

THE SYNDROME OF OPEN SPACES: ENVISIONING THE GREAT PLAINS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

by
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Regions are important and complex textured threads in the tapestry of any nation's culture. A magnificent mixture of nature, culture, and specific historical moments, regions offer one framework for understanding who we are (identity), what happened to us (history), how we make sense of our local environment (space and place), and what we can look forward to (the future). Regions are elusive and attractive cultural and environmental phenomena as they are never fixed or unchanging. Writers of the regional often run up against the challenge of defining what a region is, and Great Plains writers are no exception.

Though the American Great Plains includes generous parts of ten states,¹ many authors speak of the region as if it were a single, homogeneous region. Coming from Britain to the American West, I have continually been struck how the sense of regions in the two nations is different. In Britain, regions are small, change within a few miles, and are defined using a mix of a particular physical geography, cultural indicators from dialect and accent to food, along with a rich variety of social and economic features. In comparison, the regionalizing narratives that bring together such an enormous part of the continent into something called the Great Plains, are baffling and compelling. It would seem that I am not the only British person interested in the problems of regionalizing the Great Plains. Recently, Jonathan Raban wrote an acclaimed non-fiction narrative, *Bad Land*, examining the northern Plains states of Montana and the Dakotas. With an interesting mix of history

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and travelogue Raban ruminates on the reasons why some stayed and many more left this vast landscape. He concludes that not only were the Plains politically disenfranchised, but that one of the ramifications of this was that the region was held in low regard, and that a weak sense of regional identity ruled the place.

We were in a state that wasn't on the map of the U.S., Dakkana, or Monota. It had a distinct geography and economy, but it had been effectively disenfranchised by its more crowded neighbours. So it was a natural target-area for outsiders with big ideas. The latest scheme was to give the land back to the American bison, and turn it into a "Buffalo Commons" It was the old story, of the prairie as a blank page. The New Jersey wilderness enthusiasts were in the tradition of James J. Hill and Hardy Webster Campbell, sketching a fantastic future for the land, with an Olympian disregard for what was actually here.²

For Raban the answer to the "blank page" problem was in the celebration of the region's history; this, he argues, would prove a useful corrective. Plains people, he suggests, needed to retain a history in the landscape: "To outsiders, this land still looked like *space*, and could as easily be a weapons test-site, or a safari park. To the ranching families, it was a *place*; landscape, not mere land, with all the shape and particularity of home."³ Is Raban right? Can reclaiming history negate the blank page regionalism that he sees the Plains suffering from? Perhaps history can fill an important role for the Plains, as Raban advocates, and perhaps not if the histories of the Plains have themselves helped create a sense of this region as a *tabula rasa*.

Certainly Raban is not alone in considering the region in this way. More recently, commentator Thomas Franks echoes this sense of the *tabula rasa* when he argues that the perception of Kansas is that it is underpinned by the belief that the state is merely a blank slate, "It was as though the blank landscape prompted dreams of a blank-slate society, a place where institutions might be remade as the human mind saw fit."⁴

This paper explores how the blank page regional concept is present in four twentieth century non-fiction articulations of the Great Plains stretching from 1931 to 1979, and concludes with a discussion of the implications of that perspective.

First, I want to suggest that the *tabula rasa* concept is part of a much larger issue, an issue I have termed “the syndrome of open spaces.”⁵ This syndrome has three underlying assumptions. First is that the Great Plains includes so much of the earth's surface that it appears almost to be an enormous single canvas, covering a quarter of the lower 48 states, a homogenous blank slate, upon which histories, fictions, and other literature are placed. Not only are the Great Plains portrayed in this way in a physical sense (i.e. they share the same physiographic and climatologic features), but there is also a desire by some authors to speak of a homogeneous cultural landscape.

The second assumption of the syndrome is that most authors believe nature and/or technology will provide the solution to economic or cultural problems afflicting the region. The desire for natural or technological fixes can be understood as two sides of the same coin. On one side there is disdain for human development and up goes a cry for a return to nature, and its morally pure coda. On the other side of the coin, is the belief that technology will provide the answers to the region's problems, fixes that will often decrease the need for agricultural income that is seen to be at the mercy of fickle nature and globalized commodity prices that shape so much of this agricultural region. Both of these rhetorical positions rely on the creation of an evil other. Either culture is tainted by capitalism, a system that takes people away from a more natural way of living, or nature is suspect because of its unpredictability, and, as such, it must either be tamed or made not to matter for those who are subject to its vagaries. This, of course, is a rather black-and-white description of tendencies that are often more nuanced and complex. In articulating this analogy plainly I hope to come to grips with the narratives that house such assumptions.

The last assumption within the syndrome of open spaces is that authors often tell the story of the Great Plains as if it were the springboard for a new utopia. In some circumstances they may reach to

the past as a guide to creating this idealized future landscape. In other circumstances, they may project a bright new vision onto the Great Plains environs, but its effects are often to wipe away either historical or contemporary experiences.

How does the syndrome of open spaces work in the stories of the Great Plains region? To explore this more fully, Great Plains narratives from four twentieth-century writers were chosen—Walter Prescott Webb (1931), Carl Kraenzel (1955), Mari Sandoz (1961) and Donald Worster (1979)—that span a fifty year period that includes both the rise in interest in regionalism, its falling away in the 1950s and 1960s, and its rekindling in the 1970s. These texts were chosen because they spanned various decades and were written from a variety of perspectives, two by historians (Webb and Worster), a sociologist (Kraenzel) and an anthropologist (Sandoz). Together, they offer various perspectives on the history of the region shaded in some part by the syndrome of open spaces.⁶

The Great Plains in the 1930s

A sense of regionalism and its use as an organizing principle have shifted dramatically in the twentieth century in the work of both historians and geographers. In the post World War I period many cultural critics, both inside and outside the region, saw the concept of regionalism as the answer to various cultural concerns: the decadence of Modernism, the utter devastation of the First World War, the economic depression agriculture suffered after the war, the rise of fascism in Europe, and the powerful American financial and political centers of the East. Regionalists believed that a return to regionalism offered something urban Americans lacked, namely the ability to be in touch with their roots.

During this interwar period, the Great Plains region was distinguished in academic writings and conferences, literary writings, as well as the arts and film. The historian Walter Prescott Webb came to teach regional history at the University of Texas in 1918. In his book, *The Great Plains* (1931), Webb defined the Great Plains as a distinct environmentally unified region and described the region in this way,

“The Great Plains environment, as defined in this volume, constitutes a geographic unity whose influences have been so powerful as to put a characteristic mark upon everything that survives within its borders.”⁷ Academic interest continued in Great Plains regionalism and in 1942 there were two conferences on the Great Plains, held in New York and Nebraska.⁸ The region was articulated in the popular imagination of literary authors such as John Steinbeck, artists such as John Steuart Curry, and film directors such as John Ford in his powerful interpretation of John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*, as well as Pare Lorenz’s documentary film *The Plow that Broke the Plains*. The intense focus on American regionalism, together with the spectacular environmental, ecological, and cultural devastation experienced by the Plains, brought on by the combination of the Depression and the Dust Bowl, all worked to shape an especially powerful and long lasting sense of the American Great Plains.

During the 1930s, the Great Plains was understood and represented primarily in terms of a region as an environmental whole, drawing upon both physical and environmental characteristics. As environmental historian Dan Flores has argued, Webb’s Plains make us pay attention to:

The confluence between specific ecological realities and specific human adaptations is a region (in the relatively simple terms of *The Great Plains*, such as the use of windmills and barbed wire in semiarid, open grassland) that are a part of the evolution of cultures in places.⁹

More critically, regional scholar Frederick Luebke argued that the works of historians and sociologists were often underpinned by the work of geographers who sought to articulate regional environmental homogeneity.¹⁰ Webb’s work was the first regional history of the Great Plains. Published in 1931, it was written in a lively manner, sold well, is still in print, and is used widely as a text in university classes. It has, therefore, shaped much of historical and contemporary scholarly thinking about the Plains as a region. Webb, like other regional scholars, used environmental determinants to sum up the region:

From the study emerged the recognition of a far-reaching truth, a principle of wide applicability. It was that the Great Plains environment, as defined in this volume, constitutes a geographic unity whose influences have been so powerful as to put a characteristic mark upon everything that survives within its borders. Particularly did it alter the American institutions and cultural complexes that came from a humid and timbered region.¹¹

If any text about the Plains could presume the title canonical, this would be it, and many of the arguments that Webb posits have been reiterated time and again in the works of subsequent writers.

Perhaps the most influential aspect of Webb's work is the manner in which he defined the region. Using at least eight different "natural" variables to characterize the place, Webb listed topography, rainfall and evaporation rates, vegetation and even populations of black-tailed jackrabbits that together were central in defining the region. One of the most enduring assumptions underlying Webb's writing on the Plains as a region was that this place is environmentally determined. A particular combination of climate, soils, vegetation and topography give meaning to the Plains and virtually determines the type of culture that can exist there.¹² This choice of determining boundaries according to environmental criteria is significant as it is one of the long-lasting legacies of Webb's work. Boundaries need not be constructed using only environmental determinants, of course. As James Shortridge has demonstrated in his work on the Middle West, regional boundaries are really perceptual entities that often retain flexibility over time.¹³ But, according to Webb, the Plains had almost always been outlined in physical terms, and the dominance of these environmental determinants has the interesting ramification of convincing readers to believe that this place is some how a "natural" creation, as opposed, for example, to the product of a relationship between nature and culture, or a purely cultural production. Such a belief, in turn, has important implications for the understanding of this region, historically, contemporarily, and in the way the future is envisioned. But Webb did not stop at describing the natural environment as a context for human endeavor; nature was also an actor

in history. Webb's environment has some interesting teleological qualities—the belief that purpose and design are apparent in nature and that, by studying nature, we can create a better culture. For example, he argued that ranching was a human pursuit that grew “naturally” out of the landscape—an industry that “was almost perfectly adapted to that region.”¹⁴

Webb was primarily interested in defining the region in relation to the East. Again and again, Webb was adamant that the Great Plains begins at the 98th meridian. The central tenor of Webb's argument was that farmers from the humid climates of the eastern United States crossed a critical cultural and environmental boundary, the 98th meridian, in order to inhabit this semiarid landscape. However, he did not make such a declaration for the dividing line between the Plains and the rest of the West. Indeed, he interchanged the terms West and Great Plains frequently, suggesting no strong sense of where one region ended and the other began.

Webb was insistent that the 98th meridian was a “natural” line based on the consideration of numerous environmental characteristics. West of this meridian, however, Webb described a very general, undifferentiated region, and thus he exhibited the first assumption of the syndrome of open spaces, homogeneity. This homogenous whole is not just physical; the culture of male cowboy life is both universal and utopic. Webb defined something like a perfect, almost edenic, time and place in Plains history—the southern Plains cattle kingdom—that quickly passed in the rush for agriculture. In that homosocial world with its own cultural icons and literature (the cowboy, his songs and poetry), women were nearly absent, and those that were there often went mad. This male landscape of cowboys and ranching is discussed as if it represented the Plains as a whole:

In short, it was an industry remarkably adapted to the country that it appropriated In some way range life was idyllic. The land had no value, the grass was free, the water belonged to the first comer, and about all a man needed to ‘set him up’ in business was a ‘bunch’ of cattle and enough common sense to

handle them and enough courage to protect them without aid of the law.¹⁵

His teleological landscape narrative takes a predictable declensionist dive as the perfect Plains ranching life was disrupted by the arrival of homesteading farmers who broke up the free land into plots they purchased from the government. Webb saw the Homestead Act of 1862, an eastern law developed in the humid culture of Washington D.C. (where water was ubiquitous rather than at a premium), as destroying his Eden, and he clearly mourned the loss.

According to Donald Worster's short, unpublished biography of Webb, this great regional historian did not travel much in the Great Plains or the West, other than Texas, where he taught. Indeed, he spent much of his time when not teaching in Texas either in the East or at Oxford University.¹⁶ It was two decades after the publication of *The Great Plains* that Webb looked at the broader subject of the American West.¹⁷ He shifted his sense of the Plains, redefining it as part of the Desert Rim States. This nomenclature represents a dramatic shift, instead of the 98th meridian being a major divide between East and West, it was the desert that ultimately defined the heart of the West; the Plains were only its periphery. This, amongst other reasons, should suggest to Webb's readers that he was so heavily influenced by more local Texas history in his earlier Plains writing, that one could almost call his work Texacentric.

The Plains in the 1950s

By the 1950s, the focus on regionalism and regionalist studies in American culture had fallen out of favor. Cold War ideology rejected regional division, differentiation, and diversity in exchange for the celebration of and study about national unity. As the economic and ecological ravages of the Dust Bowl abated and the war years ended, so came a period when many commentators declared regionalism over. In 1957, writer Wright Mossi declared regions dead, "The only regions left are those the artist must imagine. They lie beyond the usual forms of salvage. No matter where we go, in America today, we shall find what we left behind."¹⁸

Carl Kraenzel's work, *The Great Plains in Transition* (1955), flew in the face of the disregard of regionalist study. Kraenzel also flew in the face of two of the central assumptions underpinning Webb's regional narrative, environmental determinism and the teleological aspects of the Plains. Unlike Webb, Kraenzel, a sociologist, prepared his history as a context for the discussion of present problems and possible futures. In comparison to Webb, Kraenzel's work is perhaps the most general of Plains histories, suggesting no particular bias to any one part of the Great Plains region; indeed the author draws examples from every major section of the region.

Though Kraenzel embraced Webb's 98th meridian as the eastern border for the Great Plains, he questioned Webb's homogeneous narrative of the region: "The Great Plains are generally identified as the last of American's frontiers, and as an area without a spirit of unity. This is the case only because humid-area man believes this to be so. In reality, the region's history is old, and there was a time when there was unity in the events on the Plains."¹⁹ Rejecting Webb's argument that both history and geography had forged a homogeneous region, Kraenzel described the contemporary Plains as a fractured and unconnected place. While accepting that the Plains shared a similar physical environment that could be distinguished from the humid East and arid West, Kraenzel argued that this degree of unity had been destroyed by what he called a "humid-area way of life"—a nod to the influence of Webb's work.²⁰

Taking the notion of environmentalism further, Kraenzel, like Webb, discussed the cultural shift from wet to dryland life. Unlike Webb, however, Kraenzel narrated this shift in far less heroic terms. Whereas Webb saw a new dryland culture being created under difficult circumstances, Kraenzel hypothesized that the shift in environment from humid to a dryland damaged settlers' psychological makeup. In contrast to Webb, Kraenzel suggested that humid-life ways had not been left behind in the battle with the Plains semi-aridity.

Though Kraenzel identified an holistic Plains prior to the intervention of Euro-Americans, he did not attempt to create a utopian model from that history. Instead, he concentrated on the contemporary economic, cultural, and political fissures across the region:

[T]he Plains have never been unified socially, economically or culturally, but in the years following the Louisiana Purchase the Plains were thought of, for the first and perhaps only time, as an integrated unit and were so treated by humid-area leaders and consequently by the national government. For the first and perhaps only time there was public interest in the region as a whole. . . . What happened in any one part of the Plains was usually duplicated in other parts. After 1846, this unified approach to and attitude towards the Plains began to disappear, and never since has the region been able to demand such national consideration as a geographical or historical unit.²¹

Webb endeavored to produce an enduring environmental regionalism, while Kraenzel talked of a brief social, economic, or cultural regionalism destroyed. In his effort to think about the future of the Great Plains, Kraenzel described an institutional and socially defined region that had fractured the Plains since the 1840s. In addition he pointed to contemporary problems such as the tension between rural and urban communities. He suggested that, although agriculture might have adapted to this semi-arid region, the people on Main Street—both professionals and laborers—had not:

Constantly alert to the tempo of economic, social, and political forces outside the region, this segment of the population is uninformed and confused about native issues at stake. Yet, unknowingly, these people bear the responsibility for the future of their land. When it is realized that the residents of the Plains face this task of developing a suitable way of living without the help of region-centered cities and modern two-way communication, the job appears almost hopeless.²²

Having laid the foundation of Plains history as a region of contemporary division, Kraenzel devoted the last third of his work to a call for a new

regionalism, with a new sense of itself. Kraenzel demanded the creation of a flexible culture with new ways of thinking about water, land, agriculture, economics and politics, hand in hand with a reorganization of settlement patterns that would concentrate people in more strategic parts of the Plains. This new flexible culture would provide the answer to Plains problems. The idealized holism Kraenzel laid bare in the first part of the nineteenth century could then be recaptured and a new future could be imagined. In particular, Kraenzel envisioned the bringing together of “dry-land farmers, ranchers, irrigation farmers, laborers, business men and professional people.”²³ In other words, Kraenzel wanted the nonagricultural community members to act like farmers and ranchers and to create a reserve of resources that would help them to cope better with the environmental and economic cycles that make Plains life unique.

Great Plains in the 1960s

In academic scholarship, the 1960s saw a mitigation of the 1950s wholesale rejection of regionalism. In the midst of much civil rights tension, culture was understood to be the shaper of regionalism. The focus of regional study shifted to the ways in which different groups brought their cultural sensibilities to the region and how cultural traditions diffused through those regions. In Great Plains research a major focus became the role of the immigrant cultures to the region and cultural and regional geographers began to map food culture, religion, and linguistics as markers of culture and regionalism and the role of the environment was placed into a cultural context. One of the leaders of cultural regionalism was historian Frederick Leubke who made the case that:

The effect of the older scholarship was to reveal regional uniformities, just as the newer scholarship stresses interregional variation. Each discerns relationships that are beyond the analytical power of the other. Regions are therefore best conceptualized in terms of the interplay between environment and culture; they are best described and analyzed through appropriate comparisons in time, space, and culture.²⁴

This focus is evident in Mari Sandoz' *Love Song to the Plains*. Nebraska native and regional historian, biographer, novelist, teacher of creative writing, and authority on the Plains Indians, Mari Sandoz wrote *Love Song to the Plains* in 1961. *Love Song* returns to a far more environmentally focused narrative. Sandoz defined her Plains as running southward from the upper Saskatchewan River to the Rio Grande; "a high country, a big country of vast reaches, tremendous streams, and stories of death on the ridges, derring-do in the valleys, and the sweetness and heartbreak of springtime on the prairies."²⁵ Less interested than Webb and Kraenzel in establishing an east-west boundary, Sandoz was far more intrigued by the region's transnationality, running from Canada into Mexico. Eschewing the variables that define and redefine the 98th meridian as a sharp east-west break, Sandoz spoke of the Plains in terms of its watersheds and rivers:

Half of this region was the old Nebraska Territory that lay like a golden hackberry leaf in the sun, a giant curling, tilted leaf. The veins of it were the long streams rising out near the mountains and flowing eastward to the Big Muddy, the wild Missouri. The largest that cut through the center of the Plains was the broad, flat-watered Platte, usually pleasant and easygoing as an October day, and below it the Republican, deceptively limpid but roaring into sudden gully washers that flooded all the wide valley and could sweep away even the most powerful of the wilderness herds.

North of the Platte River the determined Niobrara cut a deep, three-hundred-mile canyon across the tablelands, the swift clear waters an eternal rebuke to the sullen gray of the Missouri that had to accept them. Beyond these streams, but still within the region that was a whole in nature before the foolish little lines of the white man cut it awkwardly this way and that, lay such rivers as the White, the Cheyenne, the Grand and the Cannonball, the Belle Fourche, the Powder and the Yellowstone.²⁶

Unlike Webb, Sandoz' landscape was defined not by meridians, climatic variables, or vegetation. Instead she used the architecture of water to shape her narrative, the "liquid arteries" that fanned out across the Plains providing lines of communication and trade amongst Indian groups. Thus, rather than creating an homogenized landscape, Sandoz effectively breaks up the Plains into sub regions that often reflect different moments in historical development. These watersheds provide a relatively nuanced landscape; however, Sandoz does characterize a culturally homogeneous place in terms of American Indian experiences.

As the quotation above suggests, Sandoz saw the pre-Euro-American landscape as a natural utopia, before the coming of the white men and their "foolish little lines," a reference to Jefferson's grid. With a portrayal of stone-aged "brown-skinned men" living with nature, before being fragmented by the coming of the white man, Sandoz was very clearly creating a utopian racial landscape of a pre-white past. Published in 1961, *Love Song* revealed an understanding of this region that did not rely on economics and politics. Instead, Sandoz offered a far more lyrical narrative, celebrating individuals and groups in a natural, utopian environment. As with Webb, she demonstrated a bias towards one area of the Plains, and thus may be understood as Nebraskacentric.

For Sandoz it was not only the Native Americans who lived in a utopian landscape. Hints of a similar landscape exist in her portrayal of the beginnings of Euro-American settlement. Sandoz uses a tone redolent of utopian self-sufficiency in true Jeffersonian style to describe fur traders, military occupants, and settlers. In doing so she created a particular glow of agricultural self-sufficiency around two nineteenth century figures, Manual Lisa and Colonel Atkinson.

In choosing Manual Lisa, Sandoz did not seek to illustrate his life as a successful and influential fur trader. Instead, she defined him almost lovingly as Nebraska's first white farmer. Employing a hundred people at his post, Sandoz describes how Lisa encouraged them to develop their own small farms. In a similar vein, Sandoz described the work of Colonel Atkinson, a man who led the government's first military establishment

west of the Missouri, as communitarian. He is pictured as a country squire commanding over a thousand troops: “Out on the Missouri Atkinson’s Fighting Sixth Infantry and his Rifles, with no place to go, prepared to improve their stay. They started early hotbeds of radish, lettuce and seed onions against the scurvy of the winter, planted sod corn on the bottoms to utilize the gristmill ordered with the sawmill for spring.”²⁷ Sandoz also pointed out that General Atkinson was recognized by a St. Louis agricultural society “for his work on the Missouri post, his old country stead.”²⁸ Thus Sandoz characterized the early white Plains inhabitants as exhibiting a strong utopian self-sufficiency.

As declensions’ narratives develop, all good things come to an end, and Sandoz described the closing of that Elysian period in the early nineteenth century with these words:

The closing of Fort Atkinson on the river bluffs ended a halcyon period on the Missouri and all the Plains. A sort of high point, with a long, long wait for another such time and place of orderliness, haphazard, true, and not sufficiently military, but more orderly than any but an isolated community could ever hope to be, and never for long.²⁹

Those halcyon days of isolated self-sufficiency were destroyed, according to Sandoz, by a rapid increase in fur trading, oiled by alcohol, that allowed traders such as Leclerc, to translate two hundred gallons of raw alcohol, not only into a fortune, but also, in the process, into a trade monopoly by winning over “the more influential of the alcoholic river chiefs for years.”³⁰

Continuing the racialized discussion of this region, Sandoz, unlike Webb, does not dissolve the American Indian experience as Euro-Americans came to the Plains. Instead she intertwined the Plains through raging land speculation with American Indian life up until the Ghost Dance of 1890. Finally, Sandoz described her contemporary Nebraskan landscape and the federally funded dams that had been recently strung along its watercourse. She waxed lyrical about these great man-made lakes created for irrigation and electrification—how Lake McConaughty

welcomed the cloudy flocks of the great flyway and carried white-sailed regattas. In comparing this multi-state development to the New Deal's TVA project, she wondered about the promise of nuclear power, and she concluded by projecting its possible influence on the landscape. In imagining a beneficent role for nuclear power, she projected a landscape that is clearly invested in technology and obviously unfettered by the subsequent developments at Three Mile Island.

In her vision of a landscape in which technology could be utilized to bring conditions back to utopian splendor, Sandoz saw inexpensive nuclear power as stopping the economically and culturally motivated migration from the Plains. In addition, nuclear-powered underground transportation and factory farm units would be established. Travel would be by giant, underground, transcontinental tubes:³¹

The first of these tubes will probably follow the old, old transcontinental trail across Nebraska along the south bluffs of the Platte. One can imagine the artificial little sausage ridge landscape with trees and fine natural growth to deaden the sound as millions are shot past underneath, the oriole's nest above scarcely swinging, the pheasant and quail and wild turkey feeding unconcerned.³²

With the application of nuclear technology, the Plains would return to its previous natural state, and underground transportation would be out of sight but working for the good of humanity.³³ By embracing technology, Sandoz' Plains could then revert to its pre-white serenity. The final description of the nuclear-aided landscape sounds very much as if Sandoz has come full circle, back to the pre-European settlement days of old. Sandoz seemed to be looking both back and forward in envisioning her future. Thus, in a similar vein to Kraenzel, she ended her "song" by reconfiguring the future landscape. The difference is that Sandoz did not project a new regionalism for the future, as did Kraenzel, but instead infused her text with a strong yearning for a simpler, natural, and utopian environment. For that she drew on the past.

The Great Plains in the 1970s

Moving on almost twenty years on from Sandoz' love song, Donald Worster, environmental and western historian, who has taught at Brandeis University, the University of Hawaii, the University of Maine, and the University of Kansas, wrote *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*. This passionately critical interpretation of this region through an environmental perspective echoes again the move towards a more socially and environmentally critical historical context. Unlike either Webb, Kraenzel, or Sandoz, Worster made clear that he was focusing on the southern Plains, in particular the Dust Bowl area, "whose borders are as inexact and shifting as a sand dune."³⁴ Worster also adopted a tight temporal focus for his study, just the 1930s. However, though his regional and temporal focus seems tight, his economic and ecological critique of this place and time is at once regional, national, and transnational.

Worster, like Webb and Kraenzel, is interested in the Great Plains people, and suggests that their cultural values presented "...a spectrum of possibilities, narrow or wide, but also a median about which clusters the majority of people,"³⁵ a majority that Worster is at odds with. Worster discusses his reasons for choosing this region and time period in the book's introduction. Unlike Webb, Kraenzel, or Sandoz, Worster also offers his readers his philosophical and ideological assumptions. Commencing with a quotation from Karl Marx, he draws clear connections between the dramatic ecological event that was the Dust Bowl and the economic context which (Worster argues) created it: "All progress in capitalistic agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the laborer, but of robbing the soil."³⁶

Admitting that this place seems remote and unappealing to many people, Worster spelled out his authorial intent, to make this "region and its destiny a part of the reader's concern, as it is of mine." In particular, he stated that the Plains are critical to the national and world food supply.³⁷ Worster's region-as-larder claim is interesting. For one thing, the assertion is rather undercut in his epilogue where he suggests two alternatives to the ecologically destructive path the Plains population has

chosen. First is to moderate demands and to discipline the population and its desires, including a hard look at the culture of capitalism, "before nature does it for us." The second option is to reduce the size of the market that the Plains services and, in the process, make the Plains a far more self-sufficient place.

Capitalism cannot fill that need; all its drives and motives tend to push the other way, toward overrunning a fragile earth. Man, therefore, needs another kind of farming by which he can satisfy his needs without making a wasteland. It would be fitting if we should find this new agriculture emerging someday soon in the old Dust Bowl.³⁸

Both options suggest a reduction in the importance of the Plains in feeding both the nation and the world.

Along with his criticism of capitalism Worster also builds an interesting construction of nature. Taking the *longue-duree* or long duration perspective³⁹ to a far greater extent than Webb, Worster delved into geological time, constructing a volatile meteorological context for the region: "The climate of the Plains then, like its geological history, confronts man with nature's capacity for violence."⁴⁰ Like Webb, Worster built his narrative by describing the vegetation of the region. Worster chooses to narrate the vegetation in a particular manner: "complexity, adaptation, and loveliness were all parts of organic nature's way of meeting the challenge of the plains."⁴¹ Like Webb, Worster explores the regionally distinctive geology, climate, and vegetation, Worster even mentioning the black-tailed jackrabbit that Webb made famous in his work.

It would seem that Worster and Webb draw on the same ecological and environmental variables to distinguish the region. However, Worster uses these variables as if they were characters in a war story. Worster bifurcates nature into two types, inorganic and organic. Inorganic nature includes the climate and topography, and organic nature includes plants and animals:

Before Europeans there had been long cycles of drought and rainfall. Against these powerful forces organic nature had struggled over millions of years, determining by trial and error what would flourish best in this dry corner of the good earth—now losing ground, now gaining it back. Nothing was fixed or permanent; man did not come into a perfectly stable or finished world on the plains. But he did encounter there an ancient set of alliances that might have helped him survive. All the living things needed each other, depended on each other, to withstand the harsher side of climate. The earliest humans to settle in the region understood that interdependency well, and respected it, but the white man did neither.⁴²

Geological history and meteorological extremes are described as violent and destructive, whereas Worster's organic nature is complex and lovely in the manner in which it meets its violent, inorganic opposite. Worster constructed a landscape within and upon which there is a constant battle between the inorganic and organic worlds, both sides losing and gaining ground, creating alliances and so forth, as if Marx's class struggle were transposed into nature.

Into this battleground relationship came Native Americans, the people at one with nature, but which nature? Worster suggests that Native Americans managed somehow to balance the inorganic and organic elements, implying that, even though a bifurcation exists within nature, he also sees a potential for unification in relationship to humans:

The truth, however, is that the Plains Indians completely merged into the natural economy; they simply became another predator—successful, highly intelligent, making themselves felt as other creatures did, but accepting in every way the primacy of the grass. They did so not because they were especially noble or righteous, although they had those qualities too, at times. More important to their adaptiveness was their assumption of complete dependence: Their unwillingness to consider that any other relationship with the grassland might be possible. From

the beginning of their occupancy there was a limit on these Plains people's potential due to their full acceptance of the restraint in their behavior.⁴³

Within the above quotation, Worster lays out his clearest blueprint for man's relationship with nature, a theme that recurs frequently in his critique of the American capitalist culture. For him, all Euro-American activities on the Plains have exhibited the greed of capitalism. Whereas Webb looked fondly on the halcyon days of ranching, and Sandoz the self-sufficient landscape of the early fur-trader or army captain, Worster decries the impact of ranching, although he does suggest that it is probably marginally better for the Plains to be overgrazed than plowed, but ultimately ranching could not be a panacea as it was a very chancy and poorly paid business.⁴⁴ Indeed, Worster argued that the Plains grass was just another resource to be mined for all it was worth, "Whether they held title or not the cattlemen pushed the land as far as it would go, and then pushed some more. They generally viewed the southern plains as another Comstock Lode, to be mined as thoroughly as possible by overstocking the range." Calling the cattle industry hegemonic, he pointed out that it lasted only two decades before self-destructing through over-expansion, creating a vacuum into which farmers poured after 1886.⁴⁵

For Worster the mined landscape then turned rapidly into a tailored industrial landscape with the rise of what he calls the monocultural wheat factory: "The new-style sodbuster was expansionist, feeling all the old land hunger of an opportunity-seeking democrat, but adding an intense desire to make his new machines profitable that would have shocked Thomas Jefferson's agrarian idealism."⁴⁶ The result of this relationship, the Dust Bowl, was not merely a result of misjudgment, but a predictable product of a capitalist culture whose philosophy is that man is autonomous of, and in control of, nature. People, whether tenant farmers or fiscally overextended landowners, had no roots and thus they, like the soil, blew away. This image is most dramatically captured in this quotation: "There was here, from the beginning of settlement until the thirties a transient, exploitative relation with the land that tore loose every

attachment that appeared. Haskell [County] could not have it both ways. Its people could not keep up forever the drive for expanding and getting ahead and still expect to find a settled place on the earth."⁴⁷ Worster's Plains is thus one of relentless capitalist reorganization that destroys a sense of place and any chance for a balanced relationship with the environment.

Man, according to Worster, had fallen out of the natural order of nature, the quintessential declensionist narrative founded on the clash between inorganic and organic nature and between nature and capitalism. Nature was the victim of an American capitalistic and self-destructive culture that was "cutting away the ground from under the people's feet."⁴⁸ The image of a material landscape being swept away by capitalism is powerful indeed. Worster argued that this decade bore witness to "the final destruction of the old Jeffersonian ideal of agrarian harmony with nature: a relationship that would nurture the land while drawing from it an enduring, widely shared security and independence for rural folk."⁴⁸ What makes Worster's argument about the seduction of capitalism compelling is that he holds out the possibility that there might have been another path to choose. That path, Worster believed, could have been laid by the Nashville Agrarians who espoused a back-to-the-land movement that endeavored to reclaim the Jeffersonian dream.⁴⁹

The warring landscape of Worster is completely at odds with the place narrated by Webb, which, in comparison, seems only to be a context to which man adapts. Even the tone of Sandoz' discussion about the relationship between Native American groups and European immigrants was not as aggressive. Worster's perspective is also a strong contrast to Kraenzel's culturally disconnected landscape in which he places the environment to the forefront in the cultural battle for the Plains. But there are similarities to Worster in Kraenzel's call for a new adaptive society that can be more flexible in relation to the environmental context. Interestingly, Kraenzel believed that farmers might have adapted to semi- aridity whereas townspeople had not. Worster vehemently disagrees with this position, and he makes no distinction between urban and rural populations. Whereas Kraenzel took pains to lay out how that union might be attained, Worster leaves a vague and

lingering suggestion that change will only come with a rather intangible future radical revolution.

Conclusions

A slippery mix of nature, culture, and specific historical moments, regions are an important framework for understanding who we are, our history, how we make sense of our environment, and how we imagine the future. Jonathan Raban has claimed that the Great Plains has suffered from a weak sense of regional identity and that history was an antidote. Can reclaiming Great Plains history stop the blank page regionalism that Raban sees the Plains suffering from? Perhaps, but perhaps not if those very histories help create a sense of region as a *tabula rasa*. Surveying four writers that span over fifty years of the Great Plains during the middle part of the twentieth century reveals a strong vision of the region shaped by the syndrome of open spaces. This includes the assumptions that the region is an enormous single canvas, a homogeneous *tabula rasa*, that nature and/or technology will provide the solution to economic or cultural problems afflicting the region, and that this landscape will provide a springboard for a new utopia. Histories can indeed add to the sense of a *tabula rasa* that can be re-imagined as a new natural or technological utopia.

Writers regularly describe the Plains as a homogeneous whole, with some authors looking to nature to recapture and re-create a better future. Historical narratives are vital to address the Plains as *tabula rasa*. Indeed, the haunting and often melancholic story that Raban tells makes his landscape alive with ghosts and memories. But, in calling for regional narratives, we must be aware of the syndrome of open spaces. In being thoughtful of how we shape the region, we may want to be careful not to reiterate the syndrome. To do so we must think critically when we read, discuss, and teach the Great Plains. I hope to suggest that we must be thoughtful in selecting the narratives we use to establish a sense of regionalism as the power of such narratives can work to reiterate limited perceptions of the region.

NOTES

1. The Canadian Plains stretches over three provinces.
2. Jonathan Raban, *Badland: An American Romance* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1996), 250.
3. Raban, 251.
4. Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004), 31-32.
5. This is a term I have modified from Dayton Duncan's *Miles from Nowhere: Tales from the Contemporary Frontier*. (New York, Penguin Books, 1993), 250.
6. Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston, Ginn and Company, 1931), preface (no page number), Carl Kraenzel, *The Great Plains in Transition* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), Mari Sandoz, *Love Song to the Plains* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1961), and Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979).
7. Webb, 1931, preface.
8. Harold E. Briggs, "An Appraisal of Historical Writings on the Great Plains Since 1920." *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*. June 1947: 83-100.
9. Dan Flores, *The Natural West: Environmental History in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 91.
10. Frederick C. Luebke, "Regionalism and the Great Plains: Problems of Concept and Method." *The Western Historical Quarterly* January 1984: 38.
11. Webb, 1931, preface.
12. As I have suggested previously, a number of authors define the Plains in precise terms--the 98th or 100th degree meridian and even the term "plain" is geographical.
13. James Shortridge, *The Middle West: It's Meaning in American Culture*. (Lawrence, University of Kansas Press, 1989).
14. Webb, 455.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 455.
16. Donald Worster, unpublished manuscript biography of Walter Prescott Webb, in author's possession, 1995.
17. Walter Prescott Webb, "The American West, Perpetual Mirage." *Harpers Magazine* May 1957: 25-31.
18. Wright Morris, *The Territory Ahead*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1957), 22, cited in "Discovering a Dynamic Western Regionalism" Michael C. Steiner and David M Wrobel, *Many Wests: Place, Culture, & Regional Identity*. (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1997).
19. Kraenzel, 42.
20. *Ibid.*, vii.
21. *Ibid.*, 71.
22. *Ibid.*, 9.

23. Ibid., 319.
24. Luebke: 38.
25. Sandoz, 1.
26. Ibid., 1.
27. Sandoz, 51.
28. Ibid., 63.
29. Ibid., 72.
30. Ibid., 80.
31. Ibid., 275-276.
32. Ibid., 276.
33. In her biographical work *Old Jules*, Sandoz gives her readers a sense of where she gained her utopian perspective. Throughout his life, Sandoz' father, Jules—a Swiss émigré—wanted to construct a new utopian existence in the Sand Hills of Nebraska. However, as the community grew up around him—he was the first to plat the area and encouraged fellow countrymen to immigrate—his woman friend in Switzerland would not emigrate, and slowly his vision seemed to diminish. Thus, he often imagined starting over again using a vague socialistic ideology in either Mexico or Canada (Sandoz, 278).
34. Worster, 30.
35. Ibid., 232.
36. Ibid., 3.
37. Ibid., 4.
38. Ibid., 243.
39. The term *longue-duree* comes from the French Annals School of history which eschews short-term history, and looks instead at the long duration, in Worsterian terms, through geological history.
40. Ibid., 71.
41. Ibid., 72.
42. Ibid., 66.
43. Ibid., 77.
44. Ibid., 117.
45. Ibid., 83.
46. Ibid., 87.
47. Ibid., 147.
48. Ibid., 45.
49. See John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate, *"I'll Take My Stand": The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. (New York, Harper and Brothers, 1930).