles and reviews, and as the recipient of the 1971 Pulitzer Prize, a Senior Fellowship from the NEH, and numerous other prestigious awards, he was and is considered a major American literary figure and precursor to the many contemporary and lesser luminaries who write on Western history and literature.¹

This acclaimed body of work by one of the giants of American letters expresses his point of view that "[W]estern history sort of stopped at 1890," thus representing the continuum of optimism concerning the survival of a civilization based upon its fondly remembered colonial past. There is, perhaps, no American fiction writer who has been more successful in serving the interests of a nation's fantasy about itself than Wallace Stegner, and there are few of us who have not read his works.

The experiences of Stegner are those of a vast portion of the American public. His experiences, one supposes, are broadly accepted as the

events and feelings known to second-, third-, and fourth-generation European immigrants to the land. As they did, Stegner simply claims indigenoussness and begins to set down the new myths and stories of those newcomers stepping off boats and, in the process, continues the personalization of history and setting that is so dear to the hearts of the so-called regional American writers. This personalization takes place in the imagination, thus the claim to identity needs only acclamation. When Stegner uses "wolf willow," then, as an example of how it is that a particular environment is remembered, he creates it as archetypal metaphor emblematic of how humans may begin to understand the function of what T. S. Eliot has called the "collective unconscious."

It is human nature to be moved by the possibility that such mechanisms work universally and because of that, the substance of what Stegner imagines becomes believable to everyone except those who have had thousands of years of prior knowledge of that same world and environment and imagined it on their own very different terms. Stegner's imagination of the West, which declares that in 1890 a world ended, is of course not his own invention. As noted by historians of his time, that world had significance somewhere in the past but, apparently, not in the present, nor in the future. Stegner and Indians, then, are (no pun intended) worlds apart. He simply took them as his culture gave them to him, though it is possible for those of us who read his works to wonder whether or not he grasped the final immorality of such a position.

Because I am an Indian, born and raised on a northern plains Indian reservation in this century, I argue with Stegner's reality. The culture I have known imagines a different continuity and intimacy with the universe, which in large part still exists. It exists in communities all over the region, in language and myth, and in the memories of people who know who they are and where they came from. Unless someone comes forward to say that Western history did not stop in 1890, Indians will forever be exempted from Descartes's admonition concerning humanity: "I think, therefore, I am." Worse yet, fraudulent public policy toward Indians has been and is even now imposed through the conversionary use of imagined realities.

It seems important, then, to call for a shift in attitude concerning the history and literature of the region called the West. As a Dakotah writer, I am hostile to the idea that history stopped in 1890, the year of the massacre at Wounded Knee of hundreds of Minneconjous in a place which was destined to become the State of South Dakota, because in the imagination of the Sioux, that moment of awful violence has meant the

beginning of hard times, the basis for evidence of a long and glorious history, the focal point of survival.

These days, a century after what is said by Stegner to be a death notice, Sioux relatives and Indians from across the land have called for a full apology from the U. S. government and payment of reparations for the undeserved death of Indians who had signed a peace treaty and carried the white flag as they traveled through their own country on that fateful December day. It is not likely that these requests will be met any time soon, but Indians everywhere understand the resistance to them. They are not unaware that the easiest solution to a problem of such magnitude, which reveals four hundred years of a corruptly imagined world, is to do one of two things: either maintain silence or feign ignorance. Indians everywhere know how important this standoff is, because there is a tacit understanding that reparations and apologies are awarded to peoples who continue to exist—the Japanese who survived World War II, for example, or the Jews who survived the Nazi Holocaust.

Since Stegner wrote of a sorrowful past as it concerned Indians, his work has served to give regional and American literature of the West a cloak of respectability. Not unlike the U. S. Congress, which has expressed regret for the tragedy of Wounded Knee in 1890, Stegner expressed for all of America, in his conversation with Etulain and in *Wolf Willow*, that his people believed "this country was a new country, and a new country had no history," that "the world when I began to know it had neither location nor time, geography, nor history." Claiming ignorance, Stegner can say that the final curtain has fallen, no handprints of any human perpetrator can be found, criminal action requires no reprimand. The concern for all of us who put pen to paper should be that such a position has the potential to cut off dialogue and condemn to oblivion or absurdity Indian writers who want to continue the drama.

Stegner lamented, "Education tried, inadequately and hopelessly, to make a European out of me," ironically and sadly disposing of the only legitimate legacy he and other immigrant children could claim. Like other Americans, he cried, "I wish our homes and schools had given us our history"; "I wish I had seen . . ."; "We were not informed in school . . ."; "I wish I had heard of the coming of the Sioux"; and "I wish I had known . . ." as though there is nothing that could be done about the past. The principal perpetrators of a wrongful history, as far as Stegner was concerned, are allowed to melt into the heroic and hopeful future of America with no more than an expression of regret.

Such terrible regret is expressed so beautifully that readers are helpless to resist a sympathetic emotional response. This is the power of Stegner

and those who preceded him, and of those American writers of the West who follow. They all become part of the American literary movement which claims possession of the American West. In the process, they become teachers, researchers, interpreters, historians. Un-self-consciously, they write about the plains and the American Indian and their own experiences in an attempt to clarify their own identities. Yet, in a moment of schizophrenia so appropriate to anyone who continually withdraws from reality, Stegner claims an affinity with Indians by calling himself "a sensuous little savage," not a child of Europe.

"Living in Cypress Hills, I did not even know I lived there and hadn't the faintest notion of who lived there before me," he admitted, in *Wolf Willow* and as he uttered this ignorance he spoke for all immigrant and pioneer offspring of America. Following this terrible admission and the information that he left there never to return, living some fifty-odd years elsewhere, he gave prominence to the idea that indigenes were for those who claimed it. His attitude toward what he saw as the ignorance and omission of his ancestors with regard to history was accepting, sympathetic, quite without malice, and compassionate.

In his misunderstanding and dismissal of indigenes and his belief in the theory that American Indians were "vanishing" he was much like writers everywhere who offer only a narrowness of vision and a confused history. Following a compelling description of the Sioux Chieftain Sitting Bull's return to the United States from his Canadian exile at the close of the nineteenth century, Stegner said, as so many American writers and historians had said before him, "The Plains Indians were done."

He does not say how this could be so in the face of evidence that representatives of Plains Indian nations signed peace treaties with the United States federal government, reserved land bases and rights for themselves and their future generations, and set up governments which continued to adapt to the inevitable changes of the modern world.

He does not say how this could be so when native populations exist all over the American landscape, identified by cartographers as occupying space on maps, by linguists as speaking hundreds of languages; people who have been reenacting their own mythologies at significant moments, cherishing the desire to sundance in the summer sun at Devil's Tower, Wyoming, and to pray with the pipe at Green Grass, South Dakota. These people who continue to reproduce themselves biologically and tell their children to whom they are related cannot be wished away either through the deception of the imagination or by any other distractions which are probably more political than artistic.

The lack of credibility of Stegner's dismissal of the Plains Indians is tolerable only because Stegner wrote for an audience made up of the children and offspring of pioneer settlers, the one or two of every four Americans who trace their ancestry to the immigrants and European colonizers of this American soil. This is a large audience.

Even though Stegner says that "education tried, inadequately and hopelessly to make a European of me," quite the opposite seems to be true. As he writes the history of the plains and claims that the Plains Indians were done, he reiterates the belief and hope of those European immigrants who created an acceptable past for Americans who continue to occupy the territory of the northern plains today. Stegner's attitude is, without question, the pervasive attitude of white midwesterners whose ancestors marched into a moral void and then created through sheer will the morality that allowed them, much the same way that the contemporary white Dutch South Africans marched into South Africa proclaiming Pretoria, to convince the world that "this is my country."

Isolated from this behavior and history, declared "done" and "vanished," the American Indian has little right to hope, since the forming of a dialectic apart from and independent of the direction of mass culture is often considered such a drastic departure as to be unscholarly. A contradictory question, however, must be asked: How may a contemporary American Indian reader of such fiction and history as Stegner's work about the American West reconcile his or her imagination of mythological continuity and primordial historiography with the death and burial of his or her presence made so explicit?

Quite frankly, I can think of no question more important to a writer and to a culture, especially since continued actions emerge from these imaginings, derived from place and history. Certainly, if the question is unasked, no answer can be forthcoming. While such a question and its answer may bring the unwelcome news that we have been enemies and perhaps still are, it is essential to self-knowledge, both individually and collectively, that we ask it. I can think of no question more vital as we enter into discussions with the new democrats at Prague and Warsaw, and as Chinese students in Tiananmen Square raise a replica of the Statue of Liberty.

It may be that Americans will have to come face to face with the loathsome idea that their invasion of the New World was never a movement of moral courage at all; rather, it was a pseudoreligious and corrupt socioeconomic movement for the possession of resources. It may be that the Plains Indians are not "done," as assumed in Stegner's fiction; rather, they continue to multiply and prosper. The threat of these two

possibilities exposes the vision of a writer like Stegner to a different interpretation but does not necessarily make that vision fraudulent. Vision is vision, after all, a sacred thing, as all of the tribes will tell you. The hazardous nature of a vision of America grounded in disguised dogma rather than in human terms, however, if it does not make the Indian deny himself, makes him at the very least deny society.

An even more significant danger, though, is the fact that the resigned immigrant/colonist grandchild who remains tied historically and culturally to the purist's notion of the making of America as a morality play may, unfortunately, continue to exert the greatest influence on the taking of action in this country's political, social, and academic life that is inappropriate for the twenty-first century. This is not purely, as far as Indians are concerned at least, an academic issue, nor is it only a problem of simple idealism. It is a serious sociological and political matter in which legislation and social action are grounded.

Writers of fiction who become party to the declaration of Indian demise do so, usually, by being first of all misguided interpreters of what they and others so carefully observe and assiduously trace as American Indian behavior and belief. Stegner, for example, includes in *Wolf Willow* a chapter called "The Last of the Exterminators," a confusing discussion about values which he says started with Paul Sharp's *Whoop-Up Country*. He affirms Sharp's smug notion, which he presents as flawless truth, that "plains Indians generally regarded the theft of a horse from someone outside the tribe the way Americans regard the theft of home base."

This contrived explanation of the attitude and behavior of Plains Indians does little to help the reader truly understand how Plains Indians regarded horse stealing. There is probably little primary evidence, beyond this kind of fictional illusion, that Plains Indians did, indeed, regard horse theft as gamesmanship of this sort. To suggest such a cavalier attitude toward an important cultural survival tactic would be to reduce these matters to cliché. This kind of cliché is much like the revelatory dialogue so familiar to movie-goers, "It's a good day to die," shouted by the chief, his rifle raised above his head, as he rides pell-mell into enemy ranks. Surely, such absurd folks can be dismissed altogether as real, continuing, or thoughtful participants in any national discourse.

Clever prose style and substance in fiction as well as nonfiction interests the American reader as entertainment, but the purpose it ultimately serves is threatening. It serves to make the claim of the nativeness of all European immigrants to this land more valid because such indigenous populations as are described here will not last long, and if they do

somehow survive their own ridiculousness, they will do so as degenerates of history, defeated and outrageous.

Even in this early work, Stegner's modernist trend in this same chapter becomes critical of the same American development he so respectfully defends in the interest of understanding the promise of democracy. He takes swipes at Canadian settlers and fur traders he calls the "wolfers," the Hudson Bay Company, and the American intrusion into the plains of Canada, contrasting the Canadian system of monopoly trading with Indians to the American system of "competition, whiskey, bullets, exploitation, and extermination." There is the suggestion here that Canada showed more interest in long-term cohabitation rather than a short-term exploitive relationship that it could establish with the natives of the land, an idea that was, from the point of view of contemporary knowledge and experience, more hopeful than actual.

Stegner's discussion of "class" society of the American plains is just as wrong-headed. His claim that the *metis* (French and Indian mixed-blood population) served as a "buffer race" and the "wolfers" as an "advancing fringe of civilization, an indispensable broom sweeping clean the plains for white occupation," is an idea which Indians find preposterous. They probably did not consider the *metis* as a buffer, nor the wolfers as civilized. Stegner considers them all "exterminators of their own kind."

The description of the *metis*, or half-breeds, as a buffer race, which means that they are "a small, neutral race or state lying between potentially hostile larger ones," is, in terms of their relationship to Indians, the beginning of a deception which allows the turning away from what was really happening in Indian communities. The *metis* would hardly have been called neutral by any of the plains peoples and societies for whom the arranged marriage patterns of ancient times were a tool of cultural survival. Instead, the *metis* were and probably still are seen by native peoples as those who were *already converts* to the hostile and intruding culture simply through their marriage into it. To say that they were neutral would mean that they were "not inclining toward or actively taking either side in a matter under dispute," and belonged "to neither side or part." With regard to their role in the enforced assimilation and oppression of native populations by the American and Canadian governments, both statements would be debatable.

Oral historians of Indian nations contend that the half-breed phenomenon was responsible for much hatred and violence within tribal groups. This was and still is especially true in the plains cultures, where it was clear from the beginning that the male person of the native

society was being stripped of his power, his role in society, and his lands and possessions by the white man who married the tribal woman and eventually made what they considered chaotic principles of a new, nontraditional government possible. Few historians have really dealt with this matter, but many tribal leaders of the Plains Indians believed that the destruction of culture caused by the killing of the buffalo was no more and no less devastating than the destruction of culture caused by the dismissal of marriage patterns deriving from and supportive of the extended family (called *tiospaye* by the Sioux), so long protected by the tribes. To claim that a society which was produced through unsanctioned marriage and reproductive activities could be considered a buffer is to look at it from a purely European point of view, not from the vantage point of the *tiospaye* value system.

American Indian nations did not in history, nor do they today, view intermarriage as buffer, though some individuals may hold that position. For the most part, native populations continue to view intermarriage as one of the risks to cultural and political survival, and there is plenty of evidence in contemporary tribal life to indicate that the Plains Indians have always regarded it with suspicion. Native languages describe biological and cultural relationships of human beings to one another with great explicitness, and the half-breed phenomenon is held in quite tentative regard by native-language speakers. The Sioux still call those with white blood *iyeska*, literally translated as "talks white," and it is not generally regarded as a complimentary term.

The interpretation of day-to-day Indian/white relationships through the appropriation of imagined native response to historical events is another marvelously persuasive technique which writers like Stegner employ over and over again to gain authenticity. A clear example from Stegner is given in "The Law in a Red Coat," a seminal essay in which he romanticizes the Canadian Mountie.

The first member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) Stegner ever laid eyes on became heroic. "I believe I know, having felt it, the truest reason why the slim force of Mounted Police was so spectacularly successful," Stegner said, "why its esprit de corps was so high and its prestige so great. I think I know how law must have looked to the Sioux and Blackfoot when the column of redcoats rode westward in the summer of 1874 [my italics]." He goes on to claim that in contrast to the American cavalry, which had become "an abomination to the Plains hostiles," the Red Coats' justice had meant "to Indian minds non- and sometimes anti-American," thus implying their virtue as perceived by Indians. Such imagining, reminiscent of Sherwood Anderson and

Damon Runyon, described "good" Canadian Mountie law, not "bad" American law, according to Stegner.

The idea that Indians as a group and more specifically those Indians who led their people to continued nationhood in spite of the bloody threat of extinction, would perceive the RCMP as substantially different from the U.S. Cavalry is, I think, an example of wishful thinking. *Colonial Law is always recognizable to the colonized!* Indians of today, for example, were not at all surprised to learn from the careful research done by Peter Matthiessen for his book *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* that the RCMP, during the upheavals in South Dakota of the 1970s, falsified documents in favor of the U. S. Government in the Leonard Peltier extradition case, a fact which has been substantiated by further examination.²

A broader look at history might suggest that the idea that Indian hating was nonexistent and empire building less violent in Canada than in the United States is simply a delusion of the imagination. Racism and its relationship to colonization and nationbuilding on the North American continent seems fairly pervasive and consistent. For Stegner to exempt his beloved Canada is a combination of compelling fantasy and bad history.

It is important to say that the business of claiming indigeness and inventing supportive mythology is an activity of the human imagination. No one argues that the declaration of one's identity is not an imaginative act. The Hopi and Dakotah, Navajo and Nez Perce have been in this business far longer than we know, certainly centuries prior to anything that Americans might have experienced. All imaginative writing and even nonfictional work defines truth and belief as the particular writer knows it, otherwise it is simply fruitless activity. Stegner's imagination, then, and his obvious popularity with the American reader must not be condemned as fruitless. It is, rather, a valiant attempt at mythologizing one's relationship to place. No sensible storyteller of any age would put forth an argument denying the legitimacy and necessity of doing just that.

The distinct idiom of Stegner's imaginative writing as it applies to nativeness, as well as his work in nonfiction, however, suggests two troubling ideas concerning cultural nationalisms. First, if there is no challenge to the wrong-headed notion that Western history ended in 1890, its absence closes forever any further analysis of a period of time, and the result is that there will be no direction for new forms to take should they somehow manage to emerge. Second, the unchallenged statement that the Plains Indians are "done" forever excludes Indians from participation in the community of contemporary human thought.

This is recognized by readers of history as the political strategy of any imperialistic entity, but for it to be buried in the work of a major American fiction writer and not subject to analysis amounts to a lack of responsibility in literary studies.

If one is an *American* writer, neither of these ideas makes sense, for they embody the most characteristic European feature of the modern historical outlook—that as one nation rises, the other dies. This is the typical Anglo-Saxon historical view. Americanisms, on the other hand, are supposed to be “new-worldisms,” setting off innovations of all kinds and allowing for the possibility that there are *living* resources in indigenous societies.

Unfortunately, Stegner’s theory is that as America rises, the Sioux Nation expires. We need only to look at Lithuania, at Poland, Bulgaria, and other national groups involved in the reorganization of the former USSR in the 1990s to know that nations do not die simply because another nation has willed it so.

From the point of view of American Indians, the declaration of their demise (based on racial prejudices) has done much harm. Yet, the Stegner phenomenon of exclusivity in literature and history is powerful. It takes over, colonizes, invades the reality of human experience in North America to the extent that the concepts of *indigenouness* and *aboriginality* are quite misdefined and ultimately misunderstood by the reading public. When that happens, the American Indian’s literary, historical, and cultural presence in America is repeatedly falsified or denied.

The underlying assumption that one world can begin only if another ends—life without continuity, humanity without history—is cause for great sadness, regret, and misery. I weep for Stegner when he says, “I saw the homestead just once after we left it to go back into town in the bitter fall of 1919. In the spring of 1920 we came past it on our way to Montana and camped in the shack for one night. We did not even take the boards off the windows or roll up the canvas blinds, but went about in the familiar, musty place, breathing the heavy air, in a kind of somnambulism. Our visit was not meant to change anything or restore for an instant the hope we had given up. *We merely passed through*, picked up a few objects that we wanted, touched things with our hands in a reminding way, stood looking from the doorway down across the coulee [my italics].”

Perhaps we can weep for all Americans who were and are *merely passing through*. But that does not mean we can excuse them for imagining and believing that American Indians, too, are or were *merely passing*

through, a mere phase of history to be disclaimed or forgotten or, worse yet, nostalgically lamented. To do so is to misunderstand indigenouness and to appropriate the American Indian imagination in the same way the colonists appropriate the land and resources of the New World.

The results of such colonialistic imaginations are disastrous not only to Indians but, perhaps, to all the world. It is not merely that such imagination exemplified by Wallace Stegner amounts to the restructuring of a rather irksome historical experience with regard to Indians. It is not just that it is an unpleasant fact that new societies and new nations are born from the spilling of the blood of other nations—a fact that must be denied if a nation is to see itself as ethical. It is not just that American writers don’t want to see the themselves as participants in a European colonial past and so create a vision which allows America a nationalistic role never before invented in the history of mankind: morally courageous, directed by God, acting as and for all humanity the new light of freedom everywhere. It is not just any of that. It is the realization that this mechanism will surely fail, for it is not the inherent right of any people to survive and rule because of an exclusive relationship with God.

The tyranny of expectation, then, comes into full play. The strength given this failed ethos by certain American literatures for whom Stegner is a major role player may be a fatal mistake—and not just for Indians. As the imagined America goes about in its disguise, its powerful economic system, capitalism, exploits resources for profit in a way which exempts native populations, its scientific mentality steals the sun and markets firepower to its friends, its “superior” governing class develops to deny religious, social and political freedoms to large groups of people. It will not be long before all mankind will believe that the tyrant must be overthrown. When that happens, it may be too late for contest, challenge, and debate.

Nothing that I have said suggests that the future will be easy, nor can we know that there is anything except hard work ahead. For now, though, I have to be content to simply encourage the new scholars and writers who have begun to understand what is at stake. For now I have to be content in my own realization that the partisan struggle in which I’ve been engaged will eventually matter. Indian Studies scholars who have been studying Indian histories and lifeways in the past two or three decades have been doing so for the purpose of petitioning for redresses of grievances in this democracy. In the process of that engagement they have helped everyone to understand that the need for transformation

is urgent and compelling. I am certain that these partisan struggles will inspire those who believe they have an intuitive responsibility to humanity. In the meantime, my reading in the works of Wallace Stegner is minimally undertaken and then only to remind myself that literature can and does successfully contribute to the politics of possession and dispossession.