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1 ৵ Landscapes of Literacy

Shortly after I moved to Corvallis, Oregon, in the mid-1990s to begin work on my master's degree at Oregon State University, I began watching the TV show *Northern Exposure*. It had just started running in syndication, and it became my 11 p.m. ritual every weeknight. The show is about a doctor from New York who agrees to work five years in Alaska to pay off his medical school debt. He is assigned to a town of a few hundred and brings with him assumptions about the rural people in Alaska, namely the notion that they are unsophisticated and less intelligent and reasonable than he is.

I couldn't stop watching this show, partly because it was simply a good program—winning Emmy awards and much critical acclaim—and partly because *Northern Exposure* was filmed only a few hours from my new home in Oregon. The setting that once seemed so exotic was now the backdrop of my daily life. Though fiction, this nightly ritual helped me acclimate to my new space, where the place and people were strangers. It was my first time living outside of the Great Plains.

Some time later, after living back in Nebraska for a few years, I discovered that the A&E network was airing *Northern Exposure* reruns. I began watching again, moving my lunchtime to 1 p.m. so I could see the show. And I realized as I watched the town subvert the New York doctor through an oxymoronic blend of common

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sense and magical realism that this was the only example I could remember in which rural people on television were more complicated than the stereotype. These characters were wise not by urban standards of efficiency but through intuition and their knowledge of place. Their behaviors and beliefs reflected their particular culture, a mix of Native and frontier ideologies. It is no wonder I was drawn to this show where rural was not deficient, where it was the New Yorker who displayed the most naiveté.

When I look back at my time living in Oregon, I see that in conjunction with my *Northern Exposure* ritual I was facing issues of defining my home place as well as tensions between rural and urban that I had not considered before. Not entirely unlike the doctor on the TV show, kindhearted people in Oregon made many assumptions about me and my home place of Nebraska when I met them. Countless people acted as if I'd reached Eden, implying shortly after I moved there that surely I wouldn't be going back now that I'd reached the coast.

And it was beautiful there. In the first few months I lived there, I took a walk in a forest outside Corvallis with two new friends. It was raining when we drove out of town, but once we were underneath the branches, the rain couldn't reach us easily. I had never been enveloped by trees like this; I didn't know what kind they were. The moss, different shades of green—some startlingly bright on that wet day—and odd-shaped leaves and branches left me feeling as though I were in a Dr. Seuss book. Hiking was one of my favorite things about living in Oregon. I grew to like walking to school in the rain, leaves like soggy cereal under my feet.

While I immersed myself in my new place as best I could, it never felt right. On the drive to Oregon the mountains felt claustrophobic. (I later learned that my grandma described her first train trip to Oregon decades before in nearly that exact way.) On the map of the country in my mind's eye, I was on the edge, and I felt precarious somehow, away from the middle where I'd been able to see the sky and the grass.

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Of course, much more was different than the landscape and actual physical place. What I remember, ironically, are the stereotypical markers—more VW vans than I'd ever seen, a multitude of coffeehouses, and vegetarian menus. And people assumed I loved beef and Husker football, which I do. They were right, but I was still rankled, because those facts came with deeper assumptions, that I'd never been to a gay bar or that I came from a farm, just as what I saw gave way to assumptions about the new culture I witnessed. I kept finding myself wanting to say, "Wait. This is more complicated than it looks. I do come from a conservative state, but during the Reagan years it had two Democratic senators when Bob Kerrey was governor, and we were the first state to have two women running for governor against each other." But that sounded defensive.

I was surprised at my resistance to people's assumptions about Nebraska, since I had carried similar ones for years, having convinced myself when I moved to western Nebraska as a preteen that I could never be cool living there. Paxton was just getting cable in the early '80s, and MTV told me all teenagers saw INXS or Wham! in concert and wore clothes like Madonna's. I was convinced I was missing out. When I shopped at the closest mall, thirty-five miles away in North Platte, I pored over outfits at Maurice's that wouldn't mark me as a hick. During a trip across the state to Lincoln for a speech contest, I purchased a Swatch, which I could not find where I lived.

I believed what I was told—and the messages implied in what I wasn't told and didn't hear—about the place where I lived. I didn't hear from anyone that it was a place to invest in, to stay for. When I moved to Paxton, a town of fewer than six hundred people, from Fargo, North Dakota, a place much larger and therefore more cosmopolitan (at least, at age eleven it seemed so), I didn't know there was anything to value about such a place, and I knew that after I moved east to attend the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL) I would probably leave for a city like Minneapolis or Denver. Moving to Oregon for graduate school was more or less following that

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path. I was getting out as I'd imagined and others had imagined for me. It was what my father had done (though he'd come full circle and returned to Paxton, a fact I ignored at the time).

But when I got to Oregon things were not what I expected. I started thinking more and more about where I came from than the place I had come to. Shortly after I arrived at Oregon State, I started teaching-assistant training led by Chris Anderson. In the first-year course, we used the anthology he and Lex Runciman edited, *A Forest of Voices: Reading and Writing the Environment*. The environmentally themed book had a section entitled "Spirit of Place," where I first read excerpts of work by Kathleen Norris ("The Beautiful Places"), Gretel Ehrlich ("The Solace of Open Spaces"), Mary Clearman Blew ("The Sow in the River"), and Scott Russell Sanders ("Settling Down"). While my composition class was discussing logging and spotted owls, giving more nuance to where I'd moved, I was also reading and assigning texts about place that resonated for me. Norris writes about finding the beauty of South Dakota, and Ehrlich discusses the notion that where we are from shapes who we are, describing how the people she met when she moved to Wyoming were as silent as the open country around her. Sanders addresses the U.S. mentality in which moving means getting ahead and the devaluing of staying in one place. He writes, "Committing yourself to a place does not guarantee that you will become wise, but neither does it guarantee that you will become parochial" (331–32). Then he adds, "How can you value other places if you do not have one of your own? If you are not yourself placed, then you travel the world like a sightseer, a collector of sensations, with no gauge for measuring what you see. Local knowledge is the grounding for global knowledge" (332). I thought about my grandma, who had lived all of her life in and around Paxton, Nebraska. I thought about her son, my dad, and how he'd moved from Paxton to college in Lincoln, to Minnesota, the Dakotas, and then back to Paxton before settling in Lincoln. He came from the generation after the shift to urban had been completed, where opportunities were found elsewhere, away

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from the Plains. I thought of myself, who never thought it would be okay to stay in Nebraska, to *really* stay and invest in one place. Movement was seen as progress. My high school class of sixteen is divided into two categories: those who left and those who stayed; and behind these categories are assumptions about class, education, and success, whether accurate or not.

My second and last year at Oregon, I wrote my thesis in the upstairs loft of the duplex I shared with a friend from graduate school. During that year I began to enjoy the rhythm of rain as I wrote. The trees in the backyard were as high as my window, and the grass was green in January. I researched my home in western Nebraska, the railroad, authors I knew and many more who were new to me who wrote from or about the Great Plains. I applied to the PhD program back in Nebraska. One of the last courses I took at OSU was Literacy, Composition, and Literature, and I wrote about how my grandma was educated in a country school in the early 1900s near Paxton. I now look at the final paper for that class as prewriting for realizing this book project. My thesis became a collection of essays on my sense of place growing up in rural western Nebraska. When I'd come home to Nebraska for winter and summer breaks, I'd noticed more of my surroundings, now that I had another landscape to compare it with and against. Mostly, I began to consider how my place is constructed by outsiders as well as by those who know the place well.

Except for those two years in Oregon, I have spent my life in and around the Plains. I was born in Minneapolis, lived in Fargo, North Dakota, through elementary school, spent a summer in Watertown, South Dakota, and then lived in Paxton, Nebraska, from sixth grade until I left for college at UNL. When I left Oregon I returned to Nebraska for graduate school, despite my ambivalence about academia, despite the generous offer by a prominent woman in my field to write me letters for good composition programs across the country, and despite the lack of funding I received for the program at UNL. Normally very indecisive, I saw only one option: I would return to

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Lincoln, where my parents now lived, and move into their basement for graduate school to save expenses. I knew some perceived this as the "safe" route to take, and in some ways it was: I was close to family again and had kept my residency for cheaper tuition, as if somehow I'd known all along I'd move home. But I was also interrupting the expectation of flight expected of Plains students. I was coming back to the landlocked middle.

In a survey taken in the early 1980s of historians of the American West, the majority of the respondents chose Walter Prescott Webb's *The Great Plains* as the most important book, noting that current texts still follow the format of his work (Lamar 25). *The Great Plains*, published in 1931, is problematic on many levels—ignoring ethnic populations on the Plains and much of the history involving the removal of American Indians from the region, for instance—but for all its faults, it serves as an example of a thorough study in defining a region historically and geographically. Frederick Luebke, a Great Plains scholar, explains, "The Great Plains exists in the minds of persons even minimally knowledgeable about the United States. . . . Where or what the Great Plains is may be unclear, but the term unquestionably evokes an image of a huge area in the west-central part of the United States. . . . It is commonly perceived as an agricultural or pastoral region of vast distances and few people" (27). The Plains may be familiar as a regional marker in the way Luebke describes, but, paradoxically, people outside the region don't think very much about the Great Plains. It's the "flyover" part of the country, a place to go through (or usually over) rather than a destination.

As geographer James R. Shortridge explains, "Plains people, with their small populations, have never had much control over how others have seen them. The possibilities for distortion, misunderstanding, and general mythmaking are enormous" (115). The opinions of outsiders have long influenced people living on the Plains. Take, as the most well-known example, the controversial idea of the Buffalo Commons offered in the 1980s by two East Coast scholars, Frank

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and Deborah Popper, in which they argue that the Plains proper (from the ninety-eighth meridian to the foothills of the Rockies) be converted back to a large national parkland where native grasses and species abound, given that rural population is on the decline. The Poppers' ideas demonstrate how the difference between being an outsider and an insider has great relevance in one's daily life on the Plains. Being an insider with outsiders' views overlaying the region means having little voice in national concerns (despite prevalent images of Plains farmers during farm crises) or having the state ranked low in a survey that asks vacationers for best travel spots in the country. Kansas was last, and also at the bottom were Nebraska, North Dakota, and Oklahoma. South Dakota, with the Black Hills and Mount Rushmore, is much higher on the list.

People writing about this relationship between insiders and outsiders on the Plains refer to the region's "inferiority complex." Historian Howard Lamar explains that "two of North Dakota's most prominent historians . . . have noted that between 1915 and 1945 the state's population developed a negative image of themselves and their state. Its citizens also resented, as any rural population would, the image of the farmer as a backward, uneducated hayseed whose problems were largely his own fault" (30). Regarding North Dakotans and Kansans, Lamar argues, "For a regionalist, then, it would make sense to focus on the drought and depression decade not so much in terms of the New Deal programs but in terms of a region developing a heightened self-consciousness due to an outside force symbolizing threat and change" (34). Instead, many outsiders describe the reactions of Plains people as just another symptom of the parochial and anti-intellectual lives of rural populations in the middle of America.

The United States has not quite known what to do with the Great Plains since it made the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. The Plains were dubbed the "Great American Desert" in 1830 by cartographer and explorer Stephen Long. Whites decided the land was useless and labeled much of the Plains "Indian Territory," yet they needed to tra-

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verse roughly a thousand miles through it to get to the West Coast, where there were trees, natural resources, and finally gold (Allen 208). It was decided that the Plains needed to be settled, in part to resolve the "Indian problem" and in part as an attempt by both the North and the South to add free or slave states, respectively. Some tribes on the Plains were used to being relocated after prior displacements when areas further east were settled; the land was opened up for settlement, augmented by the Homestead Act. At this time, railroads and other companies were touting the land in the Great Plains as a garden, struggling to dispel the notion of the open land as a desert. With the fortune of rainy seasons coincidentally in conjunction with the motto "Rain follows the plow," the land was settled by those from the Midwest and by European immigrants. At a time when the country was still rural, the Great Plains received national attention for its wonderfully fertile farmland, at least until the next drought.

Thus, from before the time when the land was even used by whites, the government and other outsiders (such as the Union Pacific Railroad) seemed to have control over the area of the Great Plains, and to Plains dwellers the control never shifted away from the outsiders. Plains residents' reactions to the common school movement exemplify the resistance to a system designed by outsiders for urban areas. Once the land was opened for settlement, common schools began to make their way into the Midwest and the Great Plains. As demonstrated by Paul Theobald in *Call School: Rural Education in the Midwest to 1918*, the common school movement was met with little enthusiasm in the Midwest and Great Plains: "Free public schools were the first systematic industrial imposition on agrarian life in the United States. . . . Before 1918 the nation was predominantly rural, and it was abundantly clear that rural residents did not share the problems of the city. If common schools were at least partially successful in the eastern states as a result of their potential to solve urban problems, this much of the pro–common school agenda was missing in rural areas" (1, 2). Regardless of the eventual outcome of incor-

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porating the common school system, it exemplifies the ways urban models were utilized for the entire country.

As the country completed its shift from rural to urban, rural students continued to be unheard, unseen, and underrepresented. Since this country has become industrialized and urbanized, it has scarcely looked back, and the effects of this trend are significant to rural students. Martha Kruse explains that "rural sociologists and education researchers frequently approach the field from a deficit perspective; the investigator describes the rural community in terms of what it lacks in comparison to urban areas" (1).

Students living in rural areas on the Plains have been taught for decades that where they are from is unimportant and that the most advanced and intelligent students leave to achieve success by the dominant standards. For years state senators in Nebraska have introduced bills to combat local "brain drain," in which students receive their education at a local college or university, then take those skills and move to Kansas City, Chicago, or Denver, contributing to the decline in rural population and the local economy.

While I was growing up as a student and "town kid" in a rural, western Nebraska school, no adults in the town (including and especially my family) ever mentioned the idea that I would remain in my hometown after high school graduation. It was assumed that since I did not have a family farm to come back to (and even for those students who did—male or female—the economy was such that the option of staying was tenuous), I would not return. I suspect it also had to do with the fact that I hadn't been solely raised there, that my mom was not a Nebraskan, and that I did well in school. Opportunity was elsewhere, and such a message insinuated low expectations from the town and low expectations for those who weren't high achievers. In school, this idea was implicitly reinforced through the lack of regional texts (I was not assigned to read any Nebraska authors until I returned for graduate school, but my high school English teacher later assigned Plains authors). As a freshman at UNL, my English composition course had ten more students than

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did my entire senior class in Paxton the year before. With the class comprised mostly of students from Lincoln and Omaha, I remember always being conscious of others' perceptions of where I came from and less aware of how I constructed my place against those perceptions. Though at that time I also resisted my rural identity, I paradoxically became protective when hearing it dismissed, and so I wrote about the details of my hometown that might seem exotic to others in the class.

I returned to Lincoln from Oregon in July 1996. I began the PhD program in composition and rhetoric at UNL a month later. While I'd been in Oregon, my parents had moved from an apartment to a house in northwest Lincoln, a part of town I was basically unfamiliar with before their move. The house was not far from where the former air force base used to be. This was the place where my dad met my mom's brother, who introduced my mom to my dad in the early 1960s. Lincoln, then, was not an insignificant place in the family history. My dad, brother, and I had all attended college there, so Lincoln made sense to us as a familiar place for my parents to move when the economy in western Nebraska offered few job opportunities.

My parents' house was modest, but even though their children were in their late twenties, they wanted enough room for us, or, more accurately, me, as my brother was now married and lived in a larger house in a nicer part of Lincoln. Of course, they weren't thinking when they bought the house that I would live in their basement, but I moved in, after living away from home for seven years, and together we worked to make the large room that ran the width of the basement into my bedroom and living area. There was a large, finished bathroom in the basement as well, and my dad partitioned other areas with walls so that the laundry room and his model railroad room took up the rest of the divided basement space.

Standing on their front porch, I could see the airport and the skyline of Lincoln, including the tall, phallic State Capitol and, on

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a clear day, Memorial Stadium, where the Huskers played. When I left for school, our most well-known state markers were symbols of my return to the state, daily reminding me where and who I was.

I had made it to Paxton only a couple of times when spring break arrived eight months later. My then-boyfriend, who had come to Nebraska from the northwest corner of Oregon and was living in an apartment near the Capitol, understood well about a sense of place and was having adjustment issues similar to what I'd had when I was on the West Coast, except that no one expected him to like the Plains better than the Columbia River. We decided to take a long weekend and explore more of the Plains. We drove the four hours west on Interstate 80 to Paxton and spent the night with Grandma. The next day we cruised around Lake McConaughy, headed northwest to Carhenge (the replica of Stonehenge done with cars painted opaque gray) in Alliance, Nebraska, and then toward the very corner of the state to see Toadstool Park, a natural and geologically anomalous phenomenon comprised largely of sandstone and siltstone. It was dusk by the time we got there, so the pale stones perched precariously on top of each other looked all the more alien. We drove on back roads to the Black Hills, the closest place we could find a forest to substitute for his home, waking in the morning to see an utterly different landscape than we'd last seen in daylight. It was too early in the season for the many attractions to open, so it was a quiet trip. We drove east across South Dakota along Interstate 90 back home, stopping at the famous Wall Drug after the billboards coaxed us to stop. After meandering through Badlands National Park, we still made it home Monday night of spring break. We'd driven about twenty hours in four days.

Tuesday morning, my mom came downstairs and woke me: Grandma had had a massive heart attack and was in the hospital. I repacked and drove west again to North Platte, this time with my mom in the passenger seat. Dad later joined us where Grandma was in the ICU.

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