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Reimagining the West: A Consideration of the Discipline

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Over the past three years, I have had occasion to consider the significance of the literary terms *western* and *American*. As president of the Western Literature Association in 1993, I reviewed almost 250 papers that considered a staggering range of topics from cowboy ecology, western irrigation, trees and bears, and women in the wilderness, to natural history writing, photography, and European imaginings of the West. In addition to sessions of the usual western canonical writers—Cather, Twain, Sandoz—readers considered Joan Didion, Booker T. Washington, David Rabe, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Walter Mosley. In 1994, there were papers on film, regionalism, the postmodern West, Native American storytelling, and industrial tourism. Curious to know how the recent increase of interest in ecocriticism, film, historical, and cultural issues compared with past concerns of the association, I did a quick survey of *Western American Literature*'s table of contents since 1971. That year, there were articles on Australia and tragedy in *Western American Literature*, as well as pieces on Wister, Crane, Guthrie, and Steinbeck. In 1972, one issue was devoted to Willa Cather and another was entitled “Why Write about the West?” (7.3), with commentaries by Guthrie, Jeffers, Ferril, and Stafford. This pattern prevails for a number of years: the odd topic such as Mormon Westerns (8.1&2) or western periodical literature (10.1) scattered among articles on a fairly predictable set of authors: Guthrie, Norris, Steinbeck, Stegner. In 1978, C. L. Sonnichsen’s “Sex on the Lone Prairee” appeared and Fred Erisman wrote of “Jack Schaeffer: The Writer as Ecologist” (13.1). Articles on Native American writers began to appear with increasing regularity, and pieces by Max Westbrook (“The Authentic Western” [13.3, 1978]) and William Bloodworth (“Literary Extensions of the Formula Western” [14.4, 1980]) demonstrated that a recognizable body of criticism was being developed. In the 1980s, Susan J. Tybursky’s article on Wallace Stegner’s wilderness vision (18.2, 1983) and Glen Love’s on Hemingway’s “Indian Virtues” (22.3, 1987) focused on a relatively new critical arena—ecocriticism—hinted at a decade earlier by Erisman. In 1989, articles by Carl Bredahl, “Valuing Surface” (24.2), and SueEllen Campbell, “The Land and Language of Desire” (24.3), and Forrest Robinson’s article “The New Historicism and the Old West” the following year (25.2) demonstrated the importance of western American literature, not as a regional (read: provincial) point of view but as an important critical perspective within American literature. Of course, there are other indicators of the developments in western literary studies: *Western American Literature*'s annual bibliography is an obvious bellwether, but even this cursory survey of

Western American Literature clearly demonstrates that western literary studies has become a legitimate field of critical inquiry.

As the western literary canon has grown, and critical considerations have developed, I have been pursuing my own interest in Great Plains literature, trying to imagine the unique qualities of the literature produced in a region that inspires—almost impels—people to write about it. I began attending Western Literature Association meetings in 1979, hoping to find a critical context for my developing theories. I wasn't sure that anyone else shared my interests, but I found in the annual meetings, and in the articles and reviews in *Western American Literature*, the resources and support I needed to keep the pen moving. Then, as I was finishing this study of Great Plains fiction, I was elected president of the Western Literature Association and for a year or two, as I read papers and planned meetings, I had to think about “the West.”

Comments and incidents in that presidential year contributed to my efforts to imagine the West and our scholarly commitment to that region. On a fundamental level, a query from one would-be participant who wanted to know if a paper about William Blake (yes, the English one) would be appropriate made me think about the West. My goodness, I thought, have we misappropriated a direction? This question raises a whole host of issues. How does western literature fit into the scheme of the traditional Western (i.e., European-American) canon? Is there a recognizable Western American canon? How do we determine the parameters of western literature and its relationship to scholarly studies of cultural diversity, feminism, ecocriticism, New Historicism, New Regionalism, bioregionalism?

To provide a context for these very broad questions, I will relate a story (a frequent device in western writing). A few months after the 1993 meeting, I found myself with a book contract in hand. How the contract got there is the story. Through a series of serendipitous events, my imagining of the West had focused for ten years or so on a topic and a region so obscure that most of the region's population, much of the academy, and perhaps not a few WLA members still do not know it exists. For years, I was convinced that the study of Great Plains literature was a bad scholarly choice: for one thing, I could think of no reason to apply for grants to study exotic places. At Wichita State, although I was in the very center of the region, no one seemed remotely aware that there is a vibrant literature about the world right outside the city.

Nevertheless, in retrospect, the imagining that culminated in *The Nature of the Place: A Study of Great Plains Fiction* (1995) seems absolutely logical, if not inevitable. The history of this project parallels the development of the “new” regionalism on the Great Plains, from a dearth to a plethora of material in thirty years. In 1966, when I began work on my Ph.D. at Kansas State University, a sociology professor, the late Wayne Rohrer, asked me to help him answer a question about the Middle West, defined at this point as the region from Kansas to Ohio and north: does the literature of the region reflect the same concerns and problems that are evident in the sociological research? For a year, I plowed through sociology journals looking for any study of the Middle West written between 1930 and 1960. At this point, I had no label, no methodology, no theories beyond this simple expedient. But at the end of the year I *did* have a broad context for my considerations of the region's literature.

Yes, there did seem to be some parallels, but the literature was infinitely more interesting and revealing than sociology. The first bit of serendipity.

Out of this experience came a dissertation on the Revolt from the Village in late nineteenth-century Middle Western fiction, with chapters on Garland, Cather, William Allen White, and others, and co-authorship of a book manuscript, organized by traditional sociological considerations—education, family, religion, and so on. I provided examples from the literature that seemed to corroborate the sociologist's findings. Although we published two articles, it was clear that neither discipline did the topic justice. The manuscript lacked a compelling thesis, and after one publisher's rejection, we abandoned the project.

At this point, in the mid-1970s, I was aware of a few studies that seemed to relate to what I had been reading and thinking about: Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950) and Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), of course. Although Smith includes the Great Plains in his consideration of the West, the region was not often included in the studies of geographers, literary critics, or historians, with the exception of Walter Prescott Webb. The dichotomies established by Smith and Marx have governed much of our conceptualization about the West in the last forty-five years, but Great Plains fiction, I discovered early in my reading, is far too ambiguous to fit neatly into opposing pigeonholes. The early literary histories that considered the region, *The Prairie and the Making of Middle America* (1926) by Dorothy Dondore and Lucy Lockwood Hazard's *The Frontier in American Literature* (1927) were reprinted in the 1960s, an indication of the region's renewed scholarly standing, but their world was then, and certainly is now, valuable only as artifact. Hazard has a chapter of "The Frontier and the Nester," a subject and an occupation she regards as of historical, not continuing interest, and Dondore asserts that Cather suffers in comparison to Knut Hamsen and Louis Hemon because she had "too much material" (225). By the 1980s, I was convinced that there was a body of literature that described the Great Plains as a region distinct in its history, geography, ecology, and culture. I kept reading Great Plains texts. My stockpile grew exponentially: one book would lead me to two others. A casual mention of my interest here or there often led to serendipitous finds. A Mennonite student told me about Canadian novelist Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1968). Philip Kimball's *Harvesting Ballads* (1984) was written by the son of a clerk at my local post office. I read and re-read Great Plains texts—Sandoz, Manfred, Wilder, Stegner, Garland, Rølvaag, Morris—then Sophus Keith Winther, John Ise, Johan Bojer, Bess Streeter Aldrich, and, thanks to scholars of western Canadian literature, Sinclair Ross and Margaret Laurence. The list grew: the final version includes over 150 works. Invariably, as I finished a draft, someone published yet another Great Plains novel. Fred Manfred's *Of Lizards and Angels* (1992) came out a few months too late to get more than a passing mention in the final draft. I "found" yet other Great Plains writers in the months that the manuscript was in press. As I read and wrote and wrote, the texts began to coalesce into a distinct, coherent body of literature. I could define a Great Plains work: a work that focuses on the relationship between the land, the great plain that rises between the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains, and the people who transform this often hostile environment into the ordered fields and established communities.

During a sabbatical year in the 1980s, I began to consider how I would explain my emerging ideas.

Remembering our focus on the relation between sociology and literature, I organized my study along sociological lines: home, school, religion, and so on. My first outline was seventeen pages long and at the end of that year, when I quit writing, I was half way through it. By this time, I had new questions that arose from the works themselves to add to the nagging queries raised by my reading of the scholars who were developing and redefining the West conceptualized for us by Henry Nash Smith. What lured people onto the Great Plains? What held in a place with a climate that often seemed consciously bent on destroying them? What determined their quality of life: the land? their imported society? I continued to search the literature with occasional suggestions from the knowledgeable and sympathetic readers and scholars I discovered, mostly at WLA meetings. The questions that came out of my readings of the novels led me to consider Leonard Lutwack's *The Role of Place in Literature* (1984), and the theories of space developed by Yi-Fu Tuan. The work of Lutwack and Tuan, while too wide-ranging to provide specific support for my developing ideas, first introduced me to the parameters of space in literature—spatial values such as extent and direction, their relationship to the physical body, and, most important, the metaphorical implications of space and place. Wilbur Zelinsky, in his cultural geographic atlases, offered definitions of the qualities and boundaries of the region. I discovered James Malin and his work on the Great Plains grasslands ecology. Here was an ecologist to complement Webb's historical perspective on the distinctive nature of the region. Looking at soil and history, one begins to realize the roots of the ambivalence toward the land that permeates Great Plains fiction. I turned to primary historical texts: the journals of Lewis and Clark and reports of the expeditions of Long and Pike. I read western history, looked at western art, and examined—often with dismay—my expanding collection of Great Plains works.

After I had finished the second or third draft, I had to catch up with the scholarly explosion that occurred while I was writing. Some of it was immediately relevant to the Great Plains, but much of it also reflects the developing scholarship increasingly evident in *Western American Literature*. Robert Thacker's book *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination* (1989) and Carl Bredahl's *New Ground: Western Narrative and the Literary Canon* (1989) led me to consider how western writers must learn to articulate what they see and to consider once again, specifically in the western context, the literary value of space. Bredahl's insistence that space informs the western imagination provides us with a way to value the surface of a text, not the post-modern artificiality of surfaces, or the enclosed texts at the core of the traditional American canon, but the physical and spiritual site of existence (30–31). Thacker approaches my own concerns even more closely, considering the "great fact," the "land itself," and our developing ability to conceptualize an appropriate literary vocabulary.

Glen Love's articles on the environment and Hal Somonson's work on Rølvaag and his studies of the frontier provided an even broader arrangement for my theoretical context. There were other studies to consider: scholars were examining critical issues that at once enriched my own study. An entire discipline—ecocriticism—seemed to be taking shape. Lee Clark Mitchell's *Witnesses to a Vanishing America* (1981) on nineteenth-century attitudes toward wilderness, and Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967), confirmed some of these attitudes toward wilderness that I found in Great Plains fictions. Nash provides a context for the historical attitude toward wilderness as a forbidding, often evil place. Mitchell's study of the inability of

Americans in the nineteenth century to acknowledge the contradictions in their attitudes toward wilderness and progress provides a context for consideration of the transformation of the myths of westward expansion that occurs in Great Plains fictions. Ironically, as Mitchell points out and as Great Plains fiction illustrates, American society needs continuous regeneration through contact with nature: but nature everywhere recedes. Nowhere is this more obvious than on the surface of the Great Plains. That point when the wandering pioneer becomes the settler clarifies an insoluble contradiction at the heart of America's self-conception: we value that which we can achieve only at the expense of its destruction.

Historian Ray Allen Billington's study *Land of Savagery / Land of Promise* (1981) traces the nineteenth-century European popular views of American frontier in promotional writing, travel narratives, and popular literature. Finally, cultural geographer James Shortridge's study *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (1989) provided a vernacular description of the region, gleaned from popular literature, a kind of counterpoint to Billington's European context. When I realized how my list of works consulted had grown, my own work suddenly seemed rooted in a valid critical context. It would not be an echo of earlier, pedantic surveys but part of a maturing scholarly discipline.

Of course, scholarship on all of the authors I was considering continued its growth spurt. James Woodress and Susan Rosowski brought out new works on Cather. Helen Stauffer's study of Sandoz appeared, and there was a steady increase in scholarship on Rølvaag, Stegner, Morris, Manfred, Wilder, Canadians Sinclair Ross and Margaret Laurence, even Bess Streeter Aldrich and, of course, Cooper's *The Prairie*. Gary Moulton, at the University of Nebraska Press, started publishing the multi-volume project, the journals of Lewis and Clark. There were days I was glad Lois Philips Hudson and John Ise had enjoyed relative scholarly obscurity and no one had discovered Mela Meisner Lindsay.

I read more novels. Robert Thacker's work led me to Canadian writers Robert Kroetsch, Robert J. C. Stead, and Frederick Philip Grove. Several significant Great Plains novels appeared in the 1980s: Douglas Unger's *Leaving the Land* (1984), Rob Hansen's *Nebraska: Stories* (1989), Kent Haruf's *The Tie That Binds* (1984), and Wright Morris's *Plains Song* (1980). Volumes of complementary nonfiction were published: William Least Heat Moon's *Prairyerth* (1991), Linda Hasselstrom's accounts of ranching life *Land Circle* (1991) and *Going Over East* (1987), and Kathleen Norris's spiritual geography, *Dakota* (1993).

While I was absorbed in all of this, affirmation of the region's new visibility began to appear. Regional presses in Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Iowa have published increasingly voluminous regional scholarship. Centers for the Study of the Great Plains were established at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln and at Emporia State University in Kansas. The farm crises brought attention from the popular press and even Hollywood. Suddenly it seemed the West, and especially the Great Plains, was a hot topic.

A clear thesis emerged from all of this reading. My focus now was on four works: land, society, myth, and reality, and the ways these four terms reflect theory and practice in Great Plains fiction. I examined the texts with these questions in mind: What myths drew people onto the Great Plains? When they found themselves

exposed on the flat, unfamiliar, and seemingly hostile land, how did they adapt to the land and how did they establish their society? Just how did reality alter their mythic expectations? Although the text follows, roughly, a chronological sequence, the thread is the myths: how they were conceived, searched for, tested, acted upon, limited, and finally transformed by place and language in Great Plains fiction.

The critical issues that I recognized in the scholarship arose from the texts themselves, the nature of the place they describe, and the approach I took toward the texts. As I was considering Great Plains texts, others were examining similar texts and contexts. The concept of the West was being reimagined once again. My point is this: most scholars of western American literature, writing in the last twenty or thirty years, could relate a similar story. In the years that I worked on *The Nature of the Place*, western scholarship became a mature field of study with a significant body of scholarship. The scholarly explosion in my own admittedly narrow field, the new subjects and critical perspectives reflected in *Western American Literature* articles, the hundreds of books reviewed in the journal each year, all reflect the growth of the increasingly complex discipline called western American literature.

Perhaps this phenomenon is a New Regionalism, or maybe it is yet another permutation of the Old Regionalism that re-emerges in slightly different forms with predictable regularity: the local color of the 1890s, the Revolt from the Village in the 1920s, the re-emergence of the Romantic South at regular intervals. At any rate, we are facing an abundance of possibilities for our scholarly projects. At the same time, I puzzle over the piles of examination copies of texts accumulating in my office for courses on western literature, multicultural literatures, cultural studies, environmental studies. These concerns are the focus of much discussion among teachers across the academy, and they are central to our consideration of the West. I think we all wonder: How are we to make sense of this new material? Whether one adapts the rhetoric of the New Historicists, ecocriticism, postmodernism, feminism, hermeneutics, or any of the other critical theories afloat in the academy, the relation of text to context is of paramount importance. As the negating effects of deconstruction are deflected by the broader scope of these theories—place and surface—the focus of much regional scholarship gains scholarly standing. Western American literature presents an abundance of texts, rich in theoretical possibilities.

I want to end with a look at two recent texts to suggest the direction that western literary studies might take. Both of these focus on the most important element in the West: the nature of the land itself, its intrinsic value, and society's relation to it. It seems that any reimagining of a western American literary text must include a consideration of context.

The first text suggests that we simply abandon the West, and more specifically the Great Plains. In *Where the Buffalo Roam* (1993), Anne Matthews traces the modern-day explorations of the Great American Desert with Frank and Deborah Popper, whose computer printouts on land-use patterns seems to prove that many Great Plains counties are economically—and therefore socially, culturally, ecologically, and, of course, literally—dead. Their Buffalo Commons image has raised the hackles of every watch dog on the Great Plains: “Frontier

conditions are returning to the West,” they assert, equating *frontier* with a place “deeply uncomfortable and scary to live on” (130). Their assertion that the old myths’ rationales of expansion, settlement, defense, and economic development no longer apply admittedly contains some elements of truth, but they do not seem to realize what the literature reveals: that the region’s residents are fiercely committed to this “useless” land in part, ironically, because they have invested so much energy in it in their effort to establish and maintain their communities. The Poppers offer no real alternative to abandonment and despair—only a call to “clear out of town” and a rather facile version of ecotourism: bison-spotting expeditions, wild life photo safaris, ghost town tours, tribal buffalo dances and historic parks, buffalo hunts (to cull the herds humanely, of course), maybe even a living museum of a 1900 Kansas wheat farm or an 1870 Lakota village (154). It sounds like a Disney nightmare and it might be funny if it wasn’t getting so much attention, and if there weren’t some disturbing truths at the core of their proposal.

The Great Plains and the West are changing, and if one defines *frontier* statistically, as the Poppers do, as a population density of not more than two persons per square mile, then we would have to admit that much of the inland West is, in a sense, a retrograde frontier. Any student of the region will readily admit that much of the region probably cannot support much population and a great deal of it should never have been cultivated, and yet those who have lived in the West, and certainly those of us who study it, recognize the intrinsic value of the land and the culture the region has nurtured. The range of the concerns at WLA meetings and in scholarly articles on the region attests to the vitality of western studies and the West and, more important, to the range and complexity of issues that demand our attention.

The second text is one of Donald Worster’s studies of western history. Worster provides an alternative to the Poppers’ pessimism. For example, in *An Unsettled Country* (1994), Worster suggests that what 77 million Westerners have in common, despite the demographic and cultural changes so visibly illustrated by the range of our considerations at WLA meetings, is the land itself. Worster proposes several ways to re-vision the West. First, he urges us, as he did in his speech at the 1993 WLA meeting, to recognize, as John Wesley Powell did, that the United States is not a seamless whole and that communities appropriate to the East might not be best for the arid West. Those with immediate interest in western resources that contribute to the stability of small communities—water, timber, and grass—should control and manage the land. Obviously, local communities cannot bear all the economic burdens of saving wildlife and wilderness, but Worster still insists that we can reimagine a new, stable model for living on the land in the West. Second, Worster suggests that our vision of the West should focus not on “two-legged people of the male gender, with white skins and pronounced entrepreneurial drives,” but on the four-leggeds and their interests as well. If there were “no grizzly bears, no cattle or horses, no salmon, no wolves, no pumas, no grasshoppers or gulls or roadrunners,” who would want to go there and read its history? (58, 59). Worster is not advocating a kind of anthropomorphic rejection of modernity in favor of animal culture or Indian cosmology, but rather an acknowledgment that we see the relationship between people, animals, and the land, a part of the concept Aldo Leopold called “land-as-a-whole” (qtd. in Worster 83). Worster suggests that this vision of the West, based as it is on the original biota, will create

the “notion of community that we want to nurture henceforth in the West.”

It is obvious to me, as I consider the issues raised at WLA meetings and in the published Western scholarship over the last fifteen years, that we do consider western literature within this inclusive context. Undoubtedly, my own study would have become something quite different if I had not been a part of a group with this broad perspective.

Our understanding of the West has changed in the last one hundred years from the simplistic urge of local colorists to preserve the passing scene and the pedestrian but necessary catalogue of Dorothy Dondore. Today, the studies of Smith and Marx are valuable as starting points. Some of the articles in *The Literary History of the American West* (1987) are already out of date. In the past two years, we have lost the voices of Wallace Stegner, William Stafford, Frederick Manfred, and Paul Horgan. But no matter what form the new regionalism assumes or who articulates it, we will continue to define and imagine the West.

In a letter written after our 1993 meeting, novelist Kent Nelson, who read from his works at that meeting, raised some questions pertinent to this discussion:

It did cross my mind ... that people were much more interested in the esoteric past than in what the conference was about, which I thought was about the future and what writers were writing now. ... There were few questions about how anything related.

We should heed Kent Nelson’s advice and consider the possibilities implicit in the intricate relationship that Worster catalogues in his examination of the region’s history. Perhaps we can refute the Poppers’ pejorative term. Certainly it is important to consider all of these issues as they apply to the region and its literature. It is especially important to consider the future of a place that we obviously care about and that is threatened with an ignominious end as a Buffalo Commons or annihilation by greed and government mismanagement.

As Worster says, “Learn where you are. Learn about this place and its history. Learn not only the history of its people but the history of the land itself, its deep history. Learn to adapt your ideas and institutions to that land. Learn to work together if you mean to endure” (30).

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