Death, Murder, and Mayhem Stories of Violence and Healing On the Plains

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12,000,000 years ago: On the grassy plains of what is now northeast Nebraska, the ordinary circumstances of life buckled under the sudden, steady fall of volcanic ash, abrasive and glassy, that was the harbinger of catastrophe. An eruption much farther west in Idaho had spewed ash up into the upper atmosphere where winds carried the particles eastward. Seventeen species of prehistoric animals would meet their death near a watering hole. The smallest animals succumbed first, their lungs quickly overcome by the cutting particles; the larger animals lived on up to five weeks before the ash killed them. When the event was over, "[o]ne or two feet of this powdered glass covered the flat savannah-like grasslands of northeastern Nebraska." For millions of years, this fatal story, wrapped in the hard embrace of bone and rock, remained undiscovered until geologist Mike Voorhies found the skull of a baby rhino emerging from the landscape.

October 20, 1541: A nobleman from Salamanca, Spain, and ambitious politician-warrior in New Spain, Francisco Vázquez de Coronado complained in a letter to his king, "I travelled five more days as the guides wished to lead me, until I reached some plains, with no more landmarks than as if we had been swallowed up in the sea... there was not a stone, nor a bit of rising ground, nor a tree, nor a scrub, nor anything to go by." Coronado's entrada was searching for Quivira, reputed city of gold, but Coronado discovered only a group of Caddoan people living off the land. The many indigenous people, who suffered violent death at the hands of Coronado's men, marked the Spaniards' bloody passage into Kansas and the commencement of contact and imperial conquest on the central Plains.

June 25, 1876: Under the command of Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer, twelve companies of the U.S. Army's Seventh Cavalry were part of a planned attack on an alliance of non-treaty Native Americans. The battle plan was to trap the Native people in a three column, "three-pincer movement" of attacking U.S. cavalry and infantry. Custer's men arrived early, scouting out the Native encampment and giving the ambitious, determined Custer a chance to attack what he wrongly believed to be a small Native encampment. With inaccurate information, Custer, to whom Brigadier General Alfred H. Terry had given full discretion, took things into his own hands, feeling victory was at hand. He judged incorrectly and his haste to defeat the enemy resulted in the deaths of over 260 soldiers and attached personnel. Thousands of Blackfoot Lakota, Oglala, Cheyenne, Hunkpapa, and Brulés, armed with repeating rifles, "trade muskets, bows and arrows, and even their hatchets," overran the battlefield.
and defeated Custer instead. Three days later, Custer's men would be interred in a mass grave. The Battle of the Little Big Horn entered into the cultural lexicon of the West and remains a vexed site of American history.

**June 25, 1959:** Serial killer Charles Starkweather was executed in the Nebraska State Penitentiary. Starkweather had terrorized the Nebraska Plains in the winter of 1957-58 when he murdered eleven people in Nebraska and Wyoming. His murder spree began in earnest when he shot dead his girlfriend's mother, step-father, and two-year-old half-sister in Lincoln on January 21, 1958. After holing up in Caril Fugate's family home for several days, the couple took off across the state. Their flight and subsequent violence has haunted the Plains ever since and been seared into American popular culture.

These scattered events bespeak the complex history of death, murder, and mayhem on the Plains. Unexpected, dramatic stories of death have left deep marks on the physical landscape and in the cultural psyche since humans first began to weave narrative from the Plains. When scholars and writers converged in Omaha, Nebraska, for the 34th Interdisciplinary Symposium of the Center for Great Plains Studies, these and many other stories received scholarly and creative attention in numerous sessions and keynote addresses headlined by renowned scholars Diane Quantic, Donald Worster, and Walter Echo-Hawk. Nonfiction essayists, fiction writers, and poets, like Verlyn Klinkenborg, Lisa Knopp, John T. Price, Alex Kava, Sean Doolittle, James Reese, Neil Harrison, and William Kloefkorn, added personal perspectives on the symposium theme. For better or worse, the Great Plains of North America have provided a staging ground for stories both tragic and mythic centered on the power and the horror of violence. Moreover, since the 19th century, national media and popular culture have reproduced over and over again narratives that turn the
spotlight on death and loss, as if the Plains themselves birth significantly more versions of violent death than other parts of the country (they do not). The tragic history of the Indian Wars and their aftermath played out primarily on the Plains and was then re-scripted and recycled repeatedly in Hollywood westerns to the current age. Gunslingers like Jesse James, Billie the Kid, Wild Bill Hickok, and the Earp brothers all gave the Plains its murderous connections. Buffalo Bill Cody began his career as a military scout and hunter on the Plains and would eventually winter in North Platte, Nebraska with his Wild West Show. With the glorification of Bonnie and Clyde during the Depression, the old West version of psychopathic behavior was repackaged with modern accoutrements: a Ford V-8 and a Browning Automatic Rifle. Romanticized as a murderous couple, they established the foundation of mobile serial killers that would culminate in Starkweather’s gripping tale. The scholars and writers meeting in Omaha were attempting to understand the critical mass of violent storytelling, to deconstruct the narratives’ cultural biases, and to share counter-narratives of healing and restorative practices.

Three of the most memorable essays from the 34th Interdisciplinary Symposium are presented in this issue of Great Plains Quarterly. The authors offer up a range of theses that represents the symposium’s breadth. Geographer Christina Dando, a long-time Plains dweller, examines the hundreds of contemporary newspaper accounts of the Great Plains, noting narrative frames that highlight a narrow range of topics: drought, bison and “Buffalo Commons,” and depopulation. In her essay “Deathscapes, Topocide, Domocide: The Plains in Contemporary Print Media,” Dando suggests that the national media have been collaborating on narratives that tend to highlight the sensational and the extreme, “bleak pictures of the Plains” that construct a troubled landscape. The effect of this predominance of negative coverage, Dando argues, is the erasure of a much richer history and the suggestion that “people do not want this landscape: it is too hard to work, it is too far from anything, it is not valued.” The current narrative restructuring of the Plains misreads much of the life and culture inherent to the Plains, effectively supporting forms of “domicide” and “topocide.” As she argues, “The print media is quick to condemn the Plains while eliding over the roles that corporations and our government play in the creation of the landscape, as well as the role of the media itself.” That story, too complex, too nuanced, would not sell. Still, Dando offers words of possibility and encouragement at essay’s end. As she notes, “we are not witnessing the death of the Plains,” however much the national media presents this theme.

In the imaginations of literary writers, however, the Plains do offer evocative grounds for horror and violence. As A.B. Emrys points out in “Open to Horror: The Great Plains Situation in Contemporary Thrillers by E.E. Knight and by Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child,” Stephen King had early in his career effectively used the “creep” factor of Plains isolation, setting his classic story “Children of the Corn” in central Nebraska. King’s unusual confluence of cornfields and horror has inspired contemporary writers E. E. Knight, Douglas Preston, and Lincoln Child to exploit the startling connection between Plains landscape and a genre invented in the 18th century. Presenting a close-reading of Knight’s Choice of the Cat (2004), part of the Vampire Earth series, and Preston and Child’s Still Life with Crows (2003), Emrys argues that the bloody history of the Plains, compounded by its physical nature, work in creative dialog with the conventions of horror. Their novels also link to the history of cultural conquest and industrial agriculture on the Plains, suggesting parables of commodification, tyranny, and extractive excesses. Past landscapes underlie their narratives, haunting presences that offer clues to present circumstances. Knight’s vision is particularly dystopic, with the ruins of Omaha and the Strategic Air Command providing a climactic stage for the novel’s final confrontation. In Emrys’s analysis, the horror genre proves a resilient narrative form, open to many landscapes and many
histories. For those of us raised on Cather and Kooser, Emrys’s thesis is provokingly original.

Daryl Palmer returns to older fables and older history in “Coronado and Aesop Fable and Violence on the Sixteenth-Century Plains.” Just as modern readers unfamiliar with the Plains have grasped imperfect understanding of the Plains from newspaper accounts, Coronado and his men turned to popular narrative from their European readings. Aesop’s Fables, as Palmer convincingly chronicles, were among the tales, legends, and fictions that “inflected [the conquistadores’] aspirations and their perceptions.” The popular literature of the era helped frame their interpretation of the massive, engulfing Plains and the disappointing march to Quivira. Hoping to find a settlement “of abundant gold and water,” Coronado and his men found failure instead. In Palmer’s words, “[r]ead­ing Aesop was like studying a manual for how to anticipate and manage failure.” Indeed, Coronado and his men matched “the cats, raptors, mice, and lambs of so many fables,” creatures who often lose out in the end. Though Quivira was a lovely spot on the Arkansas River with rich soil and plentiful resources, Coronado and his men felt “duped.”

Palmer offers memorable readings of Aesop’s Fables and connects their violent endings—so “inevitable, pragmatic, retributive, and utterly gratifying”—to the Spaniards’ violent recourse. Aesop provided them with a paradigm of naturalized violence. Moreover, in assessing their frustration, they unleashed a resulting fury which, in fabular terms, was already sufficient justification for violence.” Coronado’s encounter with Native people of the Plains established what Palmer calls “a prototype for the centuries of violence that followed.” These centuries would culminate with resonant, tragic place names: Sand Creek, Little Big Horn, and Wounded Knee.

The transformation of the Plains, as historian Elliott West argues, has been a continuous process. He remarks that “[n]owhere else on the continent can we see more dramatically the human envisioning of new lifeways and routes to power, the effects of that search in physical and social environments, and the dilemmas and disasters that so often follow.” Such projecting of history and ideology onto the screen of place has enlarged the Plains in the national imagination. In Thomas Berger’s satiric look at Plains history in Little Big Man, his beleaguered hero, Jack Crabb, finds himself buffeted from historic point to historic point across the Plains. His journey is a dark view of Plains history, replete with exploitation, racism, psychopathic violence, and greed. What elevates his experience, what provides Jack with a grace note, is telling his story, even if the hapless editor, Ralph Fielding Snell, dismisses Crabb as “cynical . . . uncouth, unscrupulous, and when necessary, even ruthless.” The discerning reader, forced to re-examine cultural myth, is transformed by Crabb’s narrative. The 34th Interdisciplinary Symposium of the Center for Great Plains Studies promoted an important scholarly exchange of story and thus opened up spaces for transformative knowledge. The three essays that follow demonstrate the ethical and creative necessity of unraveling old stories and retelling those stories, and others, anew.

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NOTES

4. Larson, 117.
5. Larson, 133.