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LITERATURES OF THE GREAT PLAINS

AN INTRODUCTION

What really happened? A meaningless question. But one I keep trying to answer, knowing there is no answer.¹

Storytelling, narrative, seems to be hard-wired into humans as a way of comprehending emotional truths about ourselves and others, our history and our cultures. Through the stories we tell, over and over, circling through different kinds of truths, we make our approaches to the question of "what really happened," and somehow we find a few answers that suit our private and public nows. The conference on literatures of the Great Plains, presented by the Center for Great Plains Studies in Lincoln, Nebraska, 3-5 April 1997, showcased a number of ways stories and songs can enlighten us about the mores of our region. Four papers, covering a variety of approaches, are published in this special symposium issue of *Great Plains Quarterly*.

P. Jane Hafen explores Zitkala Ša's delicate cultural negotiations as the Native American activist collaborated with Utah music teacher William Hanson on *The Sun Dance Opera*. On one hand, the opera allowed Ute and Lakota actors to perform outlawed religious ceremonies

in a dignified manner as part of what the dominant culture saw as its highest art form. On the other hand, the secularized and, in the most literal sense, vulgarized version of the Sun Dance was a breach of its spirituality, while Hanson's belief in a "vanishing American" allowed for a good deal of cultural appropriation on his part.

If Zitkala Ša wrestled with the presentation of Siouan and Ute materials in a European context, Becky Faber strives to find a literature of the Plains and Prairies that acknowledges the kind of drudgery and boredom she found growing up as a farm girl in Iowa. Willa Cather's radiant Alexandra says nothing to her of her own life, while Cather's *Antonia* is for the most part swallowed up in the telling of her tale by Jim Burden, the neighbor boy who persists in seeing Nebraska in terms of the dime novels he had read as a child. Lesser known writers, such as Ruth Suckow and Dorothy Thomas, and the more recent Jane Smiley, present Faber with a picture that she recognizes as a more meaningful consideration of the emotional and physical challenges of the lives of women on the farms of the midcontinent.

Anne Nothof, writing about Canadian prairie drama (which is far more rich and extensive than the very slender corpus of US plains drama) is, like Hafen, dealing with a form of storytelling that is aural and visual, not primarily written. One of Nothof's concerns in her essay is with the depiction of the prairie, the vast immensity of space filled with nothing but earth and sky—and thus resistant to representation in the closed space of a theatre. She points out that early writers of the prairie—before about 1970—tended to depict opposition between man (almost always man, specifically, and not woman) and land, but that her prairie playwrights, all women, instead focus on the synergism of humans and place, even though the writers are hampered by the difficulty of showing such a place on a stage.

In the fourth paper, John Lauck shows how fiction can serve as a “primary document,” using Douglas Unger's novel *Leaving the Land* to frame the debate about corporate farming after World War II, a debate still hotly contested on the field of hog confinement

operations—or factory farms—in Nebraska, Iowa, Alberta, and other plains and prairie states and provinces. Although the main body of Lauck's articles deals with history, not literature, his use of the novel demonstrates how fiction, far from “fictionalizing” history, aims at the emotional core, the down-home gut response, to any policy issue or public crisis, the human-scale power that always energizes political debate.

We can be, as Oscar Wilde tells us, objective only about issues with no personal resonance for us—and issues an author does not care about one way or the other will not make good literature. Each of these four articles depicts a form of passionate engagement with the land and peoples of the Great Plains. And so they repay our reading.

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¹ Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners* (New York: Knopf, 1974), p. 49.