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CASTING THE BUFFALO COMMONS

A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF PRINT MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE BUFFALO COMMONS PROPOSAL FOR THE GREAT PLAINS

MARY L. UMBERGER

They filed into the auditorium and found seats, waiting politely for what they expected to be a preposterous talk. The featured speaker rose and began his prepared speech. The audience took note of his attire, his educated vocabulary, his “eastern” ways. Their scrutiny became vocal as he proposed his dream for the Great Plains.

KEY WORDS: Buffalo Commons, Murray Edelman, Great Plains, media studies, myth, Frank Popper, rhetorical criticism

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“I live on this land,” one audience member snorted. “My granddad lived on this land. You want me to reserve it for a herd of buffalo and some tourists?”

But the challenges muted as the overhead slides projected the counties in the area which, according to the science of the speaker, were dangerously close to ecological and economic ruin. Although this audience may not have wanted to listen to the speaker’s vision of land use for the Great Plains, they knew the vocabulary of science applied to the land. They knew the talk of erosion and overgrazing. They knew the talk of pesticides and chemicals which improved yields for a few years while sinking into the groundwater that quenched their thirst. Against their will, some began to listen.

In 1987 Frank and Deborah Popper, a planner/geographer team from Rutgers University, proposed the Buffalo Commons. If implemented, the Buffalo Commons would have preserved a large area of the Great Plains, including land in ten states, in a national park to be used by existing Native American reservations, and for the reintroduction of buffalo. Farmers and ranchers who lived on

this land and were able to earn their living from it would be allowed to stay. Those who could not earn their living from the land, argued the Poppers, would vacate it on their own, leaving the land to be managed by the federal government.

This proposal caused conflict in the Great Plains because it meant change within a community possessing a rich history of the land and its use. In addition to conflict, the Buffalo Commons controversy produced a layered and complex case study of communication. What began as an academic proposal for change, offered by two professors to a community of which they were not members, quickly mushroomed into a rich exchange that reached back into the history of the region as well as into its future. Caught up in this exchange were not only the Poppers but also the Great Plains people, mythic voices from the region's past, and local and national media.

THE POPPERS AND THE BUFFALO COMMONS

In 1987 Frank Popper, an urban planner at Rutgers University, and Deborah Popper, a doctoral candidate in geography at the time, first published their Buffalo Commons idea in the specialized academic journal *Planning*.¹ The Poppers began the article with a description of the Great Plains, detailing products, climate, characteristics, and providing a definition of the region in terms of space, population, land area, and weather. They argued that while the Great Plains played an important role in the history of the United States, the region was currently being ignored and would have great importance in the future. Describing the current land use in the Great Plains as the "largest, longest-running agricultural and environmental miscalculation" in United States history, they argued that to preserve the Great Plains, the land should be "returned to its original pre-white state, that it be, in effect, deprivatized."²

They supported their argument by citing the "boom-and-bust" cycles in the history of

the region. Beginning with the Homestead Act of 1862, the first cycle stretched into the 1880s. The second boom-and-bust cycle on the Great Plains occurred during the 1890s-1930s, and the Poppers described the Dust Bowl, its creation, and the United States government's response, inadequate in their view, to the tragedy in the 1930s. The third cycle began, according to the Poppers, in the 1970s and continued through the date of publication of the article in 1987. Finally, they projected future gloom with discouraging climate forecasts for the region, anticipated water shortages, and continued ineffectiveness of conservation methods: "At that point, the only way to keep the Plains from turning into an utter wasteland, an American Empty Quarter, will be for the federal government to step in and buy the land—in short, to deprivatize it."³

The Poppers' solution for the problems of the Great Plains was to "recreate the Plains of the nineteenth century" through the means of the federal government, with buffalo, native grasses, and Native Americans. The Poppers briefly discussed their proposed solution in relationship to both the people and the land, devoting two paragraphs to the people of the Great Plains, and four paragraphs to the land.

As their article reached an audience outside the academy, the Poppers began to travel extensively in the Great Plains in 1989. As they traveled and spoke, the Poppers' arguments changed from their original conception of the Buffalo Commons as literal to one with more emphasis on the Buffalo Commons as metaphor. While their arguments for the boom-and-bust cycles in the Great Plains remained much the same from 1987 to 1994, during the height of the media coverage, the Poppers now argue that the Buffalo Commons is becoming real, created through the efforts of the Great Plains people.

The Poppers proposed their idea of a Buffalo Commons to a narrow academic audience. Yet because of the media coverage and the controversial nature of the changes themselves, their proposal reached a much broader audience in the Great Plains. The Great Plains



FIG. 1. *Bison on rangeland in Nebraska*. Photograph by Harvey Gunderson, c. 1969. Courtesy of Department of Zoology, University of Nebraska State Museum.

of Cather and Sandoz are still very much the Great Plains of today.⁴ The land and its people are steeped in the sometimes conflicting traditions of Jefferson's yeoman farmer, the frontier myth, and agricultural capitalism. These traditions speak variously of people caring for the land so it will care for them, of a land that allows only the toughest to stay, of people owning land to do with as they please.⁵ Within this context, the Poppers proposed change the magnitude of which was rarely heard on the Plains.

It would be simple to argue that the media's role in this complex exchange was to disseminate the Buffalo Commons story to the people of the Great Plains. But the media were more than disseminators of information; they cast the story as a struggle between stock characters: the academic easterners and the sturdy westerners. While the media is often expected to provide coverage of the content and con-

text of a proposal like the Buffalo Commons, I will illustrate through textual evidence that it rarely did. Instead, the media sought out familiar oppositions between East and West, between academic knowledge and lived experience, between the dueling historical myths of the Great Plains as desert and the Great Plains as garden. Any information about the Poppers' proposal or about its reception in the Plains that readers could glean from the media coverage was cast into this dramatic rhetorical struggle. In this way, the media emphasized the conflict between the Poppers and the Great Plains people over the Buffalo Commons but ignored the conflict at the root of the Poppers' proposal, the struggle between the Great Plains people and the land.

To frame this analysis of the media, we can turn to the work of Murray Edelman. In *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, Edelman contrasts our conventional notions of the role of

media with his view of politics as “spectacle” constituted by “news” reporting.⁶ In our conventional view, Edelman argues, we believe “citizens who are informed about political developments can more effectively protect and promote their own interests and the public interest.”⁷ The conventional role of the media is to disseminate information to citizens for that purpose. Edelman argues that the conventional view of the media “takes for granted a world of facts that have a determinable meaning and a world of people who react rationally to the facts.” Thus, “citizens, journalists, and scholars are observers of ‘fact’ whose meanings can be accurately ascertained by those who are properly trained and motivated.”⁸

Within this conventional view of the media’s role, we would expect the media to send reporters to the Plains to investigate the statistics the Poppers used to support their Buffalo Commons proposal, such as age of residents, depopulation numbers, and economic development, and to search for proof in the material facts of life in the Great Plains. We would expect the media to compare the Poppers’ statistics with those of Great Plains states and to ask tough questions of both the Poppers and the Great Plains people—in short, to further enlighten their readers about both the Buffalo Commons and the region that it proposes to change. This reporting would then enable the Great Plains residents and others in the nation to “react rationally” to the Buffalo Commons proposal, weighing it against current land-use policies in the region.

Such expectations of the media were not met. In contrast to the conventional view of the media, Edelman argues that events are not simply reported on by the media, they are “constituted by news reporting.” This reporting is “continuously construct[ing] and reconstruct[ing] social problems, crises, enemies, and leaders.”⁹ “[R]ather than seeing political news as an account of events to which people react,” Edelman treats “political developments as creations of the publics concerned with them. Whether events are noticed and what they mean depends upon observers’ situations

and the language that reflects and interprets those situations.”¹⁰

The media’s role in the Buffalo Commons controversy, then, was much more than disseminator of facts to a concerned public. Indeed, as the media cast the Buffalo Commons story, they ignored the call to question the Poppers’ proposal with the material facts of the Great Plains, a call dictated by the conventional view of the media. Instead, they cast a rhetorical conflict between stock characters: the academic Poppers and the alternatively reactionary or stoic Great Plains people. If the media veered from this casting, it was only to lift the struggle to a mythic level by employing the region’s conflicting myths of the Plains as desert and the Plains as garden.¹¹

If, as Edelman argues, we see the media’s role as “construct[ing] and reconstruct[ing] social problems, crises, enemies, and leaders,” then we can explore how they construct those situations through the “language that reflects and interprets” them. In the current exploration, we will see that the media cast a narrative of struggle between the Poppers, characterized as academics, and the Great Plains residents, characterized as pioneers, “yokels,” or experts. The media’s strategic choice to cast characters in these roles severely limited the characters’ actions. Thus, the plot within the media’s narrative was quite thin: action was cast only to further establish the stock characters and tighten the familiar oppositions. Before we turn to textual evidence of this argument, however, an overview of the print media coverage is needed.

PRINT MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE BUFFALO COMMONS: 1988-1994

Media coverage of the Buffalo Commons proposal began in 1988, following the appearance of the Poppers’ original article on the Buffalo Commons in December 1987.¹² I analyzed a total of seventy-four articles, nineteen from national sources and fifty-five from sources within the state of Nebraska, published in 1988-1994. I searched these articles for

patterns or themes, initially separating them into six themes.¹³ These six themes were next collapsed into three themes with one sub-theme each. It was at this point that a rough chronology emerged. The media were casting the story by introducing the characters, then maturing the story as the relationship between the Poppers and the Great Plains people changed. Discovered in the thematic analysis and supported textually in the articles, a story line emerged in which the Poppers and the Great Plains people became stock characters in a rhetorical struggle to define the Great Plains.

For Nebraska coverage, I reviewed the *Omaha World-Herald*, with the largest circulation across Nebraska; the *Lincoln Journal Star*, with a circulation mostly within Lincoln, the state capital; the *McCook Daily Gazette*, with a much smaller circulation in the south-central region of Nebraska; and the *Kearney Hub*, with a small circulation in the central region of the state.¹⁴

These newspapers were chosen for a variety of reasons. The *Omaha World-Herald* and the *Lincoln Journal Star* have the largest circulations in the state. Both these cities, however, lie in the eastern quarter of the state, which was not included in the Poppers' original predictions for the Great Plains area. To supplement the two eastern newspapers, I reviewed two dailies from the middle of the state. The *McCook Daily Gazette* and the *Kearney Hub* covered the Poppers' early visits to these areas. Surprisingly, many of the weekly local newspapers across the state did not cover the Buffalo Commons. In fact, in a 1997 informal telephone survey of newspapers in the areas that the Poppers visited, several editors either had not heard of the Buffalo Commons at all or had heard about it previously but had forgotten it.

I searched the *Omaha World-Herald* and the *Lincoln Journal Star* by edition for the years 1987-1994. For the other two newspapers, only the years in which the Poppers spoke in the towns of McCook and Kearney were searched. National coverage was determined through

computer searches of databases. The types of articles in both local and national sources ranged from opinion pieces to rebuttals to simple announcements of upcoming speaking engagements.

CASTING THE BUFFALO COMMONS STORY

The media cast the story of the Buffalo Commons as a rhetorical conflict in which stock characters struggled with each other in the Great Plains. The Poppers were characterized as academics who used ideas, talking and writing for a living. The Great Plains people were characterized variously as yokels, pioneers, or experts, defending the Great Plains as garden.¹⁵ The narrative cast by the media was one of character, not of plot. When the media varied from their character-driven narrative, they did so using the historical guiding myths of the desert and the garden. Both local and national media used these myths as resources. The national media used them to contextualize the story for their broader audience, while the local media chose quotes that enacted these myths.

The media cast their narrative of the Buffalo Commons during 1988-1994, the height of their coverage of the story. Text from eleven articles—four national periodicals, one of which was reprinted in a local newspaper, and seven local articles—illustrated this casting.¹⁶ As the media cast the Buffalo Commons story as a rhetorical struggle, they introduced the characters of the Poppers and the Great Plains people.

THE POPPERS

The differences between the local and national casting of the Poppers were of degree, not kind. Both media cast the Poppers as eastern academics who used ideas to act upon the Great Plains and its people. Thus cast, the Poppers were surprised at the reaction caused by their Buffalo Commons idea, but in their role as academics, their actions were limited

to correcting the misconceptions of the Great Plains people.

When Deborah Epstein Popper and her husband, Frank, co-authored a 1987 magazine article on the future of the Great Plains, they had no idea it would be perceived as an obituary for parts of 10 states, including Nebraska. . . . In effect, the Poppers are suggesting that the clock be turned back to the 18th century, when the Great Plains was a vast ocean of grass, inhabited only by thundering herds of buffalo and Indians. The Poppers predict . . . the federal government could restore . . . the Plains to the state they were in before the coming of the white man and create an "ultimate national park". . . . Frank Popper said the furor has not subsided since the seven-page article appeared in the December 1987 issue of *Planning*.¹⁷

This characterization of the Poppers relied on a stereotype of academics: they naively work in isolation, without concern for the implications of that work. The actions of these academics were limited to their stereotypical functions: to "suggest" and "predict." Once the characters of the Poppers were introduced, the reporter detailed the Buffalo Commons proposal for those in the Great Plains who may not yet have heard of the idea. These details worked to bind an idea from two academic easterners to the daily lives of the people on the Great Plains. The reporter used the proposed return to historical times on the Great Plains, and the role of the federal government in accomplishing that return, to emphasize the radicalness of the Poppers' idea and to further cast them in their academic character. The local media chose to cast the Poppers as the voices of the desert myth as well: the Buffalo Commons would return "huge tracts of land" to the Great Plains, a "vast ocean of grass," empty except for "thundering herds of buffalo and Indians."

While we can see a hint of the desert myth in the media's casting above, the media voices

it strongly in this *Lincoln Journal Star* article in 1989:

Man has spent a century and more prodding and poking the Great Plains land. Eking out an existence. Alternating between feast and famine. Now many of its residents get by on federal farm subsidy payments. Its small-town windows are boarded up as people leave the rural areas. Dr. Frank Popper tells a depressing story, but the Rutgers University professor's looking glass on the future is worse. And his vision is an end-of-the-world one for rural Nebraska. The New Jersey professor sees western Nebraska, as well as rural areas of 10 Great Plains states as a no-man's land. He'd rather just leave it to the buffalo and native grasses and wildlife that reigned over it before white man's modern agriculture. Popper and his wife, Deborah, proposed in a 1987 article that the government allow the Great Plains from the 98th meridian (west of Aurora) to the Rocky Mountains to revert naturally into a "Buffalo Commons." The "commons" would serve best as a great national park, the Poppers contend. And instead of the federal government continuing to subsidize feed, fertilizer and irrigation on a true grassland, Dust Bowl and Sandhills region, the government should just give up and buy it all back.¹⁸

The Poppers, as "end-of-the-world" visionaries, described the Great Plains as a place where residents had been "prodding and poking" the land for "a century and more," "eking out an existence." This was the Great Plains as desert, with Frank Popper as its voice. This academic was willing to "just leave it to the buffalo" and urged the federal government to "just give up and buy it all back." Even as the media cast the Poppers as the voice of the desert, the conflict is not between nature vs. settlement, but one of rhetorical struggle between the Poppers and the Great Plains people. Within the media's casting of the Poppers' role in this struggle, a thin plot emerged: the Poppers told

“a depressing story” in which they “contended” the Great Plains should be allowed to “revert” to the “reign” of the desert. Although the Great Plains people’s voices in the rhetorical conflict were not yet heard in this casting, their role was clearly foretold: to resist the Poppers.

Remaining within their academic character, the appropriate action for the Poppers was to explain the Great Plains residents’ resistance, even search for causality. As the media cast it, the Poppers’ explanation was that Great Plains residents simply did not understand the Buffalo Commons proposal: “Some of the criticisms are based on a serious misreading of the original article,” Popper said. “The notion that we proposed a depopulation of the plains is nonsense. In fact, I believe most of the mid-size towns of the Plains, like Kearney, will weather the storm fine. They have the tools.”¹⁹ The “serious misreading of the original article,” not errors in their analysis, explained the “criticisms” voiced by the Great Plains residents. True to the academic character cast upon Frank Popper, he refuted the total depopulation of the Plains as “nonsense,” clarified that towns like Kearney, Nebraska, would “weather the storm fine,” and corrected the mistaken Great Plains residents. This rhetorical struggle between characters equally constrained action for each: Frank could only clarify and correct the Great Plains people, who were left to “misread” and criticize.

The national media also cast the Poppers as academics in a rhetorical struggle with the Great Plains people, but with a heavier reliance upon the guiding myths of the Great Plains. This increased use of the mythic structure, and thus the increased dramatization of the struggle, can be explained by the different audiences for which the reporters were writing. For an audience reading the *Boston Globe* or the *Chicago Tribune*, the Great Plains was not a geographically familiar area, let alone an area in which the audience would have readily understood the political and economic issues. Thus, more drama was needed to cast the story to national readers than to those within the Great Plains. The need for more drama was

well satisfied when the national media placed the academic Poppers in the midst of the Wild West:

They don’t look like the scourges of the prairie. Frank and Deborah Popper look more like mild-mannered academics, because that’s what they are. . . . They’re not outlaws. They’re readers, writers, and talkers. They are the kind of people who like nothing better than to start a conversation. But walk into a bar between the Missouri and the Pecos, lift your glass and propose a toast to the Poppers, and you could be in a heap o’ trouble.²⁰

The national media cast the return of the Wild West, complete with the “mild-mannered academics” who read, write, and talk for a living, and the angry bar mob in the Great Plains. By placing the Poppers in the Wild West, the media cast them as harmless academics and set up a well-known formula for interaction between East and West. The Great Plains people then fell into the formula as those who resisted the Poppers’ ideas.

By accentuating the drama of the Buffalo Commons story for their audience, the national media became obligated to explain to their readers the reason for the Poppers’ infamy. As they did so, they echoed the local media’s reliance upon the corrective function of the academic:

As is so often the case, the Poppers’ fame stemmed more from misinterpretations of what they said than from what they said. Among the things they did not say but that many people on the Great Plains believe they said:

* Let the federal government buy all the land in the Great Plains and kick out the farmers and ranchers. . . .

What they did say is more complicated.²¹

According to this casting, had the Great Plains people only understood the Poppers correctly, the controversy surrounding the Buffalo Com-

mons could have been avoided. "As is so often the case," the misinterpretations were the true source of the problem, not the proposal itself. Again, the actions of either "side" in the rhetorical struggle were severely limited by the media's characterizations: the Poppers proposed a complicated plan for the Great Plains; the region's residents believed only "misinterpretations."

While the local media drew upon the myth of the desert to characterize the Poppers and their proposal, the national media drew upon manifest destiny to contextualize their narrative of rhetorical struggle for their readers:

Buffalo Commons . . . has inadvertently aroused something that all their [the Poppers'] maps and statistics now can neither answer nor control. The Poppers have confronted America's potent, mythological sense of its mission to conquer and inhabit a continent—every bit of it. Although linked to history, the Buffalo Commons thesis is set in the present and points to the future. . . . the Buffalo Commons has left the realm of metaphor and academic discourse and entered a more rough-and-tumble world, where ideas are taken as serious proposals and where emotions are as important as fact or reason in deciding matters.²²

The media not only forecast the reactions of Great Plains characters, they contextualized their narrative of rhetorical struggle for their national readers. According to the media, when the Poppers unleashed the idea of the Buffalo Commons, they radically juxtaposed "America's potent, mythological sense of its mission to conquer and inhabit a continent," manifest destiny, with a call to return to a "presettlement" time on the Great Plains. This historical challenge, as the media framed it, caused the inevitable conflict between the Poppers and the Great Plains people. Once the national media referenced manifest destiny, their rhetorical struggle was lifted to a mythic level. While the Poppers' "maps and

statistics" were mentioned, they were not investigated or challenged.

To further contextualize the rhetorical struggle between the naive academics and the resistant people in the Great Plains, the media compared the struggle to similar, perhaps more familiar struggles:

"I think we probably weren't expecting any reaction at all," Mrs. Popper said. Her husband explains why. . . . "The idea that there were thousands of people out there that really care. . . . We clearly struck a nerve," he said. As anyone who knows anything about practical politics and public opinion could have told them, one sure way to get angry reactions is to tell people that the way they have been living is about to become obsolete. If the people hearing this are rural folks from remote regions and the people saying it are city folks from the East or West Coast, the reaction is likely to be even stronger. Steelworkers in Pennsylvania mill towns, foresters in Oregon and lobstermen from Maine all react the same way to predictions that there will be fewer of them in the future. They deny it, even if deep down they know it's true. He acknowledged that he and his wife were naive not to expect this reaction.²³

Here the media's rhetorical struggle of the Buffalo Commons was cast within a national context. Just like other communities in the nation who had been told that "the way they have been living is about to become obsolete," the Great Plains people denied the predictions that there would "be fewer of them in the future," even if "deep down" they knew it to be "true." By using this comparative strategy, the media set the rhetorical struggle within a frame familiar to their national readers.

The local and national media cast the Buffalo Commons as a rhetorical struggle between the Poppers and the Great Plains people, characterizing the Poppers as "naive" academics, "startled" observers of the reaction their ideas had created. This narrative dictated that the

Poppers' actions would be appropriately academic, to clarify and correct Great Plains residents. Set in opposition, the Great Plains residents were thinly characterized as people who "misread" and criticized. But the media cast a richer characterization of the Great Plains residents as well.

THE GREAT PLAINS RESIDENTS

Just as the media's character-driven narrative of the rhetorical struggle over the Buffalo Commons restrained the actions open to the academic Poppers, their characterization of the Great Plains people dictated a limited range of actions. Regardless of the variety with which the local media cast the Great Plains characters—as wise rural, pioneer, or expert—the actions they were allowed remained singularly limited: to resist the Poppers' Buffalo Commons. Similar to their casting of the Poppers, the national media cast the Great Plains characters as yokel or pioneer, employing the myths of the desert and garden to lift the rhetorical struggle to a mythic level.

The local media cast the Great Plains residents as wise rurals who used the Buffalo Commons as an opportunity to exchange a few insults with the easterners. From the *Omaha World-Herald* in 1991 we hear this Great Plains voice:

Not Again!

Just when we think we've heard the last of **Frank and Deborah Popper**, back they come, popping off again. The Poppers are those New Jersey city dudes who are trying to tell Plains state folks what we must do to be saved. They have this idea that big parts of the Plains, including a number of Nebraska counties, are no longer fit for human habitation and in fact never were. They want to turn the land into a "Buffalo Commons." "Commons" is Easternspeak for a publicly held grassy area.²⁴

This local editorial cast the voice of the Great Plains resident as the dubious rural, armed with

folksy language and barbed wit. As we heard in the media's casting of the Poppers, the rhetorical struggle was not between nature and settlement, as it was historically, nor even between the people and the land, as it was in the Poppers' Buffalo Commons proposal, but between the narrowly defined characters of the academic Poppers and the wise rurals in the Great Plains. By placing these stock characters within the thin narrative plot of a rhetorical struggle over the Buffalo Commons proposal, the media limited the Great Plains peoples' actions to one: resistance of the Poppers. The media then fueled those actions by characterizing the Poppers in a certain way: as those "New Jersey city dudes" who used "Easternspeak" and held "this idea" about the Great Plains that was clearly ludicrous.

The local media further fueled the rhetorical struggle by encouraging the voice of the wise rural and his folksy insults. "An illustrious panel has been assembled to take on the Poppers. . . . 'Popper bashing' should make for an entertaining and interesting evening. But let's remember, these are experts—they are more than 50 miles from home and carry briefcases."²⁵ The media did not urge investigation of the Poppers' statistics, or even a comparison between the Poppers' proposal and the material facts of the Great Plains, but rather "Popper bashing." In doing so, they reinforced their character-driven narrative of the rhetorical struggle.

Within this rhetorical struggle, the folksy yet flippant voice of the wise rural evolved into the voices of pioneers, in a panel of local residents who disputed the Buffalo Commons proposal after the Poppers' public speech in McCook, Nebraska.

Friehe, a member of Nebraska Wheat Growers Association, called the proposal ridiculous, but one that shouldn't be taken lightly. He said agriculture on the Great Plains has been one of this country's greatest success stories, especially when it comes to foreign trade. . . . Maddux, a cattle feeder from Wauneta and Republican candidate for lieu-

tenant governor, said he couldn't argue with the bleak statistics offered by the Poppers, but added statistics don't recognize the spirit of the people to make the most from what little is offered. Renken, president of the Chase County Area Arts Council, said the people of the Great Plains have the strength to face change and it's part of their heritage. "Working together is what community is all about," she said. "People expect to make sacrifices and know the need to preserve the land. People are this land's most important resource."²⁶

The local media displayed the Great Plains residents, gave them credentials, and aimed them at the Poppers. Friehe, Maddux, and Renken were cast as the voices of the Great Plains pioneer, but also as the voices of the garden. They spoke of the agricultural "success story," the pastoral garden of the world. Once the rhetorical struggle between the Poppers and the Great Plains people was elevated to the mythic level, the Great Plains people could deny the "bleak statistics offered by the Poppers" with the voices of the Garden. The "spirit" of the Great Plains people, the garden's yeoman farmer, had the "strength to face change," to "make sacrifices." These voices enacted the garden myth, with the splendor of the Great Plains' productive capabilities and the resiliency of its people. Indeed, people became the "land's most important resource."²⁷

The media's strategy of casting a local lineup of Great Plains residents to resist the Poppers became a familiar one throughout the local coverage, varying only to supplement the voices of the wise rural and sturdy pioneer with a Great Plains expert. Matching Great Plains academic for eastern academic, the local media reported on the reaction of one professor from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln:

The Poppers have drawn attention to the Great Plains. "They used the idea of a Buffalo Commons park like some professors use satires in the classroom—to get students in

a 'tizzy' so they will focus on what is feasible," she said. The idea of buffalo roaming across the Great Plains has problems, Kaye said, since bison are carriers of feared diseases such as brucellosis, which causes spontaneous abortions, and tuberculosis, which may be transmitted to people. . . . The Poppers' idea of a Buffalo Commons park distracts from the real agriculture problems of the Great Plains, she said. Some of those real problems, Kaye said, are the aging population of the Great Plains, the market of farm commodities and health care. . . . "Those are the real problems in Great Plains agriculture," Kaye said. "A Buffalo Commons looks cute by comparison."²⁸

Although Dr. Fran Kaye attempted to address the material facts of life on the Great Plains, as well as the facts of the Poppers' proposal, the media cast this as a conflict between professors. Through these dueling academic experts, the media questioned the basis of expertise. Relying upon familiar divisions between the East Coast and the Great Plains, the local media required that place of origin determine expertise. Only the experiences of living on the Great Plains could bring the experience required to be an "expert." Thus, the Poppers were cast as the eastern academics who used "cute" ideas to evoke reactions from the Great Plains people, but Fran Kaye, Great Plains expert, was not fooled by the Poppers' "satire," for she knew the "real" problems of the Great Plains.

The local media went so far in their casting of the rhetorical struggle as to give voice to one dueling academic expert in his own feature editorial. John Wunder, at that time Director of the Center for Great Plains Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, began by grappling with the Poppers' ideas: "[T]here is more to the Buffalo Commons theory than simply writing it off with anti-Trenton talk. At first, I tried to understand the nature of these ideas coming from some unlikely sources of expertise. Ideas, after all, are very important to what I do, and these ideas are certainly

provocative. Surely there must be some substance to them."²⁹ As in the media's use of Professor Kaye, Wunder is heard to want to address the Buffalo Commons as an "idea," a proposal for land use. Yet as he continued, the rhetorical struggle between the Poppers and the Great Plains people became obvious:

So what's new? Not much. Life in the Great Plains is dynamic, not static. Many diverse people have lived in the harsh environment of the Plains for thousands of years. They come and go; lands change. . . . Thus, it is not surprising that people are moving in and out of the Plains. It has always been, and it will always be, as long as humans inhabit this continent. But the Poppers' theory is predicated on a static dimension. It is ahistorical. It fails to take into consideration that these traits about the Plains so shocking to those who first confront them have existed for tens and hundreds of years.³⁰

Wunder, featured as a Great Plains expert by the local media, denied the novelty of the Poppers' findings by relying upon his knowledge of place. This time, the Poppers, as opposed to the Great Plains experts, simply didn't do their research.³¹ In an interesting reversal, the Poppers became the participants in the local media's rhetorical struggle who "failed to take into consideration" the changing Great Plains, just as the Great Plains residents had been cast as the characters who "misread" the Buffalo Commons in the national media's coverage. Whether characterizing the Great Plains people or the Poppers, the media severely limited the actions of both: the Poppers and the Great Plains people could only resist each other.

The local media presented a cast of Great Plains characters to resist the Poppers, ranging from the wise rural, armed with folksy insults, to the sturdy pioneer, voicing the garden myth, to academic experts, using the language of their professions. As the national media cast the Great Plains characters, the voices of

the expert and the wise rural were silenced. In their place the national media cast the yokel, an angry reactionary, and the pioneer, armed with the powerful garden myth. We heard the yokel voice in the *Boston Globe*:

Virtually every Plains-state governor, not to mention a horde of congressmen and other elected officials, has denounced the thesis, engaging in what one observer calls Popper-bashing. The Poppers have been called "deranged," and the Buffalo Commons has been termed a "bunch of crap," "flapdoodle," and "Popperscock" by editors of small-town weeklies. . . . More than 1,000 letters have poured in to the Poppers at Rutgers, about a quarter of them praiseworthy and the rest ranging from politely critical to downright vicious; a few, unsigned, referred ominously to a "Zionist conspiracy" against rural America.³²

While the national media cast the Poppers as stereotypical academics, naive and isolated, they cast in counterpoint the Great Plains resident as the stereotypical one-dimensional yokel, with the only action open to them one of angry reaction: "vicious," "ominous," even anti-Semitic. Little attempt was made by the national media to ascertain the material facts of the Buffalo Commons; rather, they simply set up the opposing sides in their rhetorical struggle.

Once the opposing sides in this rhetorical struggle had been cast, the media lifted the conflict into the realm of myth. Just as the national media used the garden myth to contextualize the Poppers and the Buffalo Commons for their readers, they provided those readers with a similar context in which to understand the Great Plains people:

In a region where the white settlement is often only several generations old and in some instances younger than some current residents, the assertion that settling the land was a profound miscalculation is taken as more than a scholarly analysis. It is a per-

sonal rebuke. Mark Carson, editor-publisher of the *Pierce County Tribune* in Rugby, North Dakota, best sums up the raw emotion the Poppers and their evocative phrase have elicited: "They don't take into account the struggle and hard work of three generations of pioneers who have taken what was a treeless prairie and made it into one of the most productive food-producing areas in the world. That's what really troubles me. Their theory says we should have left this to the buffalo."³³

Again, the national media used the garden myth to provide context for their readers. Within this context, the "Popper-bashing" yokel evolved into a struggling "pioneer." The national media carefully chose quotes that characterized the Great Plains pioneer. Through the "hard work of three generations," that "treeless prairie," the desert of the early 1800s, was transformed into "one of the most productive food-producing areas in the world," William Gilpin's "garden of the world." The academic Poppers' "theory," that the garden of the Great Plains should have been "left . . . to the buffalo," denied these pioneers' history in the Great Plains, therefore transforming a "scholarly analysis" into a "personal rebuke." By lifting the rhetorical struggle between the Poppers and the Great Plains residents into myth, the media transformed an academic idea for an important region of the country into an insult to the way people lived their lives.

The garden myth's failure in the Great Plains provided the opening scene for their compelling narrative:

On the surface there is not much about Bill Mathers to bring to mind Augustus McCrae or Woodrow Call, the gritty cattle drivers of the epic novel and television mini-series *Lonesome Dove*. . . . But more than a century after the time of that story, Mathers rode their trail, sank his roots into their grasslands and adapted to the big weather and financial buffetings of the Great Plains. Storms natural and political have raged

there forever, and another is blowing this summer. Mathers will survive as he always has, with hard work, shrewd calculation. He and those like him may be the future of this vast and troubled land, which seems to be stumbling back in time toward a recast frontier where grass will be king, some buffalo may actually roam again, and man will be in the minority. . . . In a way, Mathers is part of a recreation, edging back toward an open and exhilarating country that was swept away by bad government policy and greed. Homesteading was a tragedy in most of the plains, pitting small farmers against the relentless weather. It was no contest. But then the government compounded the problem—and still does—by offering crop subsidies, and those who broke the soil became manacled to a marginal existence. Some still hang on, but time runs against them. There, in simple narrative, is the core of the anguish and the argument and the hope of the Great Plains with its menacing beauty.³⁴

Bill Mathers is presented as the archetypal pioneer. Like those pop culture cowboys, Mathers provides the media with a protagonist in their "simple narrative."

Once the media had captured the attention and emotions of their readers with the stock pioneer and his saga, they introduced the familiar struggle between the Poppers and Great Plains people like Bill Mathers:

In such a huge land, the conditions vary enormously, and so do the opinions on what to do. . . . But of all studies and proposals, the one by a couple of New Jersey intellectuals has raised the greatest storm out on the plains. . . . They swept up the entire region, from Texas to Montana, in their analysis. Their language was apocalyptic ("largest, longest-running agricultural and environmental miscalculation in the nation's history"), their images devastating ("dreams, drought and dust") and their predictions frightening ("a wasteland, an

American empty quarter"). . . . But putting visions on seminar blackboards and bringing them into reality in this nation . . . are dramatically different things. . . . If nothing else, the debate has rallied the plainsmen to search for new ways to deal with the realities of decline—less water and oil; fewer minerals, people, towns. It has also revealed that a remarkable number of plains residents, like Mathers, have for years been adjusting to the inexorable rhythms of the land. . . . In the end, Mathers believes, land governs almost everything else. “You work with the land,” he says. “You can’t work against it.”³⁵

Regardless of the mythic underpinnings of the struggle over the Great Plains, it remained a conflict between a “couple of New Jersey intellectuals” and “plainsmen” like Mathers. While the casting alternated between the actions of academics, “putting visions on seminar blackboards,” to the actions of the government, which “manacled homesteaders to a marginal existence,” to the actions of pioneers, who lived with “the realities of decline,” it ended with the land, which governed “almost everything else.” The national media concluded the rhetorical struggle between the Poppers and the Great Plains people in the realm of the desert, with the triumph of the land. Pioneers like Mathers might remain in the region, but if they did, they had to “work with the land,” not “against it.” By casting the conflict in mythic terms, the national media were able to conclude their narrative without overtly supporting either side in the rhetorical struggle they cast between the Poppers and the Great Plains residents.

The local and national media cast the Great Plains people differently, yet both relied upon the mythic guides of the Great Plains as desert and the Great Plains as garden. The local media cast the Great Plains residents as wise rural, pioneer, or expert, but regardless of the characterization, their actions were limited to resistance of the academic Poppers. Even when the media lifted the rhetorical struggle to a

mythic level, complete with archetypal pioneers and pop culture cowboys, the struggle remained between the Poppers and the Great Plains people.

THE RHETORICAL STRUGGLE OF THE BUFFALO COMMONS

Guided by Edelman’s theory of news reporting as spectacle, we can see that the media acted as more than simply disseminators of the Buffalo Commons story. They cast the story of the Buffalo Commons using familiar oppositions between eastern academics and western pioneers, voicing the myths of garden and desert. Our notions of the media as a vehicle through which we can further investigate a situation, obtain information, and use it to make an informed decision were not supported by the actions of the media as they cast the Buffalo Commons story. They seemingly did not take the Buffalo Commons seriously as a land-use proposal, for they did not send reporters to question the statistics of the proposal with the material facts of life in the Great Plains. Instead, both local and national media cast the Buffalo Commons story as a rhetorical struggle between the Poppers and the Great Plains people. In this rhetorical struggle, stock characters were cast in a thin narrative plot, where the only action was to resist each other.

This rhetorical struggle was at times lifted to the mythic level of the region’s guiding myths of the desert and the garden. While this provided more drama for national readers, the strategy did little to inform readers. Both the casting of the rhetorical struggle and the lifting of that struggle to a mythic level ignored the conflict between the Great Plains people and the land itself, the conflict that had been at the heart of the Poppers’ proposal.

The Poppers had proposed that the Great Plains people should approach their battle with the land in a different way. The Poppers provided evidence of this battle by detailing the boom-and-bust cycles of settlement. Instead of the charging advances and forced retreats

that had dominated past conflict between the Great Plains and its inhabitants, the Poppers argued for less intensive land uses through the Buffalo Commons. Yet this conflict, so well supported by the Poppers with the history of the region, was generally ignored by the media.

Thus, we can see three levels of conflict within the media's casting of the Buffalo Commons story. The first, and dominant, conflict cast by the media is the rhetorical struggle between the Poppers and the people of the Great Plains. By relying upon their stereotypical characterizations of the Poppers as academics and the Great Plains people as variously yokel, wise rural, pioneer, or expert, the media were able to cast a conflict over the land-use proposal while ignoring the second conflict entirely. This second conflict, conspicuous mostly for its absence, had been proposed by the Poppers themselves. It was a conflict found in the material facts of the historical, current, and even future lives of Great Plains residents as they struggled for their livelihood with the land they inhabited. This was the conflict of boom-and-bust cycles, of government policies designed to help the region but harming it instead, of economically forced depopulation as more and more land fell into the hands of fewer and fewer people, sometimes even to corporations. But rather than address this second conflict, which dealt with the material facts and statistics of life on the Great Plains, rather than asking the difficult questions and furthering the dialogue that resulted, the media transformed the first conflict into yet another conflict, one of mythic proportions, where nature battled settlement, and the desert battled the garden.

If, as Edelman suggested, our "conventional" view of the media entrusts them with a responsibility to investigate situations in order to enlighten readers, then the media failed in their coverage of the Buffalo Commons. If, in contrast, the media's role is to constitute events, "continuously construct[ing] and reconstruct[ing] social problems, crises, enemies, and leaders," then they performed well,

casting stock characters in a mythic battle on the Great Plains.

Perhaps the more important question is not about the role of media, but about readers' expectations of it. Why does it matter whether the media fulfilled our expectations? One reason is that many of the Great Plains people, as well as others outside the region, got their only information about the Buffalo Commons from the media. Many did not hear the Poppers speak, nor read the original or subsequent articles. Instead, they relied on the media to report the proposal. If readers expected Edelman's "conventional" reporting of facts that can be trusted and used to make sound decisions, then the media's casting of the story into familiar, even trite oppositions between East and West, and their further dramatization of the controversy using the region's myths, obscures the science and logic of the proposal itself, let alone the complexities of interaction between the "opposing" sides. Of course, some of the Great Plains people recognized the Poppers' facts in their own lives: the children who left to attend college and returned only on holidays, the dwindling resources available in a small town, the loss of a grocery store, a bus route, a doctor, a post office. Yet reading the media's casting of the story, one can doubt whether understanding was enhanced concerning these difficult and painful issues. In their search to make the Buffalo Commons an engaging drama that would play well with their readers, the media performed a disservice to all parties by oversimplifying and overdramatizing the issues.

NOTES

1. Deborah Epstein Popper and Frank J. Popper, "The Great Plains: From Dust to Dust," *Planning* (December 1987): 12-18.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

4. Willa Cather, author of *My Ántonia* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1918) and *O Pioneers!* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), wrote fiction set in the region. Her novels are filled with strong pioneer characters, many of Nordic origins, who struggle to survive on the harsh Plains. While

Cather wrote fiction, Sandoz wrote nonfiction based on the region. In her book *Love Song to the Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961) Sandoz documents the history of the region through true tales and tall tales. In *Old Jules* (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1935) Sandoz documented the life of her father, one of the Swiss homesteaders in the Sandhills region of Nebraska.

5. The yeoman farmer, believed by Thomas Jefferson and others to be the backbone of the nation, was a sturdy plowman who made the best soldier in wartime, the best citizen in peacetime, and retained the purity of the country while resisting the degradation of the city. Henry Nash Smith, in his book *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950), documents the power of this ideal on the development of the West. The frontier myth, whose hero was often alienated from "civilized" culture and whose education came only from nature, became the dominant ideological guide in the development of the American West, argues Richard Slotkin in his book *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (New York: Atheneum, 1985). Slotkin also discusses the role the frontier myth played in western expansion. Finally, agricultural capitalism leaves behind the purity and sanctity of the yeoman and places farming and ranching operations on the same plane as any business: dictated by the economy.

6. Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 1-2.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

11. These myths deserve a brief explanation here. The myth of the desert is signaled by a vocabulary of emptiness, vast expanses of land, and few people. Any actors within the myth are either savages, living outside the bounds of civilization, or doomed people engaged in a hopeless struggle against the land. Land is dominant in the desert myth, for it controls the actions of people. In contrast, the garden myth is full of people: the sturdy farmers who plow the land, create a garden from the wilderness, and in so doing, become the foundation of civilization. By taming the land, the protagonist of the garden myth not only provides for his family, but for society as well. Within the garden myth, people control the land and use it to better their lives. For a more detailed discussion of these myths and their power, see Smith's *Virgin Land* (note 5 above).

12. I have analyzed national coverage, but local coverage from Nebraska only. I do not argue that

Nebraska coverage is generalizable across the entire Great Plains, but I also do not think it was unique, for the similarities between the national and Nebraska coverage are striking. Although televised media also picked up the story of the Buffalo Commons, I have chosen to focus only on print media coverage because it allowed me access to more local markets: many small towns in western Nebraska have a daily or weekly newspaper but receive their televised news from a nearby, larger market like Omaha, Lincoln, or even Cheyenne, Wyoming. If my choice to study only the print media broadened my access to local markets, it also provided a logical limit to the text for analysis.

13. These themes can be briefly described: "Initial Response" includes articles that illustrated the Great Plains people grappling with the new idea of the Buffalo Commons. "Buffalo Commons as Reality" describes coverage of how the Popper's message evolved as they traveled in the Great Plains. "Contra Buffalo Commons" include articles in which the Great Plains people acknowledged the problems of their region but denied the Buffalo Commons as a solution. "Reluctant Acknowledgment" includes responses of Great Plains residents who thought the Poppers may have been correct about some aspects of the Great Plains. "Lack of Novelty" include coverage that denied that the Poppers' observations about the Great Plains were novel. "Emotion and Outrage" include folksy insults to the Poppers, the Buffalo Commons, and New Jersey.

14. In order to ensure coverage from the entire state, I reviewed articles about the Poppers and the Buffalo Commons in the *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, the newspaper from the largest city in the Panhandle. This coverage reviewed the Poppers' appearance in Laramie, Wyoming, but did not significantly differ from the coverage of the Poppers' appearances in Nebraska.

15. I have chosen the term "yokel" to describe the characterization of Great Plains people as unsophisticated and boorish in their responses to the Poppers' Buffalo Commons.

16. Al J. Laukaitis, "Authors Propose Plains Grassland Preserve, Magazine Article Discusses Future of Great Plains, Predicts Deserted Region," *Lincoln Journal Star*, 26 January 1989, 1, 6; Kelly Gold, "Prof Says Let Buffalo Have Great Plains," *Lincoln Journal Star*, 28 January 1989; Betty Van Deventer, "Returning Great Plains to Buffalo Great Satire, Professor Says," *Lincoln Journal Star*, 25 September 1989; Jack Rogers, "Evening with Poppers Promises to Be Fun," *McCook Daily Gazette*, 23 April 1990, 1, 6; Dayton Duncan, "Westward NO," *Boston Globe*, 10 June 1990, 21, 36, 43, 53; Anne Matthews, "The Poppers and the Plains," *New York*

Times Magazine, 24 June 1990, 41; John Wunder, "People of Region Would Have No Voice': Buffalo Commons Idea Is Theoretical Totalitarianism," *Omaha World-Herald*, 5 August 1990, 19B; Hugh Sidey, "Where the Buffalo Roamed," *Time*, 24 September 1990, 53-54, 56; Tony Messenger, "Plains to Prairie: Prof Backs Theory," *Kearney Hub*, 13 October 1990, 1A, 6A; "Not Again! Who Invited Them?" *Omaha World-Herald*, 26 August 1991, 9; Jon Margolis, "Them's Fightin' Words!" *Chicago Tribune*, 7 January 1993, 1C-2C.

17. Laukaitis, *ibid.*, p. 6.

18. Gold, "Prof Says Let Buffalo Have Great Plains" (note 16 above).

19. Messenger, "Plains to Prairie" (note 16 above), pp. 1A, 6A.

20. Margolis, "Them's Fightin' Words!" (note 16 above), p. 1C.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Duncan, "Westward NO" (note 16 above), p. 53.

23. Margolis, "Them's Fightin' Words!" (note 16 above), p. 2C.

24. "Not Again!" (note 16 above), p. 9.

25. Rogers, "Evening with Poppers" (note 16 above), p. 6.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Land that draws upon the "resource" of "people" decenters the traditional idea of landownership, as well as contradicts the relationship between land and people normally found in the garden myth.

28. Van Deventer, "Returning Great Plains to Buffalo" (note 16 above).

29. Wunder, "People of Region Would Have No Voice'" (note 16 above), p. 19B.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Several articles, both national and local, argue that the Poppers' idea is not novel. As Kaye, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln professor, said in the *Lincoln Journal Star*, "[T]hey're (the Poppers) right about some things, but none of it is new" (Van Deventer, "Returning Great Plains to Buffalo" [note 16 above]). In an article in the *Omaha World-Herald*, 19 June 1991, we hear that the Buffalo Commons "proposal suggested not so much a bold land reclamation project as it recognized something that towns, non-profit foundations and universities throughout the region had know for more than a decade. The structure of the Plains was experiencing dramatic change." In *Time*, 24 September 1990, we hear "The irony is that the 'new truths' of the plains are as old as the crumbling diaries of the first explorers. Those early wanderers lumped the plains onto something labeled the 'great American desert' . . . The Poppers simply confirm Webb." Even international articles argue the lack of novelty in the Poppers proposal, as we hear in *Harrowsmith Country Life* July/August 1993: "Many people, including the Sioux, predicted the sorry state of affairs long before the Poppers recognized the obvious. . . . American geologist John Wesley Powell similarly doubted the wisdom of settling the arid American grasslands with 160-acre homesteads."

32. Duncan, "Westward NO" (note 16 above), p. 36.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

34. Sidey, "Where the Buffalo Roamed" (note 16 above), pp. 53-54.

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 54, 56.