

By [William deBuys](#)

http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/176036/tomgram%3A_william_debuys%2C_entering_the_mega-drought_era_in_america/#moreLong ago, I lived in a cheap flat in San Francisco and worked as the lone straight man in a gay construction company. Strangely enough, the drought now strangling California brings back memories of those days. It was the 1970s. Our company specialized in restoring the Victorian “gingerbread” to the facades of the city’s townhouses, and I got pretty good at installing cornices, gable brackets, and window hoods, working high above the street.

What I remember most, though, is the way my co-workers delighted in scandalizing me on Monday mornings with accounts of their weekend exploits.

We were all so innocent back then. We had no idea of the suffering that lay ahead or of the grievous epidemic already latent in the bodies of legions of gay men like my friends, an epidemic that would afflict so many outside the gay community but was especially terrible within it.

It’s unlikely that many of those guys are alive today. HIV was already in the population, although AIDS had yet to be detected or named, and no one had heard of “safe sex,” let alone practiced it. When the epidemic broke out, it was nowhere worse than in trendsetting San Francisco.

By then I had returned to New Mexico, having traded my hammer for a typewriter. When I announced my intention to leave California, the guys all said the same thing. “Don’t go back there,” they protested. “You’ll just have to go through *all of this* again!”

All of this required no translation. It meant the particular newness of life in that state, which was always sure to spread eastward, as Californian styles, attitudes, problems, tastes, and fads had

Posted by Joan Russow

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been spreading to the rest of the country almost since the days of the Gold Rush.

Hippies, flower power, bikers, and cults. The movies we see and the music we listen to. The slang we pick up (*I mean like, what a bummer, dude*). Wine bars and fern bars, hot tubs and tanning booths, liposuction and boob jobs. The theft of rivers (*Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown*) and the theft of baseball teams (Brooklyn still mourns). Gay rights, car culture, and the Reagan Revolution. Scientology, mega-churches, Buddhist chic, and exercise videos. If they didn't actually start in California, they got big and came to national attention there. Without the innovations of Silicon Valley, would you recognize your mobile phone or computer? Would you recognize yourself?

It's the same with climate change. California in the Great Drought is once again Exhibit A, a living diorama of how the future is going to look for a lot of us.

And the present moment -- right now in 2015 -- reminds me of San Francisco as the AIDS epidemic broke out. Back then we had no idea how bad things were going to get, and that is likely to be true now, as well. As usual, California is giving us a preview of our world to come.

The Arrival of the Bone-Dry New Normal

On the U.S. Drought Monitor's [current map](#), a large purple bruise spreads across the core of California, covering almost half the state. Purple indicates "exceptional drought," the direst category, the one that tops both "severe" and "extreme." If you combine all three, 95% of the state is covered. In other words, California is hurting.

Admittedly, conditions are better than at this time last year when 100% of the state was at least "severe." Recent [summer rains](#) have somewhat dulled the edge of the drought, now in its fourth year. Full recovery, however, would require about a [foot](#) of rain statewide between now and January, a veritable deluge for places like [Fresno](#), which in good times only get that much rain in a full year.

California First As Both Climate Victim and Responder, the National Style-Setter Leads the Way

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