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# WOMEN'S CULTURE IN THE GREAT PLAINS

## AN INTRODUCTION

Women, including plains Indians, European immigrants, blacks, and Chicanas, have always been essential to the development of Great Plains culture. Bounded by the patriarchal traditions associated with "women's place" in western society, women's diverse experiences are refracted through prisms of class, race, family structure, and work to create women's cultural legacies. In March 1987, scholars and other conference participants gathered in Lincoln, Nebraska, at the eleventh annual symposium of the Center for Great Plains Studies to address the theme of women's culture.

The four essays included in this issue of *Great Plains Quarterly* represent varying perspectives from that symposium. "Women's culture" in the Great Plains implies two distinct analyses of the political, social, economic, and artistic contributions of women. The first is to "add in" scholarship that uncovers women's contributions to Great Plains societies in general. The second is to study women through women's studies frameworks, with new assumptions and concepts and, thus, to consider the possibility of an autonomous "women's culture." The notion of a women's culture, or a separate experience of

culture by women, has provoked considerable debate about the validity of its social, political, or even biological sources and even more debate about its consequences. The four articles below detail women's experiences and move us toward resynthesizing the theories and conclusions of the traditional disciplines of Great Plains studies.

In the first essay, "'There Is Some Splendid Scenery': Women's Responses to the Great Plains Landscape," Julie Roy Jeffrey explores the personal and public writing of white women settlers from 1850 to 1900. Jeffrey posits that the wide range of attitudes expressed, from indifference to romantic ecstasy, is backlighted by the values, interests, and habits of the female world. The eyes of the women writers were upon the external patterns of contrasts: wide open plains or confined cabins; the brilliant sky or the dark thrill of a tornado; monotonous landscapes or seasonal blazes of wildflowers. Jeffrey discusses women's internal landscapes, as well, their memories of other homes to the east. These internal landscapes inspired many women writers to recreate a homelike environment with flower beds, home arts, and homestead sites that reminded them of past landscapes. Jeffrey argues that these

adaptations were not attempts to tame or domesticate the landscape but to humanize and beautify it.

Dorothy Schwieder and Deborah Fink illuminate the contributions of plainswomen to society during a period of economic crisis. The issues of the 1920s and 1930s in the Great Plains parallel the contemporary ones of deflated land prices, bank closures, and family struggles to keep the land. Schwieder and Fink document the work of women in farm households in two counties, using historical data on economic activities, memoirs, and letters to agricultural magazines. They calculate the contributions of women's labor in economic terms as well as in its creative dimensions. The ingenious, inventive responses of women stand in stark contrast to the external factors affecting their lives: isolation, drought, reduced federal aid, and scourges of grasshoppers. The primary response of women to the deepening crisis of the Depression was to produce more food and to generate more labor and products for exchange. Schwieder and Fink show the wide range of distinctive resources and effective work patterns of plainswomen in response to the depression era.

The contradictions in women's lives during the nineteenth century are illustrated by Ruth Ann Alexander's essay on Elaine Goodale Eastman. She frames the discussion with a "feminist Protestant ethic" that combines virtues of hard work with service to others in its most selfless form. This philosophical combination, she argues, provides explanation and motivation for women's achievements. Elaine Goodale Eastman is a prototype of the missionaries, abolitionists, reformers, and suffragists driven by the power of this philosophy. For Eastman and others the contradictions inherent to this model would ultimately lead to dissatisfaction and anger.

Elaine Goodale Eastman's work as a teacher, superintendent, writer, and poet focused around the lives of plains Indians. Alexander sees this work in the context of her subject's marriage to Ohiyesa (Charles Alexander

Eastman) and her subsequent work with him on numerous plains Indian stories and accounts. Sketching the history of Elaine Eastman's family life and writing, Alexander highlights the fluctuations of success in both spheres as related to the feminist Protestant ethic. Eastman championed plains Indians through her own histories of the Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre, plus letters, "propaganda," and even "pot boilers" to bring in family income. These efforts meant the curtailment of her earlier efforts at poetry, and were not sufficient to prevent the disruption of her family and her lifelong sense that she had lost her literary work.

Mary Hurlbut Cordier documents the material lives of women teachers from the mid 1850s to the 1920s in three plains states. She describes the teaching lives of the part year, short term teacher, the long term teacher, and the fully committed community education leader. In this article and others, we see how the Great Plains environment shaped women's work. Teachers arranged school and personal schedules around the seasons and community activities. The early salaries of teachers in the Plains were low, but as the school year lengthened, educational requirements increased and so did salaries. Cordier provides enrollment and employment figures supplemented by women's diaries and other primary sources to chart important changes in prairie schoolwomen's lives and contributions to Great Plains culture.

These articles demonstrate a range of approaches that describe women's culture in the Great Plains region. Each author carefully analyzes the environmental and social boundaries and the efforts of women to live within and beyond those boundaries. The articles do not each address the concept of a separate, extant women's culture, but they do illuminate its possible dimensions.

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