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## Five Voices One Place An Introduction

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## FIVE VOICES ONE PLACE

### AN INTRODUCTION

The essays gathered together in this issue of *Great Plains Quarterly* constitute “Five Voices One Place,” the 25th annual symposium of the Center for Great Plains Studies. This was a symposium designed to complement the initiative from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to establish a regional humanities center in the Plains (to be called the Plains Humanities Alliance). Appropriately, the symposium program reflected populist traditions fundamental to the Great Plains. That is, each of the five state humanities councils in the region (defined for this initiative as Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, and North Dakota) selected a writer to represent its state, and then each selected a scholar to talk about that writer. In this manner the people most interested in the humanities in each state provided a starting point for explorations of identity and place.

On 6-7 April 2001, at Lincoln, Nebraska, the symposium convened. Jane Smiley, an author much associated with North America’s heartland, opened the gathering, and then we waited to see what would emerge. What immediately became clear is that an exploration of identity and place is enormously complicated. Where does one start? “What is a place?” Thomas Fox Averill asks: “Kansas as on the map? Or the place of nature?”

At first glance, each writer responds differently in representing her or his state. Does one begin with a communal or a personal history? On the one hand, a “tribal view of the world” is a premise for North Dakotan Louise Erdrich, according to P. Jane Hafen, who explains that tribal view as “where one place has been inhabited for generations, the landscape becomes enlivened by a sense of group and family history.” On the other hand, an individual view of the world is a starting point for Nebraskan Wright Morris, writes Joseph J. Wydeven, who explains Morris’s writing as emanating from his personal experience of emptiness and absence.

The use of language is similarly complicated. In coining the name “Siouxland” for his fictional world, South Dakotan Frederick Manfred acknowledged the Big Sioux River drainage basin, and provided an alternative to the arbitrary designations of states—Iowa, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Nebraska. From a different perspective, Thomas Fox Averill explains that language is place for Kansas poet William Stafford. By listening to Stafford’s poetry, one finds qualities of living in the place he writes about: a language that is “spare but incredibly full of subtle beauty and remnants of the historical past” (281), that is “satisfied with humble materials,” and

that recognizes that "humble materials are simple words, simply used"(281).

And then Patricia Nelson Limerick inserts a wild card into the conversation with her charge to remember the implications of the premises we assume and the language we use. Oklahoma historian Angie Debo wrote about issues of place in conjunction with power and politics, Limerick reminds us; in doing so, Limerick makes consequences of action in the real world an integral part of the conversation.

Beyond these apparent differences similar questions arise. What is a home place, and how does it relate to the maps we create? Morris's cartographical imagination springs from identifying himself "perched on the border between West and Midwest," Wydeven argues, "in the center of the country, at midpoint on an east-west line from ocean to ocean" (290), and it springs also from "the town grid of Central City"—where two railroads co-existed, creating confusing streets and angles (291). This "crazy pattern of a town" contributed to Morris's own manipulation of boundaries between past and present, fact and fiction. As Hafen argues, Louise Erdrich resists the straight lines of a map, preferring instead the truth of natural lines drawn by streams. For Erdrich "the straight-edged shape is not a Chippewa preference," for "[y]ou look around, and everything you see is round, everything in nature. There are no perfect boundaries, no natural borders except winding rivers. Only human-made things tend toward cubes and squares" (325). Frederick Manfred drew maps as guides through his fiction, and Manfred scholar Arthur Huseboe extends the cartographic principle by looking to recent maps for what they tell us about living in a place.

Beyond apparent differences comes another commonality, in that all five writers present enormous challenges: to engage in the mythic imaginations of Louise Erdrich and Frederick Manfred, to see by the transcendence offered by Wright Morris, to measure by the authenticity of William Stafford, and to judge by the truth-telling of Angie Debo. Myth, transcendence, authenticity, and truth telling are inextricably joined when one understands them as qualities that emerge from a common place.

Race, culture, biography, aesthetics, politics, ethics—it's an exhilarating conversation that occurs when five scholars represent five writers in a conversation about place.

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