2004

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BUT WHAT IS THERE TO SEE?
AN EXPLORATION OF A GREAT PLAINS AESTHETIC

SHAUNANNE TANGNEY

In the fall of 2001 I taught a beginning college composition course at Minot State University, a small state university located in the northwestern quadrant of North Dakota. It is typical of such courses to include a fair amount of reading, and one of the texts I assigned was Ian Frazier's *Great Plains*. The book is a travelogue that Frazier wrote while living in and traveling throughout the Great Plains. It is written in a direct and inviting style and provides insight about the very place in which the students and I were living. I thought students would take to it like the proverbial duck to water, so I was shocked when just the opposite happened. The students hated the book.

"It's boring!" they complained.

"What do you mean, it's boring?" I asked.

"It's all about . . . well, here," they replied, "and it's boring here."

I tried for days to get the students to see what Frazier saw in the Great Plains, but they just could not or perhaps would not; it doesn't matter. As far as they were concerned, this place in which we live is boring.

I was terribly dismayed by this experience, but I shouldn't have been surprised. People—myself included—have long misinterpreted the Great Plains. When I first moved to North Dakota in the fall of 1997, this place seemed alien indeed to me. It wasn't just that it was big and flat: I had grown up at the edge of the Great Central Valley in California and I knew big and flat very well. For me, it was the lack of mountains on the horizon. I had grown up at the edge of the Great Central Valley in California and I knew big and flat very well. For me, it was the lack of mountains on the horizon. I was (and to a degree still am) perpetually disoriented. I had no landmarks to reinforce the compass points, and I often felt exposed, a feeling that resonated on both physical and psychological levels. This is nothing new.

KEY WORDS: environment, landscape, Luce Irigaray, place, settlers
But my students (for the most part) weren't newcomers. They were natives. Many of their families had been here for generations. Why did they have such negative reactions to the place in which they lived, the place to which they were native? It was easy to ferret out the issues of rural, small town, and remote life everywhere: there's nothing to do on the weekend, schools that are small and unsophisticated, no good jobs await those who do finish school, and so on. It wasn't just those facts that made the place boring; to my students the land, the landscape, the physical place itself was boring. One student said, "You know—that drive from here to Bismarck—it's just flat, dull, and full of nothing." I was actually unable to respond for a moment. I had recently made that drive and was remembering what I had seen: acres of fields, the most delicate yellow in color, powdered-sugared with snow, and topped by a sky achingly and perfectly blue; an enormous flock of snow geese, a flock so large that I had to stop and marvel at them, and when I did the noise they made was as enormous as their number; the digger at the Falkirk mine, a mechanical amazement; a bald eagle in a tree along the Missouri River, that rare and majestic bird watching over the river that changed the course of the nation's history. When I reported these sights from my recent trip, the students just shrugged. Either these things didn't mean anything to them or, perhaps more frighteningly, they just couldn't see them.

I want to explore how people see the Great Plains. Following that exploration, I will suggest a proper aesthetic for the Great Plains, one that might lead to a revaluation of that landscape. I am not alone in suggesting that the lack of a proper aesthetic for the Great Plains is due to a failure of vision. As Robert Thacker points out in his study, The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination, in a place with no familiar geographical features, men and women had to learn to see the Great Plains.¹

It is not clear, however, that men and women have yet learned to see the Great Plains. Ian Frazier expresses a similar concern:

> I fear for the Great Plains because many people think they are boring. . . . The view of the Great Plains from an airplane window is hardly more detailed than the view from a car on the interstate highways, which seem designed to get across in the least time possible, as if this were an awkward point in a conversation. In the minds of many, natural beauty means something that looks like Switzerland. The ecology movement often works best in behalf of winsome landscapes and wildlife. The Great Plains do not ingratiate. They seldom photograph well—or rather, they are seldom photographed. Images of the Great Plains are not a popular feature of postcards or scenic calendars.²

Here Frazier implies the spectacular, and it is my argument that the Great Plains is misinterpreted, and therefore misunderstood, because we see plains as not spectacular. Tall mountains, deep forests, and teeming wildlife are considered spectacular, and the spectacular is considered valuable. The spectacular is by definition something that is striking, amazing, or lavish. It is easy, then, to understand why we consider mountains, forests, and wildlife spectacular. But it is not easy to understand why we don't see the Great Plains as spectacular. Simply in terms of open space, the Great Plains is certainly striking, amazing, and lavish. One answer may lie in the etymology of the word spectacular. "Spectacular" derives from "spectate," which means to look or gaze. Whether or not something is spectacular, then, is directly connected to how we

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see it. It’s not that the Great Plains in and of itself is not spectacular; rather, it is that we are incapable of seeing it as such.

We are incapable because we emphasize what I will call the vertical spectacular: we only value the kind of landscape that has tall trees and high mountains. My idea of the vertical spectacular is derived from the work of feminist and psychoanalytic theorist Luce Irigaray, most specifically her idea of the male spectacular gaze, which is developed in Speculum of the Other Woman. Irigaray argues that when a male looks upon a female (when he gazes or speculates upon her) he sees only a void, a blank, a nothing. This nothing is a pun on “no thing”: because the female has no penis, the male can see in her neither himself nor his desires and values, therefore she is nothing. Likewise, I argue, a landscape that lacks the vertical spectacular (or, as Irigaray might suggest, phallic geography) is seen as nothing. In other words, we subject the Great Plains to a gaze (akin to Irigaray’s male spectacular gaze) that renders them as nothing. Both the vertical spectacular and the male spectacular gaze, then, are ways of seeing that objectify and denigrate that which is viewed. Irigaray constructs the theory of the male spectacular gaze to address the fact that women have long been considered “less than” men. Following her lead, I have constructed the idea of the vertical spectacular to address the fact that the Great Plains has long been considered “less than” other American landscapes.

To begin, let me simply present a collection of written evidence of how people see the Great Plains. I will use evidence in writing from explorers, settlers, and literary figures. I will also include commentary from contemporary scholars of landscape, place, and environment. This commentary will help to weave together the descriptions of and reactions to the Great Plains made by explorers, settlers, and literary writers, and my idea of the vertical spectacular.

As for the explorers, we can start at the very beginning of European contact: Robert Thacker tells us that “the first European who traveled on the Great Plains was Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, a Spaniard who lost his way as he wandered through the southern plains about 1534. . . . He later complained, ‘We nowhere saw mountains.’” Thacker also makes note of the Stephen H. Long expedition to the Rocky Mountains in 1819 and 1820. Edwin James, a member of the party,

recorded details that articulate the experience of overland plains travel. Thus he writes of the landscape’s effect on the imagination: “The great extent of country contemplated at a single view, and the unvaried sameness of the surface, made our prospect seem tedious.” . . . Referring to the same phenomenon later, James wrote that he and his party felt “grossly abused by [their] eyesight.”

In the two accounts of Plains exploration, mountains—or the lack thereof—are crucial. For Cabeza de Vaca, the lack of mountains confounds his ability to navigate the landscape. It also devalued the landscape in his mind. For the Long party, mountains were the objective, and the Great Plains merely something to suffer through. In contending that the Great Plains “grossly abused [their] eyesight,” James does not mean that traveling across the Great Plains did physical damage to their eyes; rather, he means that the endless horizontality of the Great Plains was troubling to them, coming as they did from the eastern US with its landscape of trees and mountains.

Paul Witkowsky accuses “the eastern mind” of reducing “the complex ecosystem of the Great Plains to negative space: in simple terms, a forest with the trees missing.” The idea of “negative space” is important. Early explorers and contemporary writers alike tend to see the Great Plains as a negative—empty, void, nothing. We can still see that negativity in the “ironic boosterism” of billboards that read “Welcome to North Dakota—Mountain Removal Project Completed.” It seems clear, if unfortunate, that the “eastern mind” is still at work in the Great Plains.
In response, A. Carl Bredahl Jr. calls for the development of a “western mind.” The “eastern mind” is comfortable with enclosure and verticality and is “fundamentally distrustful of space.” In the vast, open, horizontal space of the Great Plains such an imagination is useless if not dangerous, as Bredahl states: “Confronting an environment of extravagant size, weather, and configuration, the western imagination had finally to discard assumptions of imposing self and enclosing landscape, efforts that in the West met inevitably with disaster.” Quantic also points out the eastern mind at work in many of the early settlers of the Great Plains:

Walter M. Kollmorgen has suggested that the large farms and ranches that are better suited to the ecology of the high plains were slow to develop because of “inept land alienation laws,” advocated by an Eastern “woodsman” mentality. . . . Settlers were unwilling or unable to approach the land on its own terms.

. . . Settlers who crossed Kansas and Nebraska on their way to Oregon and California carried with them a mental picture of rich forests or instant riches, nurtured by the myth of manifest destiny.

Here again is evidence of the eastern mind that valued most those landscapes containing the vertical spectacular: mountains and trees. The failure of settlers to approach the land on its own terms is a failure of vision as much as anything—and I do not mean of agricultural or economic vision, but of actual vision: it is a failure to see with anything other than eastern eyes, eyes that are trained for the vertical spectacular. When describing the Northern Plains, explorer Sir William Francis Butler complains that at a single glance the eye is satiated with immensity. There is no mountain range to come across the middle distance, no dark forest to give shade to foreground or fringe perspective, no speck of life, no track of man, nothing but wilderness.

Butler uses the terminology of landscape painting—middle distance, foreground—but can’t really deal with the view of the landscape itself. His eye longs for mountains and trees, and because they are unavailable to him out on the plains, he cannot judge the landscape as anything but wanting; it is nothing but wilderness.

The notion that without trees or mountains—that is, without the vertical spectacular—the Great Plains is negative space continues to present itself in the literature that settlers left behind. “It may enchant the imagination for a moment to look over the prairies and plains as far as the eye can reach,” Sarah Raymond wrote in her dairy in 1865. “Still such a view is tedious and monotonous. It can no wise produce that rapturing delight, that pleasing variety of the sublime and beauty of landscape scenery that mountains afford.”

According to Raymond, the plains are tedious and monotonous because they do not achieve the sublime. The sublime is a key idea here, and perhaps why so many early settlers and explorers failed to describe or appreciate the Great Plains fully or well. As Quantic argues, “Most of the earliest travelers had no vocabulary to describe the unfamiliar landscape and thus relied on inept similes and euphistic clichés.” Those inept similes and clichés come from the Romantic vocabulary already developed to describe nature or landscape as sublime.

When people of European descent first began crossing the American continent, they brought with them their ingrained notions of landscape appreciation, derived from the Romantic movement in literature, philosophy, and art. Preceding the Romantic ideal was the European tradition of the picturesque, in which nature was artfully designed so that it could be read like a picture, with clearly defined near, middle, and far distance. It is out of this tradition that we get the precisely designed gardens of the castles of Europe. On the wild and immense American continent, the picturesque was hardly applicable, and so American philosophers and aestheticians began to employ...
AN EXPLORATION OF A GREAT PLAINS AESTHETIC

the notion of the sublime. The sublime is actually a feeling, a sense of awe or thrilling fear, provoked by a natural scene or object. This awe, this thrilling fear, was linked to God, determined to be God’s presence in nature, and therefore in America.

Writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson in the East and John Muir in the West valorized the sublime in the extreme. In “Nature,” Emerson tells us that “in the presence of nature a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows.” He also says that when he goes into the woods he “enjoy[s] a perfect exhilaration. [He is] glad to the brink of fear.” Emerson equates the natural and the sublime, for it is nature and nothing but nature that evokes in him the feelings that denote the sublime. Indeed, for Emerson, in nature “the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.” Nature and the sublime are not only delightful and exhilarating, they are the locus of God, and therefore of truth and being, for God guarantees both abstractions.

In the West, John Muir finds landscapes that allow him to advocate the sublime at a fever pitch. In My First Summer in the Sierra, he writes of the granite mountains that ring the Yosemite Valley:

No pain here, no dull empty hours, no fear of the past, no fear of the future. These blessed mountains are so complacently filled with God’s beauty, no petty personal hope or experience has room to be. Drinking these champagne waters is pure pleasure, so is breathing the living air, and every movement of limbs is pleasure, while the whole body seems to feel beauty when exposed to it as it feels the campfire or sunshine, entering not only by the eyes alone, but equally through all one’s flesh like radiant heat, making a passionate ecstatic pleasure-glow not explainable.

Muir’s language is as wild and as uncontainable as the far western landscape was when Muir first encountered it, and this wildness and this exuberance of landscape work well with the sublime. Mountains become cathedrals for Muir, and he finds his God therein. Like Emerson’s woods, Muir’s mountains evoke the sublime, and therefore guarantee God. One final point is important concerning our understanding of the sublime. As the work of Emerson and Muir demonstrates, the sublime is directly connected to the vertical spectacular. For them, things like deep forests full of tall trees, or dramatic valleys ringed with rangy mountains, are the objects that most evoke the sublime.

Those who crossed or settled the Great Plains were faced with a landscape that could hardly be called sublime. It did not give them a thrilling sense of awe or fear, but left them feeling terrified and speechless. Nevertheless, the idea of the sublime persisted, and the strangest thing happened. Travelers, explorers, and settlers in the Great Plains realized almost immediately that the language of the sublime was inadequate for the Great Plains, but rather than find or make a new aesthetic language, those travelers, explorers, and settlers kept the language and evaluative standards of the sublime and saw the Great Plains as a place that failed to measure up. The region was therefore seen as void, a place to be crossed as quickly as possible in order to get to Oregon or California, places they saw as evocative of the sublime. This is evident in the words of mid-nineteenth-century settler Clarina Nicols, who writes that in the Great Plains, “It seems as though nature had gone on a long journey‘ taking her ‘treasures’ with her.” Without those hallmarks of the sublime, tall trees and high mountains, the Great Plains has nothing to treasure.

Unfortunately, this inappropriate aesthetic continues well into the twentieth century. Cary W. deWit’s intriguing study of latter-day immigrants to the Great Plains, “Women’s Sense of Place on the American High Plains,” presents twentieth century voices that echo earlier ones; “a western Kansas woman originally from Kansas City recounted, ‘When I first came here, I felt really vulnerable because there
were no trees. I would drive down to Garden City, get under those trees, and say, "Whew, safe at last!" Another woman in Dewit's study, originally from Colorado, bemoans the lack of mountains—which she indicates as "scenery"—on the Great Plains: "I like scenery. I like to see things. There's no scenery here, nothing to look at. We were driving to Garden City. I look out and tell my husband, 'There's nothing. How did the Indians hide from anything? There's no place to hide!'" Fiction presents scenarios that are eerily similar. O. E. Rølvaag's 1927 tome, Giants in the Earth, ostensibly a story of Scandinavian settlement of the Northern Plains, is also the story of a family driven to madness and suicide by the land itself. Rølvaag is a just storyteller, because many people did go mad in the Great Plains; however, his narrative always blames the land, as we can see in Beret's early impression of the prairie: "Had they traveled into some nameless, abandoned region? Could no living thing exist out here, in the empty, desolate, endless wastes of green and blue? . . . If life is to thrive and endure, it must at least have something to hide behind!" As in the writing of actual explorers, pioneers, and immigrants, Beret bemoans the lack of the vertical on the plains—no tree or mountain to hide behind. It is intriguing how they all assume verticality to be essential to life, and equally intriguing is that they cannot see the abundant life that does in fact exist in the Great Plains. Because there is no verticality, the Great Plains are for actual and fictional immigrants denied even basic existence; they are a non-place.

From Cabeza de Vaca's travelogue to the journals of nineteenth-century settlers, to Rølvaag's twentieth-century literary version of settlement, we see immigrants struggling to understand and describe the Great Plains. It is a struggle that leaves us with an inappropriate aesthetic for the Great Plains. In an article about Canadian pioneers in the Great Plains, Ronald Rees writes, "Time alone may loosen attachments to the homeland but as long as the new land is filtered through the forms of the old culture it can never be home. To feel at home, emigrants, or their descendants, must acquire new ways of seeing." The notion of a new way of seeing is crucial to a proper Great Plains aesthetic. I have shown that using an "old way" of seeing—an emphasis on the sublime as captured in the vertical spectacular so applicable to eastern forests and western mountains—is not only an improper but also a dangerous way of seeing the Great Plains. I have yet to propose a new way of seeing, however. In order to do so, I will now turn my attention in full to Irigaray's Speculum of the Other Woman.

As stated earlier, Irigaray's feminist theories are concerned that the female is presented as nothing(ness); or, as Raman Selden puts it, the female is "not viewed as existing at all except as a negative mirror image of [the male]." This strikes me as amazingly similar to the imposition of the vertical spectacular upon the Great Plains. Doing so makes the Great Plains only a negative mirror image of the wooded East or the mountainous Far West. Because they deal with issues of lack and speculation, then, Irigaray's theories can have a great impact on formulating a workable and meaningful aesthetic for the Great Plains.

In Speculum of the Other Woman, Irigaray presents a series of short vignettes in which she leads us through her theories about lack and speculation. She begins by telling us:

Now the . . . woman supposedly has nothing you can see. She exposes, exhibits the possibility of a nothing to see. Or at any rate she shows nothing that is penis-shaped or could substitute for a penis. This is the odd, the uncanny thing, as far as the eye can see, this nothing around which lingers in horror, now and forever, an overcathexis of the eye, of appropriation by the gaze.

We can see several ideas at work in this observation. First of all, there is the male spectacular gaze, that when it looks wants only to see itself (i.e., the phallic) reflected. When it sees nothing phallic, it sees simply nothing. In terms of a
Great Plains aesthetic, we can easily understand trees and mountains as phallic, and we can just as easily note a kind of male spectacular gaze that has been imposed upon the Great Plains for centuries. This is a gaze—or an aesthetic—that says, because the Great Plains is treeless and without mountains, it is nothing.

The phrase “as far as the eye can see, this nothing around which lingers in horror, now and forever,” is exactly the kind of language writers have used for generations to describe the Great Plains. But, as Irigaray asks, “[W]hy this fear, horror, phobia . . . felt when there is nothing to be seen, why does having nothing that can be seen threaten his libidinal economy?” Many people, myself included, can report that being out in the Great Plains, in the midst of so much space, is psychologically daunting. But merely to testify to this is not to explain it. Irigaray explains that the male spectacular gaze is predicated on the female having nothing penile, in seeing that she has No Thing. Nothing like man. That is to say, no sex/organ that can be seen in a form capable of founding its reality, reproducing its truth. Nothing to be seen is equivalent to having no thing. No being and no truth.

The first part of the observation we have already explored—the lack of the phallic means there is nothing to see. The second part of the view gives us something new and difficult to consider. The lack of anything phallic, under the male spectacular gaze, implies that women have no being and no truth. Likewise, the lack of anything vertical in the Great Plains implies that it has no being and no truth. Because the Great Plains is a non-phallic landscape, it is seen as a non-place; it is merely something to get across, as quickly as possible, in order to arrive at the phallic, the vertical spectacular landscapes of forests and mountains.

Irigaray’s theories also show up the deceptively simple notion of woman as other, and while multicultural curricula and diversity programs seem to embrace the notion of the other, others and/or otherness remain pejorative in word and in being. Irigaray reminds us that “sexual ‘otherness’ comes down to ‘not having it.’” In the simplest of terms, this statement tells us that not having a penis automatically “others” women. And, simply, because the Great Plains doesn’t have a phallic landscape, doesn’t conform to the vertical sublime, it is automatically “othered,” too. On a more complex level, however, we can approach a discussion of the function of the negative. If we only see “otherness” in terms of negativity (not having it) then otherness will never be valued, will always be marginalized. Otherness must be recognized on its own terms and must have its own aspects foregrounded and valued. I have argued that the Great Plains has been othered by the vertical spectacular, but if we cease to see the Great Plains as lacking verticality, and learn to embrace its horizontality, we might indeed make literature and art that does not fight the very place we are trying to describe, represent, and honor.

Irigaray also recognizes the importance of a new vision when she reminds us that “a detour into strategy, tactics, and practice is called for, at least as long as it takes to gain vision, self-knowledge, self-posssession, even in one’s decenteredness.” The complicated idea of decentering is crucial to formulating an appropriate aesthetic for the Great Plains. In order to wend my way into decentering, I want to explore some of the work done on Great Plains landscapes by Neil Evernden, especially in his article “Beauty and Nothingness: Prairie as Failed Resource.” Despite the rather gloomy title, the article provides the groundwork for a legitimate prairie aesthetic. Evernden uses a clever mix of statistical analysis and the history of landscape painting to make some interesting proposals. Initially, Evernden presents statistical evidence that demonstrates that viewers of prairie landscapes “[r]ule prairie beauty nonexistent.” They make such a ruling because of “the central feature of the landscape, the absence of things. . . . Nothing is there, no things to
measure or enjoy. These findings are strikingly similar to my own argument that we do not value the Great Plains landscape because it lacks the vertical spectacular. Evernden then moves on to a history of landscape painting in which he asserts that around the time of the Renaissance, painters began to include nature in their paintings as a central part of the composition; this happened, Evernden argues, "as a consequence of a new way of seeing." This new way of seeing may sound like a step in the right direction, especially in connection with my own argument, but it isn’t exactly so.

What happened was that landscape painting became dependent upon what I will call "beautiful sites": places chock-full of things—like tall trees and high mountains and rushing cataracts—that exemplify the vertical spectacular. Clearly not the Great Plains. The dependence upon beautiful sites created, according to Evernden, the following problem: "[I]f you are charged with determining which sites are beautiful, not which ways each site may be beautiful or interesting, then the only features you can assess are those that are permanent. You can only measure things." Measuring things is an inappropriate aesthetic for the Great Plains, for it is a landscape largely devoid of things, or at least immediately visible things like tall trees and high mountains. The new way of seeing we need now is in the latter part of Evernden's statement: discovering the ways in which individual sites are beautiful, which is admittedly difficult, as Evernden points out: "[O]ur obsession with things seems so natural that we find it nearly impossible to imagine thinking about experience instead." "Seems" is the key word in Evernden's assertion; our obsession with things seems natural. The theory of social construction suggests otherwise—that there are no natural behaviors, only learned ones.

Following that lead, eschewing the fallacy of natural behavior and embracing the notion of learned behavior, we must turn our focus toward experience and learn to discuss the Great Plains in terms of experience, not in terms of things. Evernden says that some of us know that a profound esthetic experience may occur when in an encounter with the prairie. Perhaps we could say that the prairie is subversive. It puts us out of register with societal biases and makes us question our definitions of beauty, esthetic experience, and even nature. The prairie forces upon us the realization that as individuals we inhabit a world of irrational, experiential value.

It intrigues me that Evernden calls the prairie itself "subversive." The subversive is that which challenges—even attempts to eliminate—the status quo. If the status quo is an aesthetic that reinforces the vertical spectacular, then the prairies themselves may be that which will ultimately overcome that aesthetic. Evernden says the prairies make us question our definitions of beauty and esthetic experience, which is exactly in line with my assertion that we must eschew the vertical spectacular for a horizontal spectacular. This is, no doubt, an unfamiliar aesthetic, an atypical way of seeing. But, as Evernden suggests, we do have the capacity to grasp it.

Evernden writes at length about the relationship between sky and land. We already accept the sky as the horizontal spectacular, and we do so not “because of its solid parts, [but] because of a passing quality of clouds and light.” In other words, we have an existing aesthetic for the shape and qualities of the Great Plains; we must learn to apply it to the Great Plains. An aesthetic learned from the sky is applicable indeed to the Great Plains, for perhaps nowhere on earth is the sky already as much a part of the landscape as it is in the Great Plains. Evernden uses a passage from Wallace Stegner to illustrate this fact:

The drama of this landscape is in the sky, pouring with light and always moving. The earth is passive. And yet the beauty I am struck by, both as present fact and as revived memory, is a fusion: this sky would not be so spectacular without this earth to change and glow and darken under it.
AN EXPLORATION OF A GREAT PLAINS AESTHETIC  39

Note that Stegner uses the word spectacular. In the Great Plains we do indeed have a spectacular view: the horizontal spectacular. That is the grammar of the Great Plains, and we are foolish to keep trying to impose the vertical spectacular upon it. Evernden says it best, I think, when he reminds us that

the prairie is never really a thing or even a group of things. This absence leaves us with nothing to stand against, nothing to be a subject toward. . . . We can only accept the green onslaught of prairie, the sterilizing light, the desiccation of hubris. Exposed on the prairie, we lose any sense of mastery, for what is there to master? The sun on the head bleaches the ego, and we experience the flattening and self-extension that is the essence of the prairie. Self is not concentrated in a pinnacle of subjectivity, but diffused throughout a haze of being. The prairie is an experience, not an object—a sensation, not a view. The prairie is a way of being and not a thing at all.

Evernden, like Irigaray, turns the neat trick of making a new way of seeing into a new way of being. Two centuries of viewing the Great Plains through an improper aesthetic has made the Great Plains, to borrow from Evernden, a failed landscape. But the landscape cannot fail; only we can fail in our interpretations of, our use of, and our ways of being in a landscape. Just as the sublime functions in a vertical spectacular landscape to ensure God and therefore our being, if we learn to see—and to value—the horizontal spectacular, we can find, as Evernden suggests, a way of being crucial to life in the Great Plains.

I am also an immigrant to the Great Plains. I have lived here for nearly seven years, after more than a decade of traveling the United States pursuing various college degrees. After only seven years I am beginning to claim myself as one of the plains people, and I think that I can testify that we plains people are what we do not want to be. We are bored. We are poor. We are overlooked, forgotten even, by the rest of the nation. We are cruelly romanced as the last pioneers. But how could we be anything else, when our very sense of place is imposed upon us from without? From the Homestead Act of 1862, which followed an eastern model of farming entirely inappropriate to the West, to a vertical spectacular aesthetic, likewise imported from the East and reinforced by the Far West, we have allowed an outside ignorance to determine our ways of inhabiting and appreciating our landscape. Let me reiterate that we have allowed others to make us what we don’t want to be. It may be true, as Kathleen Norris says in Dakota, that “without a strong sense of identity, we become a mythic void,” but we have done little to make our own sense of identity and are instead all too willing to accept that which is imposed upon us from without.

I explored the above assertion in an introduction to literature course that I taught in the fall of 2003 at Minot State University. In the course we read texts from several genres, nations, and historical periods. Rather than set a theme, I tend to choose texts in which place is a central concern, as it is such a big part of my own research. It seemed only natural, then, to end with Norris’s Dakota. Plus, I wanted to explore again what young people, native to the Great Plains, would say and do when faced with a deep and thoughtful consideration of that place. Fortuitously, we read Dakota over Thanksgiving break, and so I asked the students to write about the place they call home. I asked them to pay special attention to the physical place, and not so much the town they come from. Their responses were unfortunately predictable. They called it “flat and desolate,” “barren wasteland,” and “bland and boring.” A young woman who had lived here for only two years talked about how much she misses trees. A young man who claimed to love living in the upper Great Plains still described them as “extremely bland and boring,” and talked about how, driving from Minot to his hometown west of there, the most notable
sights were “the missile silos . . . , the New Town bridge . . . , and the oil wells.” Whenever the students tried to deal with the flatness and openness of the Great Plains, they resorted to adjectives such as “desolate,” “barren,” and “boring.” Outsiders still yearn for the verticality of trees, and even life-long natives can only pick out the vertical on the plains: the missile silos, the spires of the bridge, and the oil wells.

I next asked them to write about a beautiful place. I said it could be a real place that they had been to, or it could be an imaginary place, just as long as it was the perfect example of beauty. I was employing a little subterfuge with this assignment: I wanted to find out what aesthetic they had been trained in—and sure enough, it was that of the vertical spectacular. One student chose Montana and another Alaska as the most beautiful place, and both descriptions were replete with trees and mountains. Three students actually wrote about places in North Dakota. One wrote about her backyard, discussing how her “parents spent hour after hour, hand planting every single one of our 100+ trees”; another described the experience of looking out her windows at home and “watching the snow lightly fall while covering the evergreens (the gigantic green trees reaching for the sky)”; and a third simply came right out and said it: “Being from North Dakota, one of the most beautiful things to me is a tree.” It seems eminently clear that these young people—most of them natives of the Great Plains—try as hard as all their predecessors did to impose the aesthetic of the vertical spectacular on a landscape that simply cannot tolerate it. They cannot see—perhaps because they have not been taught to see—the Great Plains as they are: a horizontally spectacular landscape.

The next time we met, I brought in a version of this article and shared with them my idea of a horizontal spectacular. They were less than convinced. They remained unconvinced even when I had them turn to the passage in Dakota wherein Norris makes an argument similar to mine. The flatness of the Dakotas, she writes, challenges the eye that appreciates the vertical definition of mountains of skyscrapers; that defines beauty in terms of the spectacular or the busy: hills, trees, buildings, highways, people. We seem empty by comparison. Here, the eye learns to appreciate slight variations, the possibilities of inherent emptiness.

The eye learns, Norris says, and perhaps, despite their initial shrugs and silence, my students will learn, too. Perhaps the one student willing to proclaim his love for rural North Dakota will remember the idea of the horizontal spectacular and find a way to truly describe what it is he sees, and loves. Perhaps the students drawn to Alaska and Montana will be able to maintain their appreciation of mountains and trees, and add to it an appreciation of the plains generously reaching out to meet a sky that is not abstract and void, but an embrace of blue. I believe that learning the aesthetic of the horizontal spectacular along with that of the vertical spectacular is of great importance for plains people. If not, I fear we will never be able to determine our own sense of place, and have to forever defend the Great Plains, as Norris did (indeed, taking all of Dakota to do it) when a friend from New York asked, “But what is there to see?”

NOTES

4. Ibid., 149.
5. Paul Witkowski, “If Prairies Had Trees: East, West, Environmentalist Fiction, and the Great
AN EXPLORATION OF A GREAT PLAINS AESTHETIC

7. Ibid., 196.
13. Ibid., 24.
22. Ibid., 48.
23. Ibid., 52.
24. Ibid., 136.
26. Ibid., 3.
27. Ibid., 5.
28. Ibid., 8.
29. Ibid., 8.
30. Ibid., 8.
34. Evernden, "Beauty and Nothingness," 8.
36. Ibid., 155-56.
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