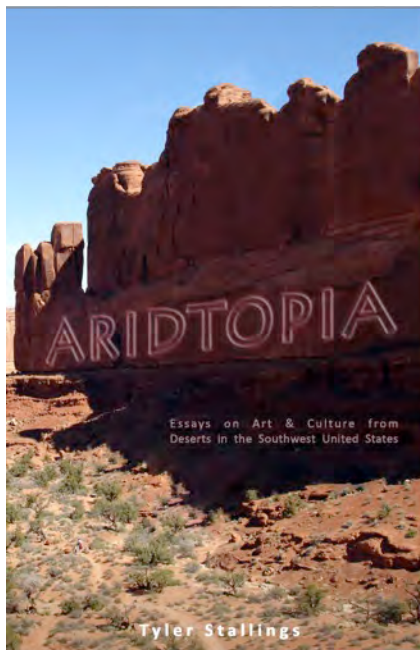




Discussion Guide for *Aridtopia: Essays on Art & Culture from Deserts in the Southwest United States*, by Tyler Stallings (Blue West Books)



Aridtopia: Essays on Art & Culture from Deserts in the Southwest United States

By Tyler Stallings
Trade Paper ISBN 978-0-9859495-3-2
\$24.95, 262 pp. with 48 photographs
Release Date: May 2014

In a personal and lyrical style, critically acclaimed author and contemporary art curator Tyler Stallings creates a literary mirage in ***Aridtopia: Essays on Art & Culture from Deserts in the Southwest United States*** that fuses present day reality and a future imaginary which repositions our view of the world from that of the desert.

The essays represent a state of mind born in an arid region. It is a book that is both manifesto and commentary. It is a mash up of references to popular culture, academic discourse, and speculative ideas about society. An Aridtopian recognizes that the desert is a setting for so much that co-exists unexpectedly: survivalists, military bases, legacies of Native American and settler conflicts, water wars, love for open vistas, and full of people who go there to experience the desert's openness in order to reconnect to the vast, cosmic

spaciousness beyond this planet. The airiness between vegetation, mountains, and even people allows room for the mind, soul, and spirit to wonder. For centuries, spiritual seekers have gone into the desert. The openness allows for secrecy too. Doomsayers will sometimes set up their fortresses there, while the military will establish secret operations too.

The thread throughout many of the essays, and the source of the book's title is Stallings' thought experiment Aridtopia. It is a speculative, secessionist community set in the southwest United States, an inspired concept after Stallings read Ernest Callenbach's 1975 novel, *Ectotopia*. That story's setting is the secession of Washington, Oregon, and northern California from the U.S. in order to create what he called a "steady-state" society, a precursor to "sustainability."

Exploring many topics, Stallings says, "Over the years, I've written about the impact of hearing whistles throughout the day and night in Riverside from successive trains carrying goods from Long Beach ports to the rest of the country; to listening to the imperceptible sub-sonic sounds with special instruments around Area 51; to the science-fiction like terraforming of desert land into new developments; to viewing empty and full swimming pools as sites of masculine reconfigurations; to tracing a new golden age in the aerospace industry as entrepreneurs near Edwards Air Force Base invent new means for transporting private citizens into space at a low-cost; to the sacred geography of mountains and rocks that resonate still with living Cahuilla people and also inspire contemporary artists."

A stark, white line crosses the desert surface. It is one segment of a miles long, nearly seven-foot circumference, metal pipe, or siphon, transporting water from the Owens Valley River to Los Angeles. The siphon's extreme straightness suggests a contemporary



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rendition of the ancient Nazca Lines in Peru, which often took the shapes of regional animals; some seemingly visible from an aerial viewpoint only. Zigzags of this same pipe are atop hills in the distance; perhaps suggesting a slithering rattlesnake over the landscape, at least as seen from the sky, or the satellite image on my phone. The reflection of the sun off the chalk-like paint covering the pipe is blinding. I walk across the powdered desert sand to touch its side. No sensation of rushing water—of the Sierra Nevada's blood—beneath the metal, as I had expected.

Inspiring and thought-provoking, ***Aridtopia: Essays on Art & Culture from Deserts in the Southwest United States*** will keep readers reflecting long into the cool nights of the desert.

What other author and editors are saying

“The desert is a place where Native American and settler conflicts, water and land-use issues, survivalists, military bases, experimental aircraft launches, and so much more converge in a new consciousness, which *Aridtopia* so deftly observes.”

—Deanne Stillman, author of *Desert Reckoning*, *Twentynine Palms*, and *Mustang*.

“Tyler Stallings traces the burgeoning contemporary arts and culture scene in the deserts of the southwest. While the region lacks water, it is far from being a cultural desert, as Stallings’ *Aridtopia* explores a creative environment that fosters the spirit of innovation and expansive imaginations as vast as the infinite horizon.”

--Drew Tewksbury, managing editor / producer *Artbound* on KCET

“Stallings’ *Aridtopia* blends cultural criticism, personal observation, and an artistic sensibility. Today, it seems so much is happening in the deserts around the globe. Perhaps *Aridtopia* is destined to become a guidebook from a desert point of view?”

—Greg Esser, Director, *Desert Initiative: Desert One*, Arizona State University

About the Author



Tyler Stallings is the editor and contributor to numerous books on art and culture that focus on identity, technology, photography, popular culture, and desert studies. He has been a columnist for print and online journals. He writes about artists and individuals who are highly engaged with their political, social, and ecological environment. His personal essays often take a *What If?* speculative perspective. He is the Artistic Director at Culver Center of the Arts and Director of Sweeney Art Gallery at UCR ARTSblock at University of California, Riverside. *Aridtopia* is his first book of collected essays. For more information on other books edited by and contributed to by Stallings, including

downloadable essays, visit the author’s website at tylerstallings.com.

Other Books Edited and Contributed to by Tyler Stallings since 1994: *Are We Touched? Identities From Outer Space*; *Desmothernismo: Rubén Ortiz Torres*; *Free Enterprise: The Art of Citizen Space Exploration*; *Sandow Birk’s “In Smog and Thunder: Historical Works from The Great War of the Californias”*; *The Signs Pile Up: Paintings by Pedro Álvarez*; *Surf Culture—The Art History of Surfing*; *Truthiness: Photography as Sculpture*; *Uncontrollable Bodies: Testimonies of Identity and Culture*, and *Whiteness, A Wayward Construction*.



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Discussion Questions

1. **Aridtopia** offers a **cultural portrait** of culture in deserts of the southwest in the United States.
 - a. What **observations** are made in the book? Does the author examine economics and politics, family traditions, the arts, religious beliefs, language or food?
 - b. Does the author **criticize or admire** the culture? Does he wish to preserve or change the way of life? Either way, what would be risked or gained?
 - c. What is **different** from your own culture? What do you find most surprising, intriguing or difficult to understand?

2. What is the **central idea** discussed in the book? What issues or ideas does the author explore? Are they personal, sociological, global, political, economic, spiritual, medical, or scientific?

3. Do the issues **affect your life**? How so—directly, on a daily basis, or more generally? Now or sometime in the future?

4. What **evidence** does the author use to support the book's ideas? Is the evidence convincing...definitive or...speculative? Does the author depend on personal opinion, observation, and assessment? Or is the evidence factual—based on science, statistics, historical documents, or quotations from (credible) experts?

5. What kind of **language** does the author use? Is it objective and dispassionate? Or passionate and earnest? Is it polemical, inflammatory, and/or sarcastic? Does the language help or undercut the author's premise?

6. What are the **implications** for the future? Are there long- or short-term consequences to the issues raised in the book? Are they positive or negative...affirming or frightening?

7. What **solutions** does the author propose? Who would implement those solutions? How probable is success?

8. How **controversial** are the issues raised in the book? Who is aligned on which sides of the issues? Where do you fall in that line-up?

9. Talk about **specific passages** that struck you as significant—or interesting, profound, amusing, illuminating, disturbing, sad...? What was memorable?

10. What have you **learned** after reading this book? Has it broadened your perspective about a difficult issue—personal or societal? Has it introduced you to a culture in another country...or an ethnic or regional culture in your own country?

(Questions are courtesy of LitLovers.)