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FRAMING THE TOURIST GAZE

RAILWAY JOURNEYS ACROSS NEBRASKA, 1866-1906

JEAN P. RETZINGER

Thus the railroad, the prime instrument of the large-scale industrialization which re-created American nature into “natural resources” for commodity production, appears as a chariot winging Americans on an aesthetic journey through the new empire. Tourism, already implicit in the landscape conventions, becomes yet another form of acting upon the land.

—Alan Trachtenberg¹

As the last of the Conestoga wagons crossed the Nebraska plains along the worn and rutted Oregon Trail, the tracks of the Union Pacific were already being laid. Telegraph wires had crossed the continent by 1861; the railroad would follow within the decade. Touted as the latest technology to transform space and time, the railroad was to “bind all portions of our country in one homogeneous organism of political, military, social, commercial and Christian nationality and power.”² Trains from the East transported consumer

goods and consumers alike to the western territories, traversing in a single hour what once had taken a full day. Boxcars carried the plows and barbed wire that would refashion the Great Plains, as well as the household items that would domesticate it. Passenger cars held soldiers and farmers hoping to settle and reshape the West. But curiosity seekers also purchased railway tickets, eager simply to view a new land, not to inhabit it. By the 1860s tourism (a word coined at the beginning of the nineteenth century) began to shift the focus of its already burgeoning trade from foreign to domestic travels. Ads urged the leisure class to “First See America”³; travel guides instructed vacationers on what was to be seen. In the final decades of the nineteenth century railroad magnates reaped the profits of a golden age of leisure travel and editors filled the pages of newspapers, magazines, and books with literary accounts of railway journeys.

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Words penned by tourists reveal far more than just the characteristics of their accommodations or the scenes and events they encountered along the way. Ideologies lie entangled in descriptions, and each repetition reinforces their cultural significance. By examining tourist responses to one brief portion of the Union Pacific's transcontinental route through the Platte River Valley of central Nebraska, we can explore the far-reaching influence of the ideologies of progress and tourism (Fig. 1). For the travelers' views of this region were framed not only by the train car window but also (and perhaps primarily) by the "vision" promoted by those who had made the journey earlier. I analyze the interplay of these various discourses—to explore the forces that shaped the tourist gaze (and in so doing reshaped the Nebraska plains at the close of the nineteenth century). Perhaps underlying all, and most fundamental, was a reconceptualization of space and time influenced by both technological and cultural changes.

Tourism both extends and suspends capitalist practices. Though a form of consumerism, tourism also entails a temporary abandonment of daily business routines and transactions. Victor and Edith Turner's analysis of the Christian pilgrimage, especially their identification of the three distinct phases of their journey, has been applied to tourism. Travelers first undergo a social and physical separation from their ordinary acquaintances and familiar surroundings. Secondly, they experience a state of liminality, an "anti-structure . . . out of time and place" where conventional social ties are suspended and new bonds of community are formed. And finally, upon their return home, the travelers are reintegrated into former social ties, though often with a change in status upward.⁴ The leisure trip becomes yet another prized consumer acquisition.

The journey outward begins the second stage and may in fact possess a double liminality, as neither home nor destination. Travelers shed familiar routines, without replacing them with new structures that the destination itself will impose. Conceptions of

space and time become less stable. As travel is eased, distant places seem more accessible and thus closer. The space "annihilated" by the railroad is the space between the stations marked on a passenger's ticket. Similarly, time also stretches and contracts, made fluid by both expectation and impatience.

Tourist accounts of the trip itself, then, may provide a crucial vantage point in understanding the tourist gaze. In looking upon unfamiliar landscapes or townscapes, travelers search for difference. Judgments of tourist sites and activities are made "not in terms of some intrinsic characteristics, but through the contrasts implied with non-tourist social practices."⁵ Yet the gaze itself, socially organized and constructed, is fashioned from the familiar, structured by ideology. Meaning depends on bridging the gap between difference and sameness by fitting new experiences or observations into familiar formulas. Such ideological framing can be found even in accounts of the very first touristic journey by rail across the Nebraska plains.

In October of 1866, 100 excursionists left New York City, gathering more than 100 others along the route, to travel the newly laid Union Pacific Railroad tracks to the 100th meridian (Fig. 2). At Omaha, nine train cars (including a cooking car, refreshment saloon, passenger coaches, and separate cars for members of Congress and Thomas Durant, vice-president of the Union Pacific Railroad) were assembled behind the two locomotives that would pull them 279 miles westward across the Platte Valley.⁶ Silas Seymour, consulting engineer for the Union Pacific, wrote an account of the four-day journey from Omaha. On the morning of the second day, near Columbus, Nebraska, the travelers assembled outside the train to watch a "sham Indian fight." Gazing at the scene before him, Seymour wrote:

Perhaps no better illustration could have been given of the extremes of civilized and savage life, standing face to face with each other, than the one now before us. On the

one side was the track of the Union Pacific Railroad, upon which stood that great civilizer, the locomotive and train, looking westward . . . ; and in the foreground stood the group of excursionists, composed of beauty, intelligence and refinement; while, on the other hand, were grouped these uncouth savages, many of them almost in their normal state, except for the profuse display of feathers and trinkets which bedecked their persons; low and brutal in their habits, and mentally elevated but slightly, if at all, above the level of the beasts that inhabit this vast and beautiful country with them. (89-90)

In case readers missed the point of his comparison, Seymour went on to discuss in detail the fate that awaited Native Americans. Difference was to find no shelter upon the vast expanses of the plains.

But the laws of civilization are such that it must press forward; and it is in vain that these poor ignorant creatures attempt to stay its progress by resisting inch by inch, foot by foot, its onward march over these lovely plains, where but a few years since, they were "monarchs of all they surveyed."

The locomotive must go onward until it reaches the Rocky Mountains, the Laramie Plains, the Great Salt Lake, the Sierra Nevada, and the Pacific Ocean. Lateral roads must also be built, extending in all directions from the main line, as veins from an artery, and penetrating the hunting-grounds of these worse than useless Indian tribes, until they are either driven from the face of the earth; or forced to look for safety in the adoption of that very civilization and humanity, which they now so savagely ignore and despise. (90)

The contrasts Seymour observed between the excursionists and the Plains peoples served both to predict and justify the railroad's penetration (rape) of Indian lands and the annihilation of Indian tribes. Seymour's prophecy

was largely borne out, and within a very few years. Before the end of the century, the plans for a nearly total genocide of the Plains Indians and their culture had been sanctioned and the process initiated.⁷

Seymour's vision of the future, shared by many, presented progress as inevitable and irresistible, and granted technology nearly total autonomy as its cause and driving force. The "laws of civilization" embodied in the locomotive (without an engineer, let alone a corporate board of directors) would leave no portion of the country untouched. Outsiders to the "humanity" Seymour described above were faced with limited choices. Those who were not killed outright were offered the "safety" of cultural annihilation. If the train was the nineteenth century's most potent symbol of "progress," the Indian, as Trachtenberg points out, "remained the utmost antithesis to an America dedicated to productivity, profit, and private property."⁸

But the train, as a symbol built of iron and steel and human labor, left far more than metaphors littered along its path. The railroad altered lives both inside and outside its passenger coaches. The hours spent aboard the train encouraged travelers to examine their surroundings (accommodations, fellow passengers, the passing landscape)—and themselves. Their judgments reflected individual and cultural values, tempered by fluid conceptions of space and time. But just as patterns of travel and attitudes toward tourism changed, so too did the lands the railroad crossed and the lives of those who once resided there.

THE SCENE INSIDE THE RAILWAY CAR

ONWARD

. . .

Written on the Train by a Lady
Expressly for the *Trans-Continental*.

. . .

Through arid plain and meadow fair,
We pass, unconscious of the powers
Which bear us on through earth and air,
As swiftly as the circling hours.

Thro' sunshine and thro' storm we pass,
 (A rapid glance in magic glass,)
 While we, in trustful calm await
 Pacific shores and Golden Gate.
 —A.W.⁹

Advertising for railroad travel emphasized three themes in particular, and the poem cited above, written aboard a Union Pacific train in 1870, offers some indication of the railroad's success in spreading its message. Time, comfort, and the lure of the destination were all employed to promote railroad travel across the continent (Fig. 3). Railroads made a virtue of their ability to transport passengers, like parcels, across vast expanses of space. Separated equally from sunshine or storm, passengers' experience of those expanses became little more than the poet's "rapid glance in magic glass." Space was annihilated (in the words of General Dodge, the Union Pacific's chief engineer) but only by being reconceived as time.¹⁰ "Swiftly . . . circling hours" were all that separated travelers from their destinations, the touristic sites of California or the mountains. And though many travelers purchased insurance before setting off on their overland journeys, the comfort of the accommodation was meant to assure them of the benevolence and safety of industrialization and technology.

Again and again, advertisements stressed the speed with which trains could carry passengers across the continent (Fig. 4). Advertising copy featured promises of "California in 3 Days" (via the Chicago & North-Western), "less than three days" (aboard the Rock Island), or, more specifically, "2 3/4 days" (also aboard the Rock Island).¹¹ In 1899 the Sante Fe's California Limited called itself the "Finest Train West of Chicago" and measured the journey in hours rather than days, refiguring the trip's duration as just "66 Hours to Los Angeles" via its southern route.¹²

Advertising copy matched its precision in describing the brief duration of the journey with its guarantees of strict arrivals and departures. "Every Friday night at 10:35 P.M., a through Tourist Car for San Francisco, carry-

ing first and second class passengers, leaves the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway Union Passenger Station."¹³ Passengers aboard the Overland Limited could expect to arrive in San Francisco promptly at 5:15 in the afternoon on the third day of their travels.

This heightened sense of time and timelessness was by no means a new feature of western railroad travel. Lewis Mumford traces the internalization and adherence to mechanical time back to the monasteries of the early Middle Ages and describes the clock itself as the most significant machine of the modern industrial age. Capitalist constructions of time—in which timekeeping becomes "time-serving and time-accounting and time-rationing"—coordinate and restrain human action.¹⁴ Still, the final decades of the nineteenth century witnessed significant changes in the regulation of time, largely due to the power and influence of the railroads. In 1881 George Beard's treatise on "American Nervousness" pointed its finger at the "necessity of punctuality" and "the habit of looking to see the exact moment, so as not to be late for trains or appointments."¹⁵ But it was not until 1883 that the country was divided into four standard time zones—by decree of the railroad companies, not by Congressional mandate.¹⁶ Standardized time zones permitted increased control over markets—and over human labor and leisure.

The associative link between railroads and timekeeping remained strong enough for the Legion Watch Company to enlist it in advertisements for their "'B. W. Raymond'—21 Jewel—Railroad Model" pocket watch in the 1920s. The "Raymond" was promoted as the "authority in professional timekeeping," an authority placed in the hands of "the railroad man" as far back as 1867 when, according to the advertising copy, "Railroading was in its infancy. Railroads were short. Life was leisurely."¹⁷ Though the advertisement clearly permits some nostalgia for the past, the final message was one of celebration rather than mourning. If life was no longer leisurely, it could at least be precise and professional. The

reward for internalizing capitalist constructions of time was the yearly vacation—made easier by longer railroads, both source and solution to the conundrum.

This heightened consciousness of time and its resulting tension may perhaps best be glimpsed in a travel guide published in 1868. *Turner's Guide from the Lakes to the Rocky Mountains* casts suspicion on the Elgin Watch Company's claim that life had been leisurely even in the late 1860s. The strict separation of labor and leisure hours appeared no easy feat, as Turner's description of the traveler aboard the train makes clear. Images of relaxation and urgency are woven together and blurred in nearly every sentence—and presumably throughout the vacation itself.

Luxuriously reclining in a palace car, he is now carried, at great speed, over one of the best railroads in the world, across river, plain and mountain. A thousand miles from Chicago, he takes his 'ease in his inn,' and, while he daintily sips his mocha or his wine, reads the news of the world, not an hour old! A week takes the hasty tourist to the mountains and returns him, refreshed and recuperated by vitalizing breezes, to the busy moil of the lake borders. Soon, less time will give him a view of the Golden Gate and the placid waters of the Pacific.¹⁸

Railroads transported the businessman and his family from the "busy moil" of labor to a "hasty" vacation and back again in a single week. The promise of the future was to travel faster and further in even less time.

Railroads unquestionably assisted in altering the pace of life in general and of travel in particular. Samuel Bowles, who had made a trip across the plains three years earlier by stagecoach, commented in 1869, "The then long-drawn, tedious endurance of six days and nights, running the gauntlet of hostile Indians, was now accomplished in a single twenty-four hours, safe in a swiftly-moving train, and in a car that was an elegant drawing-room by day and a luxurious bedroom at night."¹⁹ Oth-

ers, more hesitant to describe the train's pace as swift, still recognized the relative ease of railway travel. "[T]he train rolls on, at no frightening speed, though advertised as a lightning or thunderbolt express. Twenty miles an hour carried on all day soon mount up into very respectable figures"²⁰ (Twenty miles, in fact, had been the average distance covered in a full day of travel by emigrants in wagon trains just a few years earlier.) Still, for many "the interminable hours of railway traveling" remained the journey's characteristic feature.²¹

The railroads worked to soften the tedium of those hours by surrounding passengers with luxurious accommodations—and by highlighting those features in their advertisements. At least one early train contained the "special luxury of a house organ," allowing Bowles and his fellow passengers to "while away the tedious hours of long rides over unvarying prairies with music and song."²² Trains on the Rock Island Railroad provided "electric lights; electric fans; bath room; barber shop; Booklover's Library" as well as "compartment and standard sleeping cars; dining, buffet-library and observation cars" for their passengers.²³ The Wabash, meanwhile, promised "Every comfort is provided, equal to that of a first-class hotel."²⁴ Yet despite the luxurious accommodations inside the railway cars, travelers still felt effects of the lands they crossed. After leaving the station in Chicago, one writer noted that "the women immediately took off their best hats and dresses, the men put off their frock coats and derbies, and everyone put on a dustproof suit made of light cloth, and caps. . . . heat and dust would be our worst enemies on the western prairies."²⁵

Advertisements also emphasized "Palace Sleepers" and "Tourist Sleepers" with the statement, "A Good Night en route is ensured on all trains of the Wabash Line."²⁶ The emphasis on a comfortable night's sleep no doubt struck a resonant chord for many travelers. W. F. Rae, grateful for having procured a berth in a Pullman sleeping car before leaving Omaha, wrote, "The prospect of spending several nights

in an ordinary car is enough to depress the mind and daunt the courage of the hardest traveler."²⁷ Major Shepherd, an Englishman whose journey to America's western states was spent among "cattle, cow-boys, round-ups, sheep-driving, [and] herders," still asserted that "a sleeper, or berth in a sleeping car, is no extravagant luxury for anyone who has to travel more than twenty-four hours." He offered a vivid description of the alternative.

[T]he ordinary seat in an ordinary car forbids comfort and defies sleep. By no arrangement of the head, body or limbs; by no propping with luggage, nor spreading of coats and rugs; neither by resting your head on the sharp angle of the window, nor by trying to balance it on the back or arm of the seat, with your legs stretched out under the bench in front, or bent upon your own red-plush mockery of a seat—in no way can you be at ease. The place is too short, and too narrow; . . . there is no elbow-room to spare. The constant passage of the guard and brakesman down the central aisle, passengers coming and leaving, the call for tickets at each change of train-staff—say every three hours—combine to transform a night journey into an ingenious system for keeping you awake.²⁸

The emphasis on luxurious daylight accommodations and comfortable sleeping arrangements served to shift the focus away from the lands traversed. Though some few companies offered a "scenic route," even then the "scenery" only commenced once the mountains had been reached (Fig. 5). For the most part, landscapes along the railroad routes were ignored, blurring together into an impediment to anticipated pleasure. As Wolfgang Schivelbusch points out, "the railroad opened up new spaces that were not as easily accessible before," but it did so "by destroying space, namely the space between points."²⁹ Thus, it comes as no surprise that destination points were emphasized in railroad advertising both in pictorial

and verbal images and descriptions. And most of those destination points were California cities and coastlines.

Readers of the February 1903 issue of the *Literary Digest* were urged to "Go where Comfort is" (Fig. 6) and were further admonished, "You can't be comfortable at home and it is useless to try."³⁰ Again and again, California was served up as the tonic for all of life's ills and discomforts, and a ticket there on the Golden State Limited was "practically a guarantee that . . . you will be supremely happy." Just an hour after arrival in Los Angeles, claimed the Rock Island Railroad, "you can be on the shores of the Pacific, listening to the roar of the surf, drinking in the wine-like air; the bluest of blue skies above you and the most charming landscapes in America all about you."³¹ The landscapes along the way, implied the advertisements, were neither charming nor noteworthy. Not only was time, therefore, bifurcated into labor and leisure hours, but space as well could be divided (profitably for the railroads) into the same categories.

Passengers followed the advertisers' lead, withdrawing their gaze from the view outside the window to "glance round upon the cheerful prospect within."³² The ease of railway travel and the separation from the lands being traversed encouraged attention to the social dynamics aboard the train. Few travel accounts omitted descriptions of at least some of the other passengers on board, and most offered evidence of shared conversations and confidences. Robert Strahorn, traveling in 1878, offered a brief list of his fellow passengers' occupations or reasons for travel. They included a home-seeker, health-seeker, cattle dealer, ex-surveyor-general, US government representative on his way to China, pleasure-seekers, and army officers.³³

Three years later Lady Duffus Hardy, on vacation from her native England, commented upon the presence of a young woman traveling alone to meet her brother. "A lady can do that in this country," she remarked, "without running the slightest risk of annoyance or in-

convenience in any way.”³⁴ “Indeed,” she noted later, “to thoroughly enjoy traveling in perfect comfort and freedom from anxiety, one must be an unprotected female” (92).

The sense of suspended time within the railway car, together with its compartmentalized space, seemed to permit a relaxation of social conventions while still affording the promise of protection within its confines. The railway journey, however, did not erase class distinctions. The same Lady Hardy maintained a clear distance from most of the passengers with whom she shared the train. “We look round on our fellow-passengers,” she wrote in 1881. “As a rule they are simply commonplace, such as nature manufactures by millions and turns out merely labeled men and women, with no special characteristics except their sex” (91). For nineteenth-century women, the liminal space of the railroad car offered from fear but not from gender or class codes. If anything, Hardy’s comments suggest a more exaggerated attention to gender, in which the laws of chivalry replaced more staid patriarchal rules. Still, railroad cars provided a public space in which women could engage in social interactions that may have been unavailable to them in more familiar surroundings (Fig. 7).

And finally, despite the many comforts the railroads tried to create, for some passengers, “life seems wasted . . . on these long train journeys; for what pleasure may be found in the contracted space, the numerous meals hurriedly gobbled, and uniformly regretted; the constantly passing landscape which leaves no further impression than so many miles of sea; the chatty traveler; the smoking traveler; the man who asks you to cut in at whist, the silent man, and last, greatest bore of all, your ill-at-ease self, whom you can neither forget, employ, nor avoid.”³⁵

While railroad technology may have eased overland travel, making it more accessible for more individuals, a touristic sensibility developed at a somewhat different pace. As travelers shifted their attention from interior

surroundings to the scenes outside, the forces shaping the touristic gaze become more visible. Cultural myth and commercial speculation color the landscape with both expectation and disappointment.

SHAPING THE VIEW OUTSIDE THE WINDOW

The broad and boundless prairies have already been bounded and will soon be made narrow.

—Alan Trachtenberg³⁶

When passengers did turn their gaze to the scene outside the window, their descriptions revealed a curious attention to (and blending of) the past and the future in their commentary about the present, the passing scene. The categories of space and time blurred together in their descriptions, as places were measured against what they had been, what they might become. Their visions often echoed those promoted by the railroad, in which both time and space were bounded and curtailed. The annihilation of space depended upon greater fixity; railroad tracks once laid become immobile. And controlling time necessitates restricting it, to a narrow band between past transactions and profitable (short-term and rapid) turnovers. By the time the first of the passenger trains crossed the Platte Valley, the railroad had already been instrumental in effecting change upon the Nebraska plains. With each additional passage it reinforced those changes while promoting a very specific—and narrow—vision of the future. Most travelers, then, offered comments on the transformation of the landscape or articulated the railroad’s view of progress and the future.

The changes in the landscape conspicuous to many travelers concerned absence rather than presence. In a land “until recently given up to the red man and the buffalo, the elk, deer, antelope, wolf, and fox, . . . the grand march of civilization” had made its presence felt along the “great *National Highway*” of the

Platte Valley.³⁷ The Sioux and Pawnees had offered some resistance to the encroachment of white emigrants and the advance of steel rails across their lands, and in at least one instance a group of Cheyennes succeeded in derailing a passenger train. Yet travel writers assured their audiences that "the course of civilization's stream never was seriously turned."³⁸ Native Americans were soon relegated to "picturesque additions to the landscape," and turn-of-the-century travel guides told the story of the train derailment as a bit of colorful history to help pass the long hours of travel.³⁹

A visitor from France noted her "keen disappointment" in finding "no Indians and no cowboys." "Think what a terrible shock it is to realize that one is born a half a century too late, and on that account missing what one had so hoped to see!"⁴⁰ She was not born too late (nor too far from American soil), however, to express the same racism voiced a half century earlier in writing, "Indians nowadays have become dull, stupid, listless, and civilized." Her comments differ from those of the first excursionists only in her denunciation of the civilizing process itself—and only because it had robbed her of an abduction and escape fantasy "in the grand American film style."⁴¹

The near eradication of Native Americans coincided with—and was related to—the disappearance of the buffalo. Despite the racism of many authors who grouped Native Americans with native fauna, such commentary points to an awareness of the ecological balance within the region, a balance that was quickly altered and then destroyed by white settlement. Only once—in 1868—did the Union Pacific literature attempt to promote a positive view of the plains in their present condition rather than as they might become. "No finer trip can be taken by the tourist who would see nature as she is, than to visit these hunting grounds of the red man, now so fast disappearing."⁴² That disappearance (in the form of the most recognizable of the native animal species) proved fast indeed.

"Since the opening of the railway the buffaloes have shunned this district," wrote Rae in 1871.⁴³ Legislation, in fact, had already been proposed to protect the buffalo, eliciting Rae's comment, "When the time arrives for preserving wild animals, the moment of their extinction is not distant."⁴⁴ (At least one army officer, however, advised his troops, "Kill every buffalo you can. Every buffalo dead is an Indian gone."⁴⁵) A half dozen years later, members of Frank Leslie's excursion were disappointed to encounter "nothing wilder than the great herds of cattle" upon the plains.⁴⁶ But even if the buffalo had survived, hunters would not bring with them the profits of steady commerce, and so it is no surprise that the Union Pacific largely celebrated and helped encourage the disappearance of hunters and their prey alike, eager to replace Native Americans and buffalo with entrepreneurs, farmers, and livestock.

Views from the train car windows failed to match the romanticized mythic images of the western plains which lingered in the cultural imagination, leaving seemingly little else for passengers to notice except their disappointment. Without cowboys, Indians, or buffalo to look upon, tourists seemed at a loss for other objects to arrest their gaze. The description of the Platte Valley published during an excursion for *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* in 1877 called it "a desolate, shadeless, featureless land."⁴⁷ Nearly thirty years later, another newspaper man, Montgomery Schuyler from Chicago, declared, "the landscape would be quite featureless if man did not come to the rescue of nature."⁴⁸ The long and level horizon line of the Platte Valley seemed to offer these train travelers nothing worthy of attention except the marks of human trespass and settlement.

Most writers might have agreed with William Hooker's 1918 assessment of the Platte River Valley before the railroad. "When the Union Pacific railroad was completed from Omaha, Nebraska, to Ogden, Utah, it passed

through a territory about as barren of business as one can imagine. It apparently was a great Sahara."⁴⁹ But Samuel Bowles, writing in 1869, described a different pattern of settlement and development.

[O]ut upon the real Plains,—the first results of the Railroad are to kill what settlement and cultivation they had reached under the patronage of slow-moving emigration, stage-travel, and prairie-schooner freighting. The ranches which these supported are now deserted; the rails carry everybody and everything; the old roads are substantially abandoned; the old settlers, losing all their improvements and opportunities, gather in at the railway stations, or move backwards or forwards to greater local developments. They are the victims, in turn, of a higher civilization; they drove out the Indian, the wolf, and the buffalo; the locomotive whistles their occupation away; and invites back for the time the original occupants.⁵⁰

If the original occupants did return in the 1860s, it was for a very brief time only. The railroad had other plans for the region and worked hard to put them into practice.

The first task of the Union Pacific was to promote settlement, particularly on railroad grant land. With the completion of the Union Pacific route to California, the government had awarded the company nearly 14 million acres of land in alternate sections for twenty miles on both sides of the tracks.⁵¹ The railroad quickly set about the task of selling it. Pamphlets extolled the wonders of the Platte Valley for agriculture and settlement, promising a bright and (fiscally) rewarding future. "The soil is very rich," stated one such pamphlet, "and the mind falters in its attempt to estimate the future of such a valley, or its immense capabilities."⁵² A second, written two years later, made the railroad's interests even clearer. "The most desirable locations are along the line of the Union Pacific Railroad,

through the rich and verdant valley of the Platte River."⁵³

Guidebooks also promoted an economic reevaluation of the agricultural potential of the plains. Descriptions of the "Great American Desert" needed to be counteracted, and in 1871 W. R. Vaughan was the first to take on the task in his *Union Pacific R.R. Business Hand Book and Emigrant Guide*.

The old fear of lack of rain in "The Great American Desert" has been utterly exploded. Whether or not it is true, as the Indian says, that the white man brings rain, whether or not the running of trains of cars across the continent has broken up old electrical and climactic conditions, certain it is that there have been abundant rains, and a good distribution of them as to time, in this county, the past four years—that is, during the whole time since permanent settlement, on any scale, commenced.⁵⁴

A decade later, land speculator and amateur scientist Charles Dana Wilber further eroded the myth of the desert with his now famous epigram "Rain Follows the Plough."⁵⁵

Thus, the Union Pacific not only offered "large tracts of land . . . whose virgin soil has, for the first time, felt the pressure of the plow," but even seemed to promise rain.⁵⁶ Only one ingredient was lacking; "Nebraska needs but labor to convert her hitherto 'waste places.'"⁵⁷ *Wolfe's Gazetteer*, published for the Union Pacific railroad in the late 1870s, attempted to fill this final gap. A traveler reading the guide aboard the train was encouraged at Kearney "to look with more than passing interest upon a spot solemnly dedicated as the seat of empire in the future and picture to himself the transformation by which the prairie will be converted into spacious avenues and streets lined with palatial buildings, a city bristling with towers and spires, and crowning all, the marble halls of national legislation, topped off with the out-spread American eagle and the unfurled emblem of liberty, the 'Stars and

Stripes.”⁵⁸ Images of patriotism and the language of fairy tales together invited travelers to participate in a dreamworld of the future, uncompromised even by calls for labor. “The Union Pacific Railroad and its connections will revolutionize the tardiness of commerce and prices, open up and develop the rich lands of the West, and build cities on its path as if by magic.”⁵⁹ The fantasy of an effortless transformation of the West, made possible by the Union Pacific Railroad’s broad reach, may have encouraged some passengers to choose Nebraska as their final destination. Within a dozen years of reaching the 100th meridian, the Union Pacific had helped in part to increase Nebraska’s population from 50,000 to 300,000.⁶⁰

Other travel guides shared the Union Pacific’s spirit of optimism and its vision of the future. In 1868 *Turner’s Guide* stated, “We could easily see that homemaking here would be child’s play.”⁶¹ Three years later Rae wrote, “the valley only awaits the hand of man to be transformed into a garden.”⁶² And a visitor from Poland in 1876 wrote, “This prairie country, although almost devoid of population as yet, has a great future before it.”⁶³

The “future” thus conceived entailed far more than the mere passage of time. Its greatness depended on a conception of progress synonymous with economic gain. The “garden” that was planned and predicted was not to be a site for pastoral escape but income for a farmer. The same railroad that had carried farmers and their plows westward and had sold them land would now—for yet another fee—transport their crops to eastern markets. The measures of both beauty and success would be dollars and cents, bushels and tons. “You must come out here and traverse the State as we are doing,” wrote Schuyler in 1906, “and let the consciousness of what it all means sink into you mile after mile, until, as Charles Reade has it, ‘you comprehend the meaning of the word accumulation.’”⁶⁴ Accumulation was a word that could readily be comprehended in the pursuit of productivity, profit, and private property.

THE POETICS OF THE PLAINS

It is not until one peers into the prairie,
rather than at it, that
its true nature, its complexity and diver-
sity, is revealed.

—O. J. Reichman⁶⁵

Travelers aboard the Union Pacific trains in the late nineteenth century were offered a middle-distanced view of the plains. Framed by train windows, mediated (at least sometimes) by glass, distorted by motion, fixed by the route of the train tracks, and prepared for by advertisements and travel guides, their gaze lacked immediacy and intimacy. Yet collectively they recorded a surprisingly diverse set of responses to the scene outside the train car windows, whether finding there a “grandeur and savage freedom” or a “wild and dreary” prospect.⁶⁶

“Since the mid-nineteenth century,” wrote Daniel Boorstin, “. . . travel books have increasingly become a record not of new information but of personal ‘reactions.’” The quotation marks surrounding the final word suggest Boorstin’s disdain for such commentary. “People go to see what they already know is there,” Boorstin continued. “The only thing to record, the only possible source of surprise, is their own reaction.”⁶⁷ Yet what Boorstin appears to bemoan seems to me what is most worthy of attention. In a world glutted with information, what is often lacking are more personal and individual responses. We have lost “the ability to exchange experiences,” claims Walter Benjamin in “The Storyteller.”⁶⁸ Both personal and statistical descriptions are shaped by and reflect cultural values. But stories highlight the enduring rather than the ephemeral, for the irony of individual stories is that they may reveal universal truths. Information, in contrast, is immediately verifiable and nearly as quickly outdated. While information about the Platte Valley thus emphasizes change, reactions to that same landscape may best express what lingers. At the same time, the surprises found in personal reactions

provide a key to cultural diversity, for what is valued by the psyche (rather than the pocket-book) defies easy predictability. And the reactions of nineteenth-century travelers to the Platte River Valley did vary, expressing irony, humor, boredom, longing, earnestness, loneliness, and even wonder.

Most responses, as might be imagined, record a sense of boredom with the plains. "The day's ride grows monotonous," wrote Bowles. "We yawn over the unchanging landscape."⁶⁹ Members of the 1870 Cincinnati excursion expressed the same sentiment ironically: "The mountainous scenery of the Platte Valley soon tires one of car-window views."⁷⁰ Montgomery Schuyler, the resourceful newspaperman who owed his readers a story, sought to find a lesson in the level landscape. "We have been riding through 400 miles of Triumphant democracy," Schuyler commented. "It is a land of social as well as of topographical equality."⁷¹ W. G. Marshall, on vacation from England, also sought to discover a lesson for his readers: "Though surrounded by what seems to be an interminable monotony, there is life all around if you only choose to look for it."⁷² What he found, and described in detail, were prairie dogs, jack rabbits, a few stray antelope, and even fewer settlements.

Though missing the detailed perspective afforded from the ground, a train journey through the plains appeared to heighten the perception of its expansiveness. As Jim Burden, Willa Cather's protagonist in *My Ántonia*, recalls about his first train journey, "The only thing very noticeable about Nebraska was that it was still, all day long, Nebraska."⁷³ It was a scene many compared to the ocean or the sea, a landscape whose "chief beauty [was] in relationship to the sky."⁷⁴ And though many longed for a glimpse of the mountains up ahead, the plains offered a very different sense of scale and size. "An overpowering sense of vastness . . . [a]n indescribable feeling of solitude, a mighty loneliness which no words can well represent, is engendered by the contemplation of such an immensity of open space."⁷⁵

The sense of the sublime was inspired not by the immensity of formations in the landscape but by the seemingly oceanic sameness of the landscape. The open expanse of the prairie and plains often evoked a sense of emptiness, for both the eye and the ear. A German visitor wrote, "Nothing blurs the dazzling white, shimmering light of the prairie; nothing disturbs the solitary silence. All noises seem to bound back from that silent, soft sea of grass over which rests an unexplainable, passive sadness."⁷⁶ In a letter sent back home to Poland, Henry Sienkiewicz provided an elaborate response to the Nebraska landscape.

The best example of a prairie is found in Nebraska. . . . Occasionally, the small hut of a stray settler can be seen nestled close to the railroad tracks. Otherwise, all is emptiness, one limitless silent plain. The human eye, like a bird hovering over an endless ocean, cannot detect a single object on which to alight and finally falls with exhaustion. . . .

But this silence and wilderness have a peculiar charm. Not only one's sight but even one's soul and thoughts lose themselves in the prairie. The soul abandons familiar paths, forgets its own identity, merges with the environment, and soon ceases to be a thing apart, having been absorbed by the powerful presence of the prairie like a drop of water in the sea.⁷⁷

While many western landscapes seemed to inspire fantasies of conquest and domination, the view of the Nebraska prairie could swallow ego. The hut, rather than serving as a mark of human achievement against the forces of nature, only emphasized the frailty of such attempts. For Sienkiewicz, at least, the prairie vista evoked an alternate fantasy: an intimacy and identification with nature in which the eye becomes a bird, the self a drop of water.

Technology and culture alike frame the tourist gaze, structuring the experience in time and space, providing the ideological constructs of meaning. Yet for all their intricate power,

technology and culture cannot craft a seamless web of meaning. Difference and sameness assume a variety of configurations within the liminal space of the railway car, affecting responses to the scenes both inside and outside the train window.

Difference underscored Silas Seymour's 1866 appraisal of the Indians, and the differences he perceived predicted and justified their destruction. Difference drew sharp divides along class lines for Lady Hardy, and her perception of the passengers' "commonplace" status blurred all other distinctions but gender. For many, the landscape possessed even fewer distinguishing characteristics; emptiness and absence seemed its most noticeable attributes. The open expanses of Nebraska's prairies and plains became a site for competing fantasies battling for dominance. Grandiose promises for the future were pitted against a mythic past; images of agricultural ease, abundance, and accumulation combated images of a West fraught with wildness and savagery. The view outside the train car window, however, held few tokens to sustain either fantasy. For passengers unable to imagine a past or future found only in tour guides or to find solace in the present scene, the gaps between expectations and experience often held disappointment.

But tourists' reactions suggest that landscapes too can exert a force on those who gaze upon them, altering perceptions of space and time—and the self. While individual reactions most often follow paths laid down by earlier travelers, some few tourists discover an alternative perspective from which to view and understand landscapes as artifact and ideology. The differences between Nebraska landscapes and scenes more familiar to tourists could prompt reverie and reflection. The liminal state permitted by travel may well be crucial to this process of discovery and surprise and critique, exposing the fissures and seams in cultural webs of significance.

Tourism is yet another form of acting upon the land. Tourists in the latter half of the nineteenth century acted as accomplices in westward expansionism. Each journey marked, with

increasingly far-reaching and enduring consequences, human presence in the landscape. The march of the railroad and the "laws of civilization" it represented became a funeral procession for many native prairie plant and animal species. For the Pawnees, Sioux, Cheyennes, and Apaches, the train whistle sounded a dirge. At the close of the twentieth century tourist dollars continue to alter patterns of commerce and consumption, and fragile communities and habitats continue to be endangered by resulting land use practices. But tiny fissures, once exposed, may hold the seeds for more ethical treatments of the land.

NOTES

1. Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), p. 19.

2. Silas Seymour, *Western Incidents Connected with the Union Pacific Railroad* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1867), p. 65.

3. Advertisement, *Literary Digest*, January/February 1903.

4. John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* (London: SAGE Publications, 1990), p. 10.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

6. Seymour, *Western Incidents* (note 2 above), p. 83. Further citations to *Western Incidents* are given in parentheses in the text.

7. The combined populations of the thirty-two northern and southern Plains tribes fell from an estimated 141,800 prior to European contact to 53,338 in 1907, with only twenty-six tribes remaining (Marlita A. Reddy, ed., *Statistical Record of Native North Americans* [Detroit: Gale Research, 1993], p. 9). The Pawnees who once inhabited this region dwindled from a stable population estimated at 10,000 in 1780 to fewer than 1,000 in 1910, though 1980 census figures indicate Pawnee populations have risen to 2,454. *Ibid.*, pp. 352, 364, 382, 407. See also John Upton Terrell, *American Indian Almanac* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1961), p. 288; Ruth Murray Underhill, *Red Man's America* (Chicago: Chicago Press, 1953), p. 180.

8. Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America* (note 1 above), p. 37.

9. Boston Board of Trade, *Trans-Continental Excursion*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1870), p. 4.

10. Union Pacific Railroad Museum sign; see also Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America* (note 1 above), p. 60.

11. Advertisements, *Literary Digest*, January/February 1903.

12. Advertisement, *Atlantic Monthly Advertiser*, 1899.
13. Ibid.
14. Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1934), p. 14.
15. George M. Beard, *American Nervousness* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1881).
16. Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America* (note 1 above), p. 60.
17. Advertisement, *Saturday Evening Post*, 6 October 1923, p. 146.
18. T. G. & C. E. Turner, *Turner's Guide from the Lakes to the Rocky Mountains* (Chicago: Spalding & LaMontes, 1868), p. 209.
19. Samuel Bowles, *Our New West: Records of Travel Between the Mississippi River and the Pacific Ocean* (Hartford, Conn.: Hartford Publishing, 1869), p. 45.
20. Major W. Shepherd, *Prairie Experiences in Handling Cattle and Sheep* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1884), p. 16.
21. Ibid., p. 13.
22. Bowles, *Our New West* (note 19 above), p. 46.
23. Advertisements, *Literary Digest*, January/February 1903.
24. Ibid.
25. Alexandra Grippenberg, *A Half Year in the New World* (Newark, Del.: University of Delaware Press, 1954), p. 109.
26. Advertisement, *Literary Digest*, January/February 1903.
27. W[illiam] F. Rae, *Westward by Rail: The New Route to the East* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1871), p. 77.
28. Shepherd, *Prairie Experiences* (note 20 above), p. 77.
29. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 37.
30. Advertisement, *Literary Digest*, 21 February 1903.
31. Advertisements, *Literary Digest*, January/February 1903.
32. Lady Duffus Hardy, *Through Cities and Prairie Lands. Sketches of an American Tour* (New York: R. Worthington, 1881), p. 94. Subsequent references appear in parentheses in text.
33. Robert E. Strahorn, *To the Rockies and Beyond, or a Summer on the Union Pacific Railway and Branches* (Omaha: Omaha Republican Print, 1878), p. 7.
34. Hardy, *Through Cities and Prairie Lands* (note 32 above), p. 91. Further citations to *Through Cities and Prairie Lands* are given in parentheses in the text.
35. Shepherd, *Prairie Experiences* (note 20 above), pp. 16-17.
36. Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America* (note 1 above), p. 26.
37. Union Pacific Railroad, *Omaha to the Mountains: The Union Pacific Railroad* (Chicago: Horton & Leonard, 1868), p. 8.
38. William F. Hooker, *The Prairie Schooner* (Chicago: Saul Brothers, 1918), p. 13.
39. Rae, *Westward by Rail* (note 27 above), p. 81; see also Richard Reinhardt, *Out West on the Overland Train: Across-the-Continent Excursion with Leslie's Magazine in 1877 and the Overland Trip in 1967* (Palo Alto, Cal.: American West Publishing Company, 1967), p. 52. See Rand McNally *Overland Guide: Chicago to California* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1900), pp. 51-53, and Wolfe's *Gazetteer Union Pacific Railroad for 1878-1879*, pamphlet, Union Pacific Railroad Museum Manuscript Collection, pp. 125-26.
40. Comtesse Madeleine De Bryas, *A Frenchwoman's Impressions of America* (New York: Century Company, 1920), p. 185.
41. Ibid., pp. 185-86.
42. Union Pacific Railroad, *Omaha to the Mountains* (note 37 above), p. 8.
43. Rae, *Westward by Rail* (note 27 above), p. 83.
44. Ibid., p. 83.
45. Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America* (note 1 above), p. 32.
46. Reinhardt, *Out West on the Overland Train* (note 39 above), p. 46.
47. Ibid., p. 44.
48. Montgomery Schuyler, *Westward the Course of Empire: "Out West" and "Back East" on the First Trip of the "Los Angeles Limited"* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1906), p. 18.
49. William Francis Hooker, *The Prairie Schooner* (note 38 above), p. 11.
50. Bowles, *Our New West* (note 19 above), p. 50.
51. Boston Board of Trade, *Trans-Continental Excursion*, vol. 1, no. 3 (1870), p. 1.
52. Union Pacific Railroad, *Union Pacific Railroad across the Continent West from Omaha, Nebraska*, pamphlet, Union Pacific Railroad Museum Manuscript Collection, C-1-29, 1865; 1870, p. 9.
53. Union Pacific Railroad, *Union Pacific Railroad: The Great National Highway Between the Mountains and the East* (Chicago: Horton & Leonard, 1867), p. 4.
54. W. R. Vaughn, *Union Pacific R. R. Business Hand Book and Emigrants' Guide from Omaha to Salt Lake* (Council Bluffs, Iowa: Bluff City Book, 1871), pp. 85, 87.
55. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 182.

56. Union Pacific Railroad, *Great National Highway* (note 53 above), p. 9.
57. Ibid.
58. Wolfe's *Gazetteer Union Pacific Railroad* (note 39 above), p. 122.
59. Union Pacific Railroad, *Great National Highway* (note 53 above), p. 6.
60. Strahorn, *To the Rockies and Beyond* (note 33 above), p. 8.
61. Ibid.
62. Rae, *Westward by Rail* (note 27 above), p. 80.
63. Henry Sienkiewicz, *Portrait of America: Letters of Henry Sienkiewicz*, ed. and trans. Charles Morley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), p. 77.
64. Schuyler, *Westward the Course of Empire* (note 48 above), p. 20.
65. O. J. Reichman, *Konza Prairie: A Tallgrass Natural History* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 1987), p. 6.
66. Reinhardt, *Out West on the Overland Train* (note 39 above), p. 44; Hardy, *Through Cities and Prairie Lands* (note 34 above), p. 93.
67. Daniel J. Boorstin, *Hidden History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 303.
68. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 83.
69. Bowles, *Our New West* (note 19 above), p. 50.
70. *Cincinnati Excursion to California: Its Origin, Progress, Incidents, and Results* (Cincinnati: Indianapolis, Cincinnati & Lafayette Railroad, 1870), p. 25.
71. Schuyler, *Westward the Course of Empire* (note 48 above), pp. 24-25.
72. W[alter] G. Marshall, *Through America; Or, Nine Months in the United States* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1882), pp. 123-24.
73. Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (1918; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1954), p. 5.
74. Reinhardt, *Out West on the Overland Train* (note 39 above), p. 46.
75. Marshall, *Through America* (note 72 above), p. 123.
76. Grippenberg, *A Half Year in the New World* (note 25 above), pp. 110-11.
77. Seinkiewicz, *Portrait of America* (note 63 above), p. 69.