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INTRODUCTION

IMAGINING LITERARY LANDSCAPES

SUSAN J. ROSOWSKI

In compiling this issue of *Great Plains Quarterly*, Charlene Porsild responds to issues at the heart of the rising “new regionalism.” One premise of the renewed interest in regionalism is that learning to navigate the virtual world of cyberspace means needing to know place in the actual world, and understanding mapping means learning how to orient oneself, how to read a landscape, and how to move from one place to another. The four essays presented here offer complementary responses to that challenge.

One’s stance in time undergirds one’s relation to place, as Walter Isle demonstrates in “History and Nature: Representations of

the Great Plains in the Work of Sharon Butala and Wallace Stegner.” In their contrasting perspectives toward their common part of the southwestern corner of Saskatchewan, Stegner and Butala illustrate the point. Stegner looks backward, recovering memories of youth in the context of his later historical understanding of the region, memories of a childhood experience that “helped form the adult writer and historian.” From that same part of the Plains Butala writes from the present looking forward. She conceives of her “new life” as beginning when she came to the ranch that her husband, Peter Butala, has lived on all his life, and she tells of “learning the place she finds herself in and gradually becoming a native to that place.”

In her reading of Nebraska poet Ted Kooser’s *Weather Central*, Mary K. Stillwell locates her subject by the particularity of place on a map—Lincoln (where she lives and Kooser works), and Garland (where Kooser lives and writes). Stillwell then uses language of place to address epistemological questions of how the poet creates and how readers know the experience of the place. Kooser’s answer has to do with metaphor, the open “place”

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that occurs as "the space between" a lover and a heron, a thing and that with which it is compared. The relation between poet and reader is the bridging, crossing, and closing; together poet with reader arrive "at a map, designed above all else, to proffer at least momentary order." "Mutuality" is at the heart of the experience; connection in separation is its premise. Appropriately, the essay itself is circular. As Stillwell began her essay by situating herself with Kooser in a particular place, she returns to that place to end the essay, arguing that like the metaphor itself, Nebraska in *Weather Central* is the geographic "in-between."

Whereas Kooser creates poetry as an experience akin to conceiving a map, William Least Heat-Moon writes a book structured as a map, as O. Alan Weltzien argues in "A Topographic Map of Words: Parables of Cartography." *PrairieErth* treats the familiar question of how one best knows a chosen landscape "in ways that expose new affinities between mapping and reading and writing as fundamental interpretive acts." Beginning in Columbia, Missouri; Heat-Moon reads US Geological Survey maps of Chase County, Kansas, adapts the grid for his narrative design, then provides exercises—"formal tricks in engagement"—that "not only cast us as vicarious co-author, but force our scrutiny of maps and stories as complementary distillations of a place." Weltzien writes of a "participatory cartography" that resembles Stillwell's "mutuality" in its premise of collaborative engagement of writer with reader, language with landscape. By adopting the "ultimately playful artifice" of a "map of words," Heat-Moon offers a pretense of pretending that we draw words and write maps. "The pretense teases the space between these domains so that we more fully read—i.e., know or enter—this particular landscape."

While Heat-Moon writes as a traveler to a particular county in Kansas, Thomas Fox Averill writes as a native to the state. "A Map as Big as the World" is a paean of an essay, a Whitmanesque song of praise and

joy. "I love maps," Averill writes, then celebrates their variety of representations: "bridge maps, mineral maps, physiographic provinces maps. Maps that shade counties according to Rural Health statistics: population over 65, low birth weight babies, heart disease and cancer death rates. Maps that show water both above and below the surface of the earth. Vegetation maps, and maps that chart the progress of railroad development. Maps that show ethnic settlement patterns and the density of hogs, chickens, cattle and horses. All of these maps, of course, try to describe, try to parallel, try to be, somehow, Kansas." To test the relationship between map and world, Averill tried to see Kansas as a map by flying over it in a small plane "to see if it was as big as the real Kansas." In this flyover, he "kept having the strong sensation that the Kansas land—with its highways, rivers, towns and cities—looks exactly like I thought it would from the air. It matched the map in my head."

Why does the Kansas land match the map in his head? Averill asks, in doing so introducing the criterion of authenticity that comes from hours spent traveling the state, etching in his brain an intuitive map "with real things in it instead of words." The exchange is between the native and the place: "maps become more real as they are traveled and imagined (imaged), thus made both concrete and intuitive."

Reading these essays together evokes a heightened sensitivity to the way we relate to the land by words we take for granted. For example, the word landscape "is simple enough, and it refers to something which we think we understand," John Brinckerhoff Jackson writes in *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, then cautions that "yet to each of us it seems to mean something different."¹ The writers in this issue of *Great Plains Quarterly* confirm his point. Isle uses "landscape" to distinguish Butala's more inclusive history from Stegner's: Butala "learns what a life in nature teaches one about being in the landscape" as a gradual realization of "being

shaped by the land," "of alignment, of a congruence that has come about through opening oneself to and responding to the natural world." By her title, "The 'In-Between': Landscapes of Transformation," Stillwell signals the centrality of landscape to her exploration of the mutuality between poet and reader. The reader participates as Kooser juxtaposes interior and exterior landscape(s), and "within that space between, or landscape of transformation, one thing is at the same time separate from another and becomes it." Weltzien reads *PrairyErth* for its "answers to questions about landscape . . . : how does one best know a chosen landscape? What are the . . . connections between landscape and self?" And Averill distinguishes his sensation of maps—spreading them out, running our fingers along imagined journeys, pinning them on walls—from "what we do when we engage landscape: stand on it, unsure of what lies over the next hill. . . ."

What is landscape, that apparently most ordinary of words, as it appears in each of these essays? "A portion of land or territory which the eye can comprehend in a single view, including all the objects so seen, esp. in its pictorial aspect": The dictionary definition is useful for providing basics that set in motion another set of questions. How does one *comprehend* a portion of land? And doesn't the qualifier, "in its pictorial aspect," provide a paradox by redirecting attention from the land to its representation? The four essays invite similar tracings of the other words

central to ideas they present: place, world, land, native, space, and region.

"I have forgotten my place in the world," Ted Kooser writes, and as if in response, the authors of these four essays demonstrate ways of remembering. Isle offers a layered, long view as an invitation to reflect upon how we place ourselves, and one's reference to a map begins the process: Stegner and Butala came from that same short-grass prairie country "in the extreme southwestern corner of Saskatchewan just above the Montana border." Language represents the map that represents the place beneath which the land itself is echoed "in its pictorial aspect." Stillwell's way of remembering is by reproducing the experience of creativity. She situates herself with Kooser in a particular place, then reenacts the mutuality she describes between reader and poet, place and person. Weltzien's "participatory cartography" offers another kind of engagement. In responding to *PrairyErth* as a guidebook of cartography, Weltzien positions himself as a guide to a guidebook, all constructed by the playful premise of map making as language. Finally, Averill is the native writing from within a place so long lived that his description of his flyover confirms an intuitive map, a deep knowledge like the imprinting of migratory birds.

NOTE

1. Jackson, John Brinckerhoff. *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 3.