SEVEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT THE GREAT PLAINS LITERARY LANDSCAPE

by

Diane D. Quantic

[On the Great Plains] the eye learns to appreciate slight variations, the possibilities inherent in emptiness. It sees that the emptiness is full of small things.

Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*[1]

Introduction

Kathleen Norris's observation encapsulates a common observation among Great Plains residents: to see what is there in such an expanse of land and sky, the observer must learn to look closely. Human interaction with the landscape is an important theme in Great Plains literature: how one lives on the land determines the quality of life. Native tribes lived lightly on the prairies and plains. White settlers transformed the rich prairie soil into neatly delineated farms. Today, the edges of cities expand, turning cropland into smaller and smaller parcels for homes and businesses. All of these circumstances are reflected in one way or another in how writers see the region.[2]

"Seeing" is not simply the act of looking at a scene. Edward Casey, in his study *Representing Place*, points out that even painters did not focus on the prospect, or view, of the landscape until the nineteenth century.[3] America's sense of landscape has been shaped by historical forces, in particular the pastoral tradition that was at its height during the Romantic period in the early nineteenth century when the nation was beginning to define its creative principles. The pastoral equates nature with perfect harmony, the sublime. America's early landscape painters created this harmony with lush, wild landscapes, burdened with trees,

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Diane D. Quantic is an associate professor of English at Wichita State University where she teaches courses in Great Plains literature. She is the author of *The Nature of the Place: A Study of Great Plains Fiction* and editor of *A Great Plains Reader*.

crags and, if present, tiny humans. There was little effort to represent a particular place realistically. Countering this Romantic view of nature as the sublime was American's Puritanical fear of wilderness where evil forces inhabit the impenetrable forest beyond the settlements. However, as white Americans began exploring the unknown interior, in particular the central plains and prairies, they abandoned these extremes. To assess the region's usefulness, they needed to record accurately what they saw. On their journey across the continent from 1804 to 1806, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark kept detailed records and often added drawings and maps to their written descriptions. Artists accompanied Stephen Long's expedition across the central plains to record what the explorer's party saw. In a kind of reversal, the "second wave" of travelers and tourists, artists such as Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran, created dramatic landscapes with spectacular mountains and sweeping prospects in the earlier Romantic tradition to appeal to Easterners' sense of wonder—and to rouse support for preservation of the West's natural wonders. Other artists, like George Catlin who created thousands of sketches of Indian customs and everyday life, hurried to capture a way of life that they believed would soon disappear.

In the late nineteenth century as America's artistic and literary tastes shifted to reflect the new interest in Realism, artists and writers focused on what was "really there." In Great Plains literature, this focus began with the works of Hamlin Garland, Mark Twain, and other Realists in the 1890s. Some of these early writers shared the preservationist impulse of the visual artists and worked to record the West's "local color" before it faded into the ordinary. This legacy is reflected in the continuing emphasis on landscape as an important element in Great Plains literature.

Looking at the literary landscape

As this brief overview illustrates, even before we look at a "prospect," a landscape, we know that what we see will be influenced by what we are "supposed" to see: religious, aesthetic, and personal agendas guide even the most "objective" viewer. In his article, "The Beholding

Eye: Ten Versions of the Same Scene," D. W. Meinig puts it this way: a landscape is composed "not only of what lies before our eyes but what lies within our heads."[4] That is, each individual brings to bear on a viewed landscape his or her own physical senses, experiences, cultural biases, knowledge from reading and experience, values, beliefs, and his or her own professional and personal points of view. In Great Plains literature, landscape often determines the action and the reactions of the characters. Isolation, weather, access to a town for goods, or a community for society are variables of place determined by the lay of the land. Despite these common threads, there are myriad variations in the ways authors have "looked" at the Great Plains landscape.

Meinig's "beholding eye" provides a framework for this consideration of seven factors a Great Plains writer might consider when creating a landscape: space, scenery, place, narrative, commodity, power, and spiritual place.[5] Great Plains writers are acutely aware of the places they are writing about: few are neutral or indifferent to the settings for their stories. Of course, Great Plains writers do not categorize the landscape. Realistically, it is impossible consciously to separate one way of looking from another. Nevertheless, this arbitrary catalog helps focus this analysis on the complex interaction of people and place that is a major theme in Great Plains literature.

One: Landscape as space

The first category is a negative conception of landscape: nothing. It resembles the earlier resistance to wilderness; in this case, however, it is not dark forests but an unending "sea of grass" that intimidates some arrivals. Those who see space see only an undifferentiated surface; they have few cultural or physical referents that enable them to recognize, in this case, the grasslands as "some place." Of course there are visible aspects of any landscape: the shape of the terrain (even if it seems flat), seasonal changes, light and shadow, the presence or absence of animals and signs of human inhabitants. Although it is really impossible to view space, since viewing itself creates landscape, the absence of familiar vistas is an almost palpable reality in works about human resistance to the

Great Plains. The penultimate example is Beret in O. E. Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth*.[6] Homesick for her familiar Norwegian fjords, pregnant, and in the early stages of depression that plagues her throughout Rølvaag's trilogy,[7] Beret, ironically, senses space as a very real presence: "[S]omething vague and intangible, hovering in the air would not allow her to be at ease [. . .] The thought had struck her yesterday when she had first got down from the wagon, stood vividly in her mind: here there was nothing even to hide behind!" (36) Undone by the space that surrounds her, Beret despairs: "Could no living thing exist out here in the empty, desolate and endless wastes of green and blue?" (37) Beret is at one end of the conceptual landscape continuum in Great Plains literature. This way of <u>not</u> seeing occurs most often in the opening pages of novels and stories about the first white settlers. In Beret, Rølvaag acknowledges the reality of what still is, for some observers, simply space. As Gertrude Stein famously said, "there is no there there."

Landscape as space can morph into landscape of mythic dimensions when imagination fills in the apparent void. Mythmakers impose on the plains and prairies wildly improbable landscapes and occurrences that are, nevertheless, accepted as part of America's national experience because there seems to be no *there* there to refute them. Thus, the Great Plains first became the Great American Desert, a barrier to too-rapid expansion of population. After the Civil War it became the providential Garden of the World when population pressures made settlement of the plains desirable. For evidence that this mythic Great Plains persists one need only to consider that Kansas is the landing place for Frank Baum's still popular wizardly tornado or that the myths of the Wild West appear and re-appear in the virtual celluloid landscape. As Elliott West has pointed out, it was precisely the "placelessness" of the West and, more particularly, the central plains, that attracted the first white settlers who ventured into the region from the East. [8] They equated "free" land with "empty" space and thus, with a quick turn of phrase, ignored the signs left on the landscape by thousands of Native inhabitants over hundreds of years of presence.

Ironically, landscape as space has been resurrected in the last decade or so. New Jersey geographers Frank and Deborah Popper proposed

creating a "buffalo commons" on the high plains, a space that would be home to free-ranging buffalo and assorted fauna and flora. Looking at the declining population statistics for the high plains, the Poppers declared much of the region a frontier, defined as fewer than two people per square mile. Indeed, when farmers and ranchers sell to a neighbor or retire, the population declines. More recently, someone has proposed bringing African animals into America's "empty" (i.e., Western) quarters. The Great Plains landscape as space persists.

Two: Landscape as scenery

This way of looking is, for the most part, the point of view of explorers and travelers. Explorers' reports, such as the extensive journals of the Lewis and Clark expedition, provided the minutiae for the scientists and officials who needed to know what was *there* in the West. Thomas Jefferson set the standard for the U. S. expeditions when he instructed Meriwether Lewis and William Clark on their expedition's tasks. In addition to gathering information regarding a water route to the Pacific, Lewis and Clark were to become acquainted with the "people inhabiting the line you will pursue" and to note the "soil and face of the country," the animals of the country, "especially those not known in the US," mineral production, volcanic appearance, and climate.[9] Jefferson's detailed instructions leave no room for sweeping generalizations or a quick impression: the journey of Lewis and Clark took two years (1804-1806) and the complete edition of the resulting journals fills thirteen volumes.[10]

The accounts of other exploratory travels across the Great Plains similarly focus on the "scientific" aspects of the Great Plains scene: what is there and whether it can be of any use to the expanding nation. Scientists, illustrators and others with specialized knowledge and skills were included in most expeditions, including those of Zebulon Pike and Stephen Long that traversed the central plains. They regarded the scenery from particular perspectives. Their accounts of the Great Plains landscape as "specialized" scenery had an impact on both the scientific and popular idea of the West. Edwin James drew across the Long expedition's map

the words, "Great Desert" thus labeling the Great Plains a barrier to westward expansion for policy-makers and settlers alike. For his account of Natty Bumppo's last years in his novel *The Prairie*,[11] James Fenimore Cooper used James' account of the Long expedition. Cooper even lifted passages verbatim from the report, but most of the scenery and all of the characters and action of the story come from Cooper's own imagination.[12] Cooper's novel has provided a rich resource for the stock images of the West that persist in the popular imagination, nurtured by popular Western novels and hundreds of Grade B movies.

Traveler-writers look for the odd, the unusual. Their focus is not on the land 's potential, but on their readers who will expect accounts of the unfamiliar. As Joni Kinsey points out in her discussion of Great Plains art, European conventions of landscape that dominated nineteenth century painting were unsuited to a "featureless" country: there was no "view," no scenery.[13] Painters need a "prospect." So painters either avoided depictions of the prairies altogether or they included "scenery": bluffs, wagons, sod houses, Indian tipis, fauna (especially buffalo), and sometimes towering mountains or dramatic rivers (187).

Without the language to recreate the landscape they really see before them, some writers create colorful traveling companions or descriptions of the unusual, embellished with comparisons from their reservoir of stock images of scenery. Washington Irving and Mark Twain provided picturesque scenery for the reading pleasure of their Eastern audiences. Irving's *A Tour on the Prairies*[14] has been criticized for its references to European parkland when searching for similes to convey the Great Plains landscape.[15] Nevertheless, Irving's *Tour* is one of the first accounts written specifically to inform and entertain educated, curious readers about the unfamiliar lands across the Mississippi.[16] Perhaps because he was a sociable sort, or because he could not *see* a landscape worth recording, the first chapters of Irving's account focus on his traveling companions, rendered in colorful tones. His description of the landscape is quite generic: " It was a bright and sunny morning, with that transparent atmosphere that seems to bathe the very heart with gladness. Our march continued parallel to the Arkansas [River], through a rich and varied country. [. . .] Sometimes we coasted along sluggish brooks, whose

faintly trickling current just served to link together a succession of glassy pools, embedded, like mirrors, on the quiet bosom of the forest, reflecting its autumnal foliage, and patches of the clear blue sky" (80-81). By the end of his account, however, Irving has developed a clearer eye for the prairie scene. On coming out of the tangled cross timbers onto the "grand prairie," Irving remarks: "There is always an expansion of feeling in looking upon these boundless and fertile wastes" (126). Stilted and a bit pejorative, true, but at least it is an acknowledgment of an *emotional* response to the landscape.

In *Roughing It*,[17] Mark Twain offers his readers a vivid account of the Great Plains scene. His point of view from inside or atop a rough-riding stagecoach (on his way to Nevada) does not provide him much of an opportunity to consider the land itself; rather, he describes the "jackass rabbit," prairie dog villages and sage brush, details he can observe in his inimitable prose while on the move. His descriptions of the landscape are the "quick takes" of a traveler on his way some place else: "It was another glad awakening to fresh breezes, vast expanses of level greensward, bright sunlight, an impressive solitude utterly without visible human beings or human habitations, and an atmosphere of such amazing magnifying properties that trees that seemed close at hand were more than three miles away" (66).

The view, then, of landscape as scenery focuses on the odd, the novel, the imagined. The viewer is neither capable of conceiving, nor interested in, the character of the place as a totality: it is seen and recorded as the travelers move on, or it is a background for some fictional flight of fancy that needs a vast expanse as a landing place.

Three: Landscape as place

Once the eyes become accustomed to the far vision necessary to *see* the Great Plains landscape, viewers create particular points of view that are defined by what surrounds them. The Indians provide the earliest accounts of people who valued the Great Plains as *place*. The records of ethnographers and Indian writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century provide ample evidence of the Indians' close

relationship to the land. For many plains tribes, place was plural, movable locations dictated by the bison's' migrations and the people's need for shelter in the winter or the society of other tribal groups in summer. Ironically, the people who were most intimately *in* place on the Great Plains were *dis*placed by those who saw their *place* as empty *space.* For the Plains Indians, the landscape was home, hunting grounds, winter camps, plants and animals necessary for everyday existence and for the rituals that acknowledge the intricate connections of all of these.

Ella Deloria's novel *Waterlily* is a fictional account of the pre-contact life *in place* on the Great Plains.[18] Deloria' s book is place-centered. The story opens, for example, as the "camp circle [is] on the move again"(3). Blue Bird leaves the line of travelers to give birth. Alone, she looks to the landscape around her to provide some kind of sign or guidance: "All around the waterlilies in full bloom seemed to pull her eyes to them irresistibly, until she turned to gaze on them with exaggerated astonishment. How beautiful they were! [. . .] She glanced from one to another, and suddenly it was impossible to distinguish them from her baby's face. A new sensation welled up within her, almost choking her, and she was articulate for the first time. ' My daughter! My daughter!' she cried, 'How beautiful you are! As beautiful as the waterlilies. You too are a waterlily, *my* waterlily'" (6). The remainder of the novel centers on the lives of these two, mother and daughter, as members of a tribal community that moves across the northern Great Plains according to the seasons and the tribes' needs for food, shelter, or society.

The intimate connection to landscape as place continues in literature of contemporary Great Plains Indian authors such as Linda Hogan, whose novel *Mean Spirit* (1990) is an account of the exploitation of Oklahoma Indians when oil was found under their "worthless" land. Many of Louise Erdrich's novels are centered in the Ojibwa Turtle Mountain reservation of North Dakota, her setting for elaborate tales of relatives and relationships.[19] The land itself, even the atmosphere, is often a sensate character in her novels: Matchimanito Lake harbors some kind of powerful supernatural force; the forest hides secreted bodies and can, with some human help, come crashing down when threatened by

commercial lumbermen; a flood carries Father Damien to the Indians' reservation and the river swallows Henry Lamartine's red convertible.[20] The very air, the least visible aspect of a landscape, can solidify into snow and ice or explode in fire. *Place* is a palpable presence, not merely a backdrop for the stories' action in Erdrich's complex, interrelated tales.

White settlers who come onto the plains to stay soon learn that they must respect nature in this place. The relationship is reciprocal: the land provides the site for a home place that the newcomer imagines into existence. This is one of the persistent themes in Great Plains literature. Willa Cather's novel *O Pioneers!*[21] is a classic account of this way of looking at landscape as place. In the novel, Alexandra Bergson consciously seeks to understand the land that has become her legacy: "[S]he had a new consciousness of the country, felt almost a new relation to it. [. . .] She had never known before how much the country meant to her. [. . .] She had felt as if her heart were hiding down there, somewhere, with the quail and the plover and all the little wild things that crooned and buzzed in the sun. Under the long shaggy ridges, she felt the future stirring" (68-69). Cather knew the intimate nature of the process that turns space into the ordered grids of fields, places identified as someone's "property." Transformation of land, the antithesis of the Indian concept of a movable place, has become the definitive myth of the Great Plains. It is the governing image in the opening paragraphs of "Neighboring Fields," Part Two of *O Pioneers!* "The shaggy coat of the prairie, which they lifted to make [John Bergson] a bed, has vanished forever. From the Norwegian graveyard one looks out over a vast checkerboard, marked off in squares of wheat and corn; light and dark; dark and light. Telephone wires hum along the white roads, which always run at right angles. From the graveyard gate one can count a dozen gaily painted farm homes; the gilded weather-vanes on the big red barns wink at each other across the green and yellow and brown fields" (73-74).

Landscape as place is static only in myth: the territory one can light out for–beyond the restrictions and responsibility of everyday life–exists only in the mind. Ironically, in a place where nothing seems to change, the Great Plains is constantly undergoing transformations, real and metaphorical. Nothing is certain in a region where economic stability is

dependent upon acts of nature that are swift and capricious (hail, blizzards) or slow and deadening (drought, flood). Any of these can change that rare good year into another year of failure–sometimes in minutes.

Linda Hasselstrom is a contemporary plainswoman, the owner of her family's western South Dakota home place. In a series of autobiographical accounts of the ranching life, she chronicles her struggles to realize her own *place* on the high plains both physically and psychologically. [22] A central theme in her work is the fierce attachment to place she shares with other ranchers and farmers who struggle to make a living on the marginal lands on the high plains. This effort to maintain a hold on her place both literally and metaphorically identifies her as both a writer and a rancher: "To write truly, to speak with authority of this place, one must put down roots, become involved, be battered and tested by the terrain, the weather, and the people."[23]

Four: Landscape as narrative

The writer who approaches the landscape as narrative sees not only a scene in the present, but the sequence of historical events that determine the present character of the place. In Great Plains literature, change in the land itself is often at the center of the narrative. Euro-American settlers fanned out across the region after the Civil War, determined to leave their own marks on quarters and sections that had been imposed on the land by the surveyor's stakes. They transformed the land into cropland and pasture by their own hard work. Angela Miller calls this narrative representation the "afterlife" of the place: how its meaning is historically and culturally shaped over time. Miller points out the problematical link between verbal and visual culture. Not only does the place change as the story unfolds, but the reader's own experiences and values will color his or her reading and may alter future readings until it becomes necessary to attempt to recover the original context.[24]

Willa Cather's narratives illustrate both the straightforward narrative style typical of many Great Plains writers and the complex "afterlife" of a text. Carol Steinhagen points out that landscape in Cather's work is

"not to be equated with nature as perceived by a particular character," from a "particular and defined perspective. " Rather, it is a setting for the "totality" of the novel. At times, in the course of one of her novels, landscape becomes a "seen scene:" the narrative seems to stop and the landscape is consciously perceived. These are set scenes that remain in the reader's image memory: Alexandra comes into the high country from the river farms in *O Pioneers!*; Jim Burden and the hired girls enjoy a picnic in *My Antonia*; Thea Kronborg finds her voice in a remote desert canyon in *The Song of the Lark.* As Steinhagen puts it, Cather acknowledges the "inherent power of nature and [. . .] the power of human beings to shape and design that nature" (64). The power of landscape as narrative is the reciprocal force of landscape and human intervention.

In *O Pioneers!* Cather's Alexandra Bergson looks into the future and determines to transform the "Wild Land" into "Neighboring Fields," the titles of the first two sections of the novel. By force of her own will, and her acceptance of new farming practices, she succeeds. Alexandra is an innovator who can acknowledge both the past and the future of the *land* as opposed to the present landscape. In the last pages of the novel, Alexandra tells Carl that "the land belongs to the future. [. . .] We come and go, but the land is always there. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it–for a little while" (272-73). For Cather's Alexandra, the land's narrative is continuous.

In stories about the Depression and drought on the Great Plains, the dead or dying land is the focus of the narrative. The people who depend on it are reduced to impotent resignation. Frederick Manfred 's ironically titled novel *The Golden Bowl* [25] is the story of the drifter Maury Grant who has fled the Oklahoma dust bowl that destroyed his family, only to find himself tied to the stubborn Thor family, Pa, Ma, and their daughter Kirsten, on their South Dakota farm. In the distant past, this was a raw land, with "teeth": "The highway [. . .] passes dying Siouxland[26] farms and bone sharp people. [. . .] It passes dry wallows where, centuries ago, when the land was covered with knife edged grass, buffalo bulls bellowed and gored each other." Manfred brings the narrative up to date: "Still farther in, where Siouxland leaves off and the real Dakotas begin, empty

wells pit the land. Rotting bodies of dead animals lie facing empty water tanks. Skeletons of farms lie quietly in dusty slumber. Machines, the levers once warm with the cupped hands of men, stand idle, rusting, blackening" (4). Manfred 's novel is an unrelenting narrative of dust and depression, hardly relieved by Pa Thor's stubborn optimism and Maury's attraction to the nubile Kirsten. For Manfred, like Cather, the land's narrative is an epic cycle.

Contemporary Canadian novelist Robert Kroetsch uses a disjointed narrative to explore the dissonance between past and present. *Badlands*,[27] about the obsession of paleontologist William Dawe, is structured as a narrative within a narrative about the land as prehistoric narrative. First, the novel is the story of Dawe's ill-fated 1916 dinosaur-hunting expedition. His motley crew floats down the Red Deer River in southeastern Alberta, through the ancient layers of soil and rock that lie below the prairie's surface, beyond time, to the dinosaur's bone bed layer. The second story focuses on Dawe's daughter Anna who, in 1972, uses her father's field notes as her travel guide to retrace his journey. The narrative of the land's deep past is central to both stories. Dawe reads the landscape in search of ancient life, and Anna follows years later searching for a father who preferred ancient bone beds to modern ones.

In Great Plains literature, stories often plumb layers of the landscape's history that, with the region's weather and the fertility of the region's soils, determine the way people live.

Five: Landscape as commodity

A common theme in Great Plains literature is the *value* of the land, but for some, the *worth* of the land is important: the landscape is an investment. Cather created models of this attitude in Alexandra Bergson's brothers, Lou and Oscar, in *O Pioneers!* Oscar, a man with no imagination, would stolidly plow the same rows forever, and Lou would do what the neighbors are doing, but Alexandra prods them to expand their holdings and she introduces innovations that, in a few short years, make them all successful farmers (151). Clearly, Alexandra (and Cather) believe that the increased value of their land results not only from the

physical labor of Oscar and Lou, but also from Alexandra's imagination: her recognition of the economic benefits of innovation and her deep respect for the intrinsic value of the land itself.

There are those who see the land only as a fungible asset. They value only the profit they can realize from ownership for a time. In Hamlin Garland's story, "Under the Lion's Paw," [28] the land speculator Butler informs his renters, the Haskins, that the sale price of the farm they have rented is $5,500. When he rented it to them they understood that he would sell it to them for $2,500. The difference is the value of the work and materials the family has already put into the land. When Haskins objects, Butler explains, "The land is doubled in value, it don't matter how," and when Haskins points out he will be paying for that profit twice, Butler only says, "You're too green to eat, young feller. *Your* improvements. The law will sing another tune" (140).[29]

Caleb Gare, in Martha Ostenso's *Wild Geese*,[30] is her portrait of someone who sees land only as wealth: "[H]e came to a ridge from which he could look east and west, north and south, upon the land that was his; the two tame hayfields, separated from each other by a neck of timber belonging to Fusi Aronson (it would be well to own that timber, a fine stand it was [. . .] and the good, flat grazing land with two bluffs, that might have extended farther westward had it not encountered the holdings of that miser Thorwald Thorvaldson"(13-14). As Gare continues his meditation on his land, he considers Fusi Aronson's "slight dishonesty" that "could be used to good advantage" in his scheme to own the "neck of timber" (14). At the novel's end, Caleb is trapped by a wild fire, held down by the boggy muskeg, a heavy-handed device, perhaps, but it underlines a common theme in Great Plains literature: that the land itself is not merely an " asset" but a sensate force.

Six: Landscape as power

Those who value land as a commodity regard it primarily as a source of wealth. Others focus on land as the means to control family and community. Pastor Block in Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many*[31] believes he can maintain control of the Mennonite community that he has

led from Russia to the Canadian prairie on the edge of the wilderness. The community's land is cut off from nearby farms and communities, surrounded by tall trees that shut out the far view of the landscape. Because he is the only member of the community who speaks English, Pastor Block can monitor the community's access to radios and other sources of news and knowledge about the surrounding communities and the wider world. But their physical isolation cannot sustain Block's hold on the people. Finally, sin and error invade Pastor Block's own family and he must admit that the physical isolation of their remote land does not assure his continued control over the people.

A classic story of land as power on the Great Plains is Mari Sandoz' *Slogum House*.[32] Published in 1937, it is Sandoz's take on the will-to-power individual on the high plains. The central figure is a woman, Gulla Slogum, a slovenly servant in the Ohio home of Ruedy Slogum, who tricks him into marrying her and arrives in the Sandhills intent on becoming someone that she imagines could be the equal of the wealthy and refined Slogum family. Driven by revenge and greed, Gulla uses her children as tools to control an entire county. She prostitutes her twin daughters Annette and Celie, and directs her sons to murder or maim those who oppose her.[33] For Gulla, land is a means to an end, the power and wealth that she equates with social status. She cannot imagine that others do not share her passion for acquisition and exploitation. Like many of the land speculators who fanned across the Great Plains after the Civil Way, Gulla Slogum regards land as something to acquire by any means: purchase or, better yet, by assuming the mortgages of those she has intimidated or murdered or who have fallen on hard times.[34]

Seven: Landscape as spiritual place

As noted earlier, the plains Indians created land-centered religious beliefs. Directions, colors, and animals are significant elements in Plains Indian's cosmologies. These elements of the landscape are often important, and occasionally humorous, signifiers in contemporary literature by Plains Indians. For example, in Louise Erdrich's novel, *The Bingo Palace*,[35] Lipsha Morrissey experiences a sacred vision in the

form of a skunk that informs him that the tribe's sacred Lake Matchimanito "ain't real estate." The spiritual message literally surrounds Lipsha and he is "inhabited by a thing so powerful I don't even recognize it as a smell. [. . .] There is no before, no after, no breathing or getting around the drastic moment that practically lifts me off my feet. I stand drenched but not alone, for the skunk odor is a kind of presence all of itself. It is a live cloud in which I move. It is a thing I can feel and touch" (200-201). The sacred nature of *place* has become palpable.

Kathleen Norris discovered the spiritual nature of the Great Plains around Lemmon, a small South Dakota community. She moved there from New York City to assume management of her family's farm. She chronicles her physical and spiritual journey in *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* and later works, *The Cloister Walk* (1996) and *Amazing Grace* (1998). She regards her spiritual awakening as a kind of geographical determinism. She explains that "in western Dakota, the harsh climate and the vast expanse of the land have forced people, through a painful process of attrition, to adjust to this country on its own terms and live accordingly: ranches of several thousand acres, towns that serve as economic centers forty or sixty miles apart. Taking the slow boat to Dakota, driving in from the East, the reality of the land asserts itself and you begin to understand how the dreams of early settlers were worn away" (148-49). Norris compares her relationship to the Great Plains landscape with the ascetic lives of desert monks. She regards the high plains as a place that, as Thoreau said, "drives life into a corner." Much of Norris's work focuses on her experiences as a Protestant lay person in the Benedictine monasteries of the northern Great Plains. In these spiritual enclosures, isolated socially as well as geographically, Norris contemplates the spiritual meaning of her place in the sacred landscape. With few physical distractions, she is able to consider the essentials of faith and community.

Sharon Butala, a Canadian writer, sees the land itself as a spirit-filled reality.[36] This realization came to her over a period of time after she married and moved to her husband's ranch in southwestern Saskatchewan. A city woman, she found herself alone much of the time in an utterly unfamiliar landscape, walking across the pastures of never-

plowed native grasses and along the creeks on the family's ranch. *Wild Stone Heart*[37] is Butala's most complete account of her encounter with the land's spiritual power. A one hundred acre field, the first piece of land her husband owned (a gift from his father), is a physical site, but it is also the setting for Butala's search for spiritual meaning. Her exploration of myth, mysticism, and the meanings of dreams are centered on the field, which she discovers was, as she intuited, an Indian burial ground. She begins with simply learning to look and look again, to truly see the landscape around her: "[I]n that solitary walking and looking, I found a new world that I would otherwise never have seen" (23). In her exploration of many aspects of spiritualism, European and aboriginal, Butala realizes her own spirituality: "I only knew that, as the field was a sacred place and one full of graves of the true owners of this land, I could not have it all to myself forever, that all of this discovery was leading somewhere even if I couldn't guess where"(190-191).

In a sense, Butala brings us full circle to the earliest accounts of the Indians, who viewed the landscape simply as home, the source of food and other human essentials, a part of a world held together with sacred myths and stories that came out of the land itself.

In the concluding pages of *Wild Stone Heart* Butala sums up these ways of seeing and the current state of the Great Plains landscape. Like most of the observers discussed in this paper, Butala knows that the landscape will inexorably change:

> Everyone, us included, recognizes that we can no longer afford to farm or ranch, that with every passing year in economic terms we go farther backward. The great dream of the settlers, mostly poor people, seems to be ending as, once again, a handful of entrepreneurs begin to take over most of the land. [. . .]
>
> How strange it was that the settlers, my own people on both sides, too, could not *see* what was there all over the prairie.[..] [T]hey'd picked [Indian burial stones] so they could farm—"The circles [of ancient Indian grave sites] always went first," Peter said, "because they were so easy to see." --and yet, even knowing what they were doing, they didn't see. Beyond seeing,

> there was *recognizing.* [. . .] [T]hey were dismantling the remains of a civilization. Every stone freighted with tears, with the weight of grief, they should have been too heavy to lift. (198-99)

Conclusion

No doubt there are many more ways to see a landscape, and of course, there are no clear divisions between one way of seeing and another, as Butala's comments make evident, but by dividing the discussion in this way, one can appreciate the complex interplay that occurs anytime someone looks carefully at the slight variation, as Norris says, and really sees the layered landscape that is there.

NOTES

1. Kathleen Norris. *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*. (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1993). Further references to this work are cited in the text and come from this edition.
2. See Diane D. Quantic and P. Jane Hafen, *A Great Plains Reader*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003) for a representative sample of Great Plains literature that reflects these circumstances.
3. *Representing Place: Landscapes and Maps*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 35. See chapter two for an overview of the development of landscape representation in Western Europe and the United States. See also Carol Steinhagen, "Dangerous Crossings: Historical Dimensions in Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, *The Professor's House*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*. 6.2. (Summer 1999): 63-82.
4. *Interpreting Ordinary Landscapes*. Ed. D.W. Meinig. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 33-48, 34.
5. Meinig's categories are: nature, habitat, artifact, system, problem, wealth, ideology, history, place, and aesthetic.
6. O. E. Rølvaag. *Giants in the Earth*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1927). Further references to this work are cited in the text and come from this edition.
7. Rølvaag's two other novels of Norwegians on the Great Plains are *Peder Victorious* (1929) and *Their Father'sGod* (1931).
8. *The Way to the West: Essays on the Central Plains*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995). See West's chapter "Land" for a thorough analysis of the intricate relationship of Native tribes to the land and changes wrought by encroaching settlements.

9. Bernard DeVoto, ed. *The Journals of Lewis and Clark.* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1953), 483-84. Jefferson's instructions to Lewis and Clark are six pages long in this edition.
10. Meriwether Lewis, William Clark and Members of the Corps of Discovery. *The Journals of Lewis and Clark.* Ed. Gary Moulton. 13 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).
11. James Fenimore Cooper. *The Prairie.* 1827. (Albany State University of New York Press, 1985). Further references to this work are cited in the text and come from this edition.
12. For a discussion of Cooper's use of the reports of Lewis and Clark and James, see Quantic, *The Nature of Place* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 38-39.
13. "Not So Plain: Art of the American Prairies." *Great Plains Quarterly.* 15 (Summer 1995): 185-200. Further references to this work are cited in the text and come from this edition.
14. Washington Irving. *A Tour on the Prairies.* 1835. (New York: Time Life Books, n.d.) Further references to this work are cited in the text and come from this edition.
15. Robert Thacker. *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination.* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 70-77.
16. Irving made his trip across present-day Oklahoma soon after returning from several years in Europe, a fact that may explain his frequent references to European scenes for comparisons that would be familiar to his well-traveled readers.
17. Mark Twain. *Roughing It.* 1872. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972). Further references to this work are cited in the text and come from this edition.
18. Ella Deloria. *Waterlily.* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988). Further references to this work are cited in the text and come from this edition. Deloria, a member of the Yankton Sioux tribe, had intimate knowledge of pre-contact Indian society. She was raised on a Teton reservation and was one of the first academically trained native ethnographers. She began collected oral tales and other data among the Tetons in 1928. She wrote *Waterlily* during the 1940s but it was not published until 1988. See Raymond J. DeMallie's afterword to the University of Nebraska edition of Deloria's novel.
19. Erdrich's interrelated novels include *The Bingo Palace* (1993); *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001); *Love Medicine* (1984); *Tales of Burning Love* (1996); *Tracks* (1988); *The Painted Drum (2005)* and to a lesser extent, *The Beet Queen* (1986).
20. These events occur in *Tracks* and *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* and *Love Medicine* respectively.
21. Willa Cather. *O Pioneers!* 1913. Scholarly Edition. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992). Further references to this work are cited in the text and come from this edition.

22. Hasselstrom's autobiographical works include *Land Circle* (1991), *Windbreak: A Woman Rancher on the Northern Plains* (1987), *Feels Like Far* (1999), and *Beyond Earth and Sky: Where I Live and Work* (2002). In these works, she recounts her struggles to satisfy the demands of her father and their ranch without compromising her own writing career.
23. Quoted in Quantic and Hafen, 151.
24. "Magisterial Visions: Recent Anglo-American Scholarship on the Represented Landscape." *American Quarterly*. 47.1 (March 1995): 145.
25. Frederick Manfred. *The Golden Bowl*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1944). Further references to this work are cited in the text and come from this edition.
26. Siouxland is Manfred's term for the triangle where South Dakota, Nebraska and Iowa meet.
27. Robert Kroetsch. *Badlands*. 1975. (Toronto: GenPaperback, 1982).
28. *Main Traveled Roads*. 1891. (New York: Harper and Rose, 1956), 126-141. Further references to this work are cited in the text and come from this edition.
29. This story is Garland's most direct advocacy of Henry George's single tax theory, a proposal supported by the Populists and other Westerners in the 1890s. Under George's proposal, all land would be taxed at the same rate to discourage land speculation that especially hurt farmers.
30. Martha Ostenso. *Wild Geese*. (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1924). Further references to this work are cited in the text and come from this edition.
31. Rudy Wiebe. *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. (Canada: McClelland and Stewart, 1962). Further references to this work are cited in the text and come from this edition.
32. Mari Sandoz. *Slogum House*. 1937. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981).
33. Gulla's brother, with the help of her sons, castrates Réne Dumur of Dumur County's founding family, thus symbolically castrating the land as well.
34. Sandoz drew on her family's own experiences and local history of the Sandhills region for her fictionalized account of the region's conflicts. Her extensive research collection is in Love Library at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.
35. Louise Erdrich. *The Bingo Balace*. (New York: Macmillan, 1994). Further references to this work are cited in the text and come from this edition.
36. For further discussion of land as a spiritual landscape in the works of Norris and Butala see Diane Quantic, "Women's Response to the Great Plains Landscape as Spiritual Domain." *Literature and Belief*. 32.1 (Spring 2003): 57-79.
37. Sharon Butala. *Wild Stone Heart*. (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2000). Further references to this work are cited in the text and come from this edition. See also Butala's earlier account of her life on the ranch, *The Perfection of the Morning: An Apprenticeship in Nature*. (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1993).