Prairie survivance: language, narrative, and place-making in the American Midwest

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PRAIRIE SURVIVANCE: LANGUAGE, NARRATIVE, AND PLACE-MAKING IN THE AMERICAN MIDWEST

by

Matthew Michael Low

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in English in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

May 2011

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Phillip Round
ABSTRACT

The prairie ecosystem of the American Midwest has long been depicted as a “lost landscape.” Two-hundred years of Euro-American settlement has degraded the ecological prairie through systematic removal of native grasses and forbs, replacement with nonnative and invasive plant species, disruption of longstanding disturbance regimes (such as prairie fires), and the fragmentation of ecosystem connectivity. The prairie’s depiction in art, literature, history, politics, and our national environmental discourse, collectively referred to in this study as the “cultural prairie,” has not fared much better. Beginning in the early nineteenth-century, explorers and soldiers, writers and artists, settlers and promoters perpetuated an image of the “vanishing prairie” in travel narratives prolifically published for consumption by a burgeoning American readership. As the “vanishing prairie” emerged as the accepted image of the prairie, narratives depicting its disappearance from the landscape became self-fulfilling prophecies. Language, and narrative in particular, thus contributed to the degradation of the ecological prairie.

Narratives of the “vanishing prairie” are characterized by what Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor terms “absence, nihility, and victimry.” One remedy to these fatalistic narratives is Vizenor’s notion of “survivance,” which he defines as “an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories” (“Aesthetics of Survivance,” in Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence, ed. Gerald Vizenor [Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2008], 1). Though Vizenor uses the term survivance principally to recover the stories, traditions, and identities of Native American cultures from Euro-American “simulations of dominance,” his critical inquiries are more broadly applicable to the exploitation of the environment by many of the same policies, agents, strategies, and technologies that were put to use to propagate and promote state-sponsored ideologies of uniformity, homogeneity, and monoculturalism throughout the American Midwest. “Prairie survivance” is thus an
attempt to make the prairie a presence, not an absence, in mainstream environmental discourse and debate, including the study of American literature and the fields of environmental criticism (or ecocriticism), place studies, and cultural geography.

My argument begins with a critique of Euro-American travel narratives popularized throughout the nineteenth-century by the likes of Washington Irving, George Catlin, “Buffalo Bill” Cody, and others. These travel narratives perpetuated the trope of the “vanishing prairie” by employing stock images and narrative techniques, none more pervasive than the bison hunt. Specifically, the dramatic hunt sequences of these travel narratives reinforced the eradication of the bison from the ecological prairie. However, the consequences of these narratives are not limited to the time of their writing; instead, the “lost landscape” image of the prairie remains persistent to this day as a direct result of its misrepresentation in the travel literature of the nineteenth century. The second half of my argument entails a reading of counternarratives that envision a much different past, present, and future for the prairie. The bison’s recovery in narratives by Luther Standing Bear, James Welch, N. Scott Momaday, and Mary Oliver is one example in which the fate of the prairie is not limited to its inevitable demise. Moreover, I have coined the term “aesthetics of restoration” to describe the prairie’s presence in the work of Aldo Leopold, Paul Gruchow, Annie Proulx, and Linda Hogan (among others), each of whom overturns nihilistic images of the prairie as a “lost landscape” by writing about its restoration and permanent return to the landscapes of the American Midwest. Narrative’s potential for healing is realized in these examples, a cornerstone of narrative ethics.

Abstract Approved: ____________________________________________

Thesis Supervisor

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Date
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

PH.D. THESIS

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for the thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy
degree in English at the May 2011 graduation.

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Survivance, then, is the action, condition, quality, and sentiments of the verb *survive*, “to remain alive or in existence,” to outlive, persevere with a suffix of *survivancy*.

Gerald Vizenor
“Aesthetics of Survivance”
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In addition to my graduate coursework in the English, Anthropology, Archaeology, and Geography Departments at the University of Iowa, my participation in three extracurricular endeavors affiliated with the university contributed significantly to the inception, production, and completion of this dissertation. Serving as an assistant to Prof. Barbara Eckstein for a yearlong event entitled “An Endangered River Runs Through Us: Three Iowa River Journeys” was my first experience in coordinating with members of the local and academic communities for the purposes of environmental awareness. As a fellow with the 2009 Obermann Graduate Institute on Engagement and the Academy, facilitated by Profs. Teresa Mangum and David Redlawsk, I was introduced to the idea of public scholarship and given a platform to further integrate my academic work into “real world” issues facing the prairie. Finally, as a fellow with the 2009 Mellon Dissertation Seminar led by Prof. Garrett Stewart, entitled “Story in Theory,” I was able to bolster my expertise in the area of narrative theory and particularly strengthen my knowledge and understanding of narrative ethics.

Not all of the research that went into this dissertation took place in traditional academic venues. Specifically, for the dual purposes of academic research and public scholarship, considerable hands-on fieldwork in prairie restoration was undertaken throughout the writing of Prairie Survivance. A number of individuals and organizations were extremely helpful in introducing me to the field of restoration ecology, many of whom facilitated ample opportunities for my own prairie restoration efforts: Tammy Richardson and Casey Kohrt at the Johnson County Heritage Trust in Johnson County, IA; Glen Pollock with the Audubon Society of Omaha; Tom Bragg and Alicia Mullarkey with the University of Nebraska at Omaha; Chris Helzer, program director for The Nature Conservancy in central and eastern Nebraska; and Chad Graeve and Kody Wholers with Pottawatamie County Conservation at Hitchcock Nature Center in Pottawatamie County,
IA. Connie Mutel at the University of Iowa and John Price at the University of Nebraska at Omaha have also facilitated numerous introductions to many of the individuals and organizations noted above. This prairie restoration fieldwork has been invaluable as a source of knowledge and inspiration. It is an endeavor under-represented in our national environmental discourse and debate, a fact that all those acknowledged above are working hard to rectify. So too are the pages that follow a tribute to this challenging, yet necessary, fieldwork.
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PROLOGUE

THE PSYCHOANALYSIS OF PRAIRIE FIRE

If all that changes slowly may be explained by life, all that changes quickly may be explained by fire. Fire is the ultra-living element.

Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*

But the main gift of fire to the arts is that of symbolism, which covers much of human experience, evoking desire, passion, sexuality, romance, vitality, curiosity, knowledge, anger, punishment, evil, destruction, purity, domesticity, and comfort.

Hazel Rossotti, *Fire*

We lit the drip torch and ignited the first strands of grass. Since the wind was blowing from the southeast, the plan was to light the fire in the northwest corner and slowly spread the fire in two directions, one group moving south and one group moving east, toward the paved road that served as the prairie’s southern-most boundary. There were only four of us, so we split into groups of two. One pair had the drip torch and a big rubber swatter, while the other pair was equipped with yard rakes. This was my first prairie burn, so I was given a rake. The two more experienced burners quickly moved along the northern edge of the prairie, pushing east and swatting out the fire wherever it slopped over our recently raked fire line. Moving much more slowly along a gravel road on the western edge of the prairie, the other novice and I urged the backfire on with our rakes, working against the wind. Certainly the simplicity of our tools and the direction of the wind slowed us down considerably, but that didn’t bother me. In my past experiences with fire I was usually trying to put it out, not get it to spread, and it had been a long time since I was in such close proximity to so much fire.

The fire was hotter than I anticipated. The small amount of spark it took to engulf a large clump of grass, and the rate at which this occurred, was striking. This prairie hadn’t been burned in four or five years they said, so there was a lot of dry fuel waiting to ignite. Still, I thought it was going to take an hour or two to work through this acre-and-a-half of prairie. So I was a little surprised when I was told I needed to speed it up a
little.  What was the rush?  Then I looked up at the other team working with the torch and the swatter, who by now had ignited the whole northern and eastern edges of the prairie and were already up to the paved road, getting ready to start moving along the southern, and final, boundary.  As the southeasterly breeze picked up, I quickly realized why we needed to get moving: the head of the fire was pushing inward from where it had been lit along the prairie’s edges, and it was moving toward us fast.  We weren’t in any danger from the flames, but what a short time ago had been a small and manageable plume of smoke had almost instantaneously bloomed into a scalding, opaque cloud of white and gray, and it was beginning to envelop us.  Moving hurriedly now, we dragged the embers of our small portion of the backfire up along the gravel road, fully engulfing Strub Prairie’s western edge.

We met the other team at the prairie’s southwestern corner, and while they swatted and raked lose embers and small flare-ups, I watched and listened as a wall of fire roared its way across the remaining stretch of prairie.  The fire easily reached the lower canopy of the four or five full-grown cottonwoods growing in the middle of the prairie; given the size and speed of our prescribed burn, they were in no risk of igniting. Nonetheless, burning at its hottest and brightest, this prairie fire was an intimidating sight, though what we were burning was just over an acre of remnant prairie.  In the days when most of Iowa’s groundcover was part of the prairie ecosystem, fires like this must have burned often and covered an enormous swath of land in no time at all.  What I thought was going to take an hour or two was over in fifteen minutes.  As the smoke cleared it revealed a blackened landscape, dotted here and there with small patches of burning grass. During our mop-up, I looked over the charred remains of Strub Prairie and found it hard to believe that in just a few weeks this place would be well on its way to recovery, full of native grasses and forbs, a haven for birds, insects, and small mammals in a patch of land surrounded by golf courses, major roadways, urban sprawl, and fields of corn and beans.
In the grand scheme of things, the burning of Strub Prairie, my first official act of prairie restoration, registers quite small. It did not significantly address the numerous environmental and ecological issues facing the prairie or the American Midwest: our soils are still depleting, our waterways are still choked with nitrates, our native plants and animals are still being overrun by invasive species, and our land use is still dominated by intensive monoculture. Yet, I cannot help but feel that my first prescribed prairie burn was a success. For one thing, I had lived my whole life to that point in Iowa and Nebraska, but only just recently learned to distinguish native prairie from fallow fields or nonnative ornamental plantings. The opportunity to actually step into a prairie and do the hands-on fieldwork of restoration was therefore a personal awakening; doing so brought an increased awareness of the importance of the prairie ecosystem to the health of the greater Midwest and a deep appreciation for the aesthetic qualities of a patch—no matter how small—of native bluestem, Indian grass, compass plants, and larkspur. Participating in this prescribed burn of Strub Prairie also gave me a better sense of the hard work demanded by any serious effort to restore, recover, or preserve a stretch of prairie like this, a fact that has held true as I have gained more experience in the field, no matter if the work is being done on a small remnant like Strub Prairie, on one-acre research plots in rural Nebraska, or on several hundred acres of prairie and savanna in the Loess Hills of western Iowa.

Moreover, the prescribed burn at Strub Prairie was my first real opportunity to work alongside community partners beyond the usual scope of my academic work in the humanities. At this burn and in later experiences, I have formed bonds with natural resource officers, county conservation directors, volunteer firefighters, farmers, teachers, landscapers, and general prairie enthusiasts, all of us connected by the desire to restore native plant and animal ecology to the American Midwest. So not only was the burning of Strub Prairie my first official act of prairie restoration, it was also one of my first opportunities to engage in public scholarship; that is, this hands-on fieldwork enabled
(and continues to enable) me to expand my work in the humanities outside the walls of academia. More than just another academic buzzword, public scholarship actually allows those committed to this type of work to put theory to practice. As a proponent and practitioner of ecocriticism, I firmly believe that the most effective work in this field combines exegesis, theory, and scholarship with “real world” endeavors of environmental activism, advocacy, ethics, and justice. The writing that follows is in large part my effort to manifest this type of ecocriticism, particularly as it applies to the American Midwest and the too often overlooked and undervalued native prairie ecosystems that have been under steady assault for the last two centuries. In essence, my ecological fieldwork serves as a non-traditional foundation upon which my literary and cultural analysis rests, lending inspiration, insight, and expertise to those parts of the study that perform close readings of literary texts, critique ideologies of American land use, and argue for a broadening of our national environmental discourse to include the concerns of the prairie.

Of course, as a literary scholar, watching the small but no less intimidating conflagration spread across Strub Prairie also brought to mind a number of symbolic and metaphorical associations. Though its roots are located far from the American Midwest, Gaston Bachelard’s *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* (1938) nonetheless gives perfect articulation to the symbolic implications of lighting a prairie fire today:

> But the changes wrought by fire are changes in substance… Through fire everything changes. When we want everything to be changed we call on fire. The first phenomenon is not only the phenomenon of fire contemplated in all its life and brilliancy during an hour of leisure, it is also the phenomenon caused by the fire. The phenomenon caused by fire is the most perceptible of all; it is the one that must be most closely watched; it must be speeded up or slowed down; we must grasp the point (or exact degree) of fire which leaves a mark on a substance as we do the instant of love which leaves a mark on existence.¹

From an ecological perspective, there are a handful of practical reasons for starting a prairie fire: it eradicates nonnative and invasive species, trees in particular; it clears the

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dried-out husks of dead plants to make way for new growth; in a remnant, certain species that evolved with fire over the span of centuries will only release seeds when prompted by the heat of a fire; in a restoration, fire weakens the seed bank left behind by row crops like corn and beans, or ornamental grasses like fescue and bluegrass; and fire keeps grazing animals on the move, preventing them from exhausting the resources of isolated areas. However, as Bachelard points out, the practical reasons for starting a fire are not always the best reasons. Put simply, fire makes people pay attention. It certainly got the attention of the earliest Euro-American inhabitants of the prairie, which is why so much work went into ensuring fire would cease to be a normal occurrence on the prairie—yet one more reason why prescribed burns are an effective means of reinserting the concerns of the prairie into our national environment discourse and debate. Finally, lighting a prairie fire is undeniably subversive. We now live in a culture that goes to great lengths to keep fire hidden—in furnaces, in engines, in rockets—and tend to think of it only in terms of its economic potential (as energy) or its destructive capacity. Bachelard, on the other hand, challenges his readers to think about fire differently: “since the prohibitions [on fire] are primarily social interdictions, the problem of obtaining a personal knowledge of fire is the problem of clever disobedience.” Those who see a fire on the land and think of its restorative, purifying possibilities willingly engage in this “clever disobedience,” asserting a challenge to those who would keep the power of fire all to themselves.

Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor is aware of the subversive nature of fire as well. Vizenor’s revolutionary concept of survivance is integral to my argument in the pages and chapters that follow; for now, it is worth considering one element of survivance in particular. The one consistent image of survivance in Vizenor’s writing is

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2 See Chris Helzer’s discussion of the “Role of Disturbance” for a more complete examination of the ecological importance of prairie fire, in *The Ecology and Management of Prairies in the Central United States* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 13-24.

the trickster *naanabozho*, a figure of central importance to the oral tradition of the Anishinaabe. The story that Vizenor narrates in “Shadows at la Pointe” (1994) links the trickster *naanabozho* to Bachelard’s notion of the “clever disobedience” of fire. As Vizenor tells it, *naanabozho* “stole [fire]… from across the lake,” an act that helps to shape Anishinaabe identity, as the presence of fire enables *naanabozho* and his people to realize: “This is our place on the earth, this place is in our bodies, in our words, and in our dreams.”

However, this act also puts the Anishinaabe at odds with the “tall people who come from the East,” because, “Naanabozho must have stolen fire from them; now the tall white people are here and they want the whole [land] back as punishment.” In other words, not only do those moving onto Anishinaabe home ground from the east want to keep the power of fire to themselves, as recompense for *naanabozho*’s actions they fully intend on forcing the Anishinaabe off their lands entirely. An unjust punishment indeed, but more to the point is the risks that one must be willing to take in order to obtain fire, the “ultra-living element,” for all of its practical purposes, but especially for its symbolism as the key to power, identity, and sovereignty. *Naanabozho* stealing the fire from Euro-American colonizers is thus a powerful act of survivance. So too is lighting a fire on land at constant risk of being converted to monocultural row crops an act of prairie survivance.

I have opened my study of prairie literature and prairie restoration with a reflection on prairie fire for several reasons. First, in the spirit of the type of public scholarship with which my work hopes to be conversant, this prologue establishes a cross-disciplinary paradigm to which the rest of my argument aims to adhere. In other words, while my work fits into the humanities first and foremost, there is almost limitless potential for collaboration with those working outside of the humanities. In volunteering

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5 Ibid., 285.
for prescribed burns, interacting with those leading the burns and my fellow volunteers, and incorporating these experiences into my academic work, I hope to enact a sort of “practical ecocriticism,” in which the environments and environmental issues that I write about are more than abstract or textual entities; I want the hands-on fieldwork of prairie restoration to open up new ways of thinking about prairie literature, and vice versa. Second, opening with this anecdote about Strub Prairie enables me to incorporate discussions of a local place into the broader, more traditional analytical work of literary scholarship. Throughout this study I will therefore make a conscious effort to “localize” its concerns—that is, in addition to the primary and secondary textual resources that I engage, my own interactions with local prairie sites throughout Iowa and Nebraska will be incorporated as well. More than simply anecdotal evidence, localizing parts of this study brings it closer to “ground level,” where so much of the work of prairie restoration needs to take place in order to make it once again an ecological and cultural presence in the American Midwest. Finally, the driving principle of my argument is that the stories we have been telling about the prairie have gone a long way toward leaving it in the degraded (at worst) or forgotten (at best) state that it is in. But I also believe that narrative as the potential to heal. Such restorative narratives make up the latter half of Prairie Survivance. Thus, by opening with my own story of prairie restoration, I hope to enact Thomas King’s dictum, “Want a different ethic? Tell a different story.”

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CHAPTER 1

DOES THE PRAIRIE’S PRESENCE IN THIS BOOK MITIGATE ITS ABSENCE FROM THE LAND?

I was placeless and so innocent.

John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*

The nature of survivance creates a sense of narrative resistance to absence, literary tragedy, nihility, and victimry… Native survivance is a continuance of stories.

Gerald Vizenor, *Native Liberty*

In a manuscript from the early 1940s unpublished in his lifetime, Aldo Leopold poignantly asks “What is prairie?”

Though this question is rhetorical, Leopold acknowledges that it is also ironic. The irony, Leopold notes, comes from the fact that, “Half of southern Wisconsin was once prairie. Now that we must fight to maintain our national existence, one might presuppose a universal interest in the raw materials of an on which states were built.”

Written in the context of the Second World War, Leopold is clearly dismayed by his fellow Wisconsinites’ general lack of knowledge about the land on which they live and for which young men are fighting and dying half a world away. Part of the problem, as Leopold acknowledges, is ecological: half of southern Wisconsin was *once* prairie, the implication being that this is no longer true. Instead, the native prairie has been replaced, “partly by reason of plow and cow, and partly by reason of competitive Asiatic and European weeds and grasses.”

The conversion of the prairie to cropland, suburban lawn, and ornamental garden, Leopold argues, has all but driven southern Wisconsin’s native prairie ecosystem to a few isolated corners, such as unplowed roadsides and the University of Wisconsin’s Arboretum. Although it goes

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2. Ibid., 162. Though a native Iowan and resident of both the east coast and southwest, Leopold settled in southern Wisconsin in the early 1930s, thus his concern with this region of the country in this passage.

3. Ibid., 162. Leopold’s use of “competitive,” intentionally used as a euphemism or not, would today be replaced by the word “invasive,” the connotation of which is much more severe.
unmentioned in Leopold’s manuscript, the same was also true for the nation’s other prairie states, from Wisconsin’s neighbors (Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota) to the prairie’s western (Montana, Wyoming) and southern (Oklahoma, Texas) extremes, to all those falling in between (Missouri, Nebraska, Kansas, and the Dakotas). What Leopold observes of southern Wisconsin has come to pass in all of these places, a reality in which “the prairie flora has disappeared from view.”

Leopold, however, recognizes that the lack of knowledge about the prairie is not just an ecological problem; it is also a cultural problem. In spite of the fact that the native prairie is disappearing, Leopold cannot find “in any school or college textbook, an adequate description of prairie,” leading him to the realization that it is the lack of cultural awareness that the prairie has become for “most Americans… a flat place once dotted with covered wagons.” “The rich soil which now feeds us,” Leopold laments, has been completely devalued even in its cultural forms—inspiring Leopold to make a plea for preserving the prairie “like an old book… for its historical reasons.” The only image of the prairie that Leopold believes is recognizable to “most Americans” is an image of western settlement and expansion: the so-called “prairie schooners” that sailed into the region from the east bearing immigrant and emigrant Euro-Americans alike. In place of the ecological “story” of the prairie, Leopold observes instead that this over-simplified narrative of Western “progress” has comfortably settled into place as the “authentic” story of the prairie. Just as the native prairie ecosystem was replaced by monocultural row crops, so too has any semblance of prairie culture, other than story of Euro-American

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4 Ibid., 162. Connie Mutel notes, for example, “Prairie habitat, which declined precipitously from the 1830s until around 1900, has continued to dwindle ever since,” with less than 0.1 percent being the most commonly cited statistic for the amount of prairie remaining. Cornelia F. Mutel, *The Emerald Horizon: The History of Nature in Iowa* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2008), 114.

5 Ibid., 162.

6 Ibid., 162. This is not the only place that Leopold draws an analogy between the prairie and a book or text; other examples will be explored more fully in chapter five, which takes a closer look at much of Leopold’s writing, including his seminal work *A Sand County Almanac* (1949).
“progress” and settlement, been removed from the “school or college textbooks”

describing the region.

As a native Iowan, I can vouch for the absences that Leopold observes in this
short essay. Growing up, I never knowingly or intentionally came into contact with a

prairie, let alone even looked at one. I knew the woodlands that surrounded my house, as

well as the Mississippi River and its many tributaries that flowed through the part of

eastern Iowa—just about an hour north of where Leopold grew up—where I lived for the

first twenty years of my life. Surely the prairie had once thrived on the hills and valleys

that were now exclusively covered by farmland, another landscape with which I was

intimately familiar. Yet it was not until I was in my mid-twenties and pursuing a

graduate degree in English, with an emphasis on environmental literature and criticism,

that the prairie became a presence in my life. Up to then, the prairie was not only an

absence from the physical worlds with which I was familiar, it was also not a part of my

cultural life—the subjects I was taught in school, the books I read, the television and

movies I watched, the political debates I followed, or the conversations I had with my

family and friends. Until very recently, therefore, I too would not have been able to

answer Leopold’s question, “What is prairie?”

The distinction that Leopold makes between the crises facing prairie ecosystems

and the misinterpretations of the prairie on the cultural level facilitates a useful approach

for addressing the larger concerns of the prairie throughout the American Midwest. Even

though the ecological prairie and the cultural prairie are inextricably connected and

cannot exist apart from one another, separating the two serves an analytical purpose. By

and large, the principle focus of those who wish to preserve or restore the prairie involves

7 The use of the word “landscape” in this instance and throughout the study is done with an awareness of

the word’s complexities, multiplicities, and incongruities. Chapter five will consider this word in greater
detail. As a starting point, this study will make use of Don Mitchell’s parsing of the word as referring to
the “look or the style of the land,” as well as the “shape and structure of a place,” but most of all as “both an
outcome and the medium of social relations, both the result of an input to specific relations of production
enhancing ecosystem recovery on the land: protecting prairie remnants, planting prairie restorations on degraded farmland, establishing large prairie refuges like Neil Smith Wildlife Refuge in Iowa or Konza Prairie in Kansas, and reestablishing prairie fauna like bison, elk, and wolves. As I suggested in the prologue, the hands-on work of prairie restoration is an important component of this study and my relationship to the prairie more generally. But the main contribution I hope to make through my work in this book is giving equal attention to the prairie of the mind, or cultural prairie, as a requirement for truly successful prairie restoration. In other words, there are equally damaging consequences to the devaluation of the prairie in the American imagination, its art, literature, philosophy, education, politics, and religion. For instance, the absence of the prairie from serious environmental debate and discourse, in spite of its relevance to a number of contemporary environmental issues, such as the hypoxic zone in the Gulf of Mexico or the growing threat of climate change, is a signal that its cultural existence is just as fragmented and degraded as the ecological prairie. Creating awareness of such concerns, let alone getting the residents of the American Midwest to care about them, is a primary goal of restoring the cultural prairie and needs to be acknowledged—as Leopold saw—as an essential component of prairie restoration at all levels.

The majority of my argument will thus be devoted to the cultural prairie. Yet a brief definition of the ecological prairie is in order, to clarify limited terminology, to give greater precision to my argument, and to solidify the uniqueness of the prairie

8 Chapter four of Mutel’s The Emerald Horizon offers a helpful distinction between prairie remnant and restoration (or reconstruction); essentially, a remnant is prairie that has gone relatively untouched during the course of Euro-American settlement, likely somewhat degraded but still retaining a healthy amount of species diversity; a restoration (or reconstruction) is either a fully degraded prairie that is being resuscitated or former crop (or residential) land that is being converted back to prairie; see Mutel, The Emerald Horizon, 133-151.

9 Chris Helzer is one of the few writers who has addressed the relationship between the prairie and climate change, noting that, “Prairies are effective at sequestering carbon and, in contrast to trees, which store most of their carbon in their trunks where it can be released when the tree dies, grasslands store the bulk of their carbon below ground.” Helzer, The Ecology and Management of Prairies, 175.
ecosystem.\textsuperscript{10} The geographical extent of the North American prairie differs from map to map, but there is general agreement that historic grasslands covered the majority of the midcontinent, stretching from the Rocky Mountains in the west to the Mississippi River in the east, and from southern Canada in the north down to Texas, or even Mexico, in the south.\textsuperscript{11} In regard to the specific ecology of the prairie, Chris Helzer, a naturalist for the Nature Conservancy in Nebraska, notes: “Prairies are diverse ecological communities in which grasses are the dominant plants… However, there is a difference between prairies and other kinds of grasslands. Prairies contain a diverse mixture of native plant species, including grasses, sedges, and wildflowers.”\textsuperscript{12} Candace Savage further distinguishes the grassland ecosystem by breaking down the distinct ecoregions of which it is comprised. For the purposes of this study, the three main ecoregions that will be discussed are the shortgrass prairies found in the more arid states west of the 100\textsuperscript{th} meridian (including Montana, Wyoming, and parts of Texas, and the western half of Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas), the tallgrass prairies found in the wetter states bordering the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers (including Iowa, parts of Minnesota and Missouri, and the eastern edges of Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas), and the mixed-grass prairies.


\textsuperscript{11} See Candace Savage, \textit{Prairie: A Natural History} (Vancouver, British Columbia: Greystone Books, 2004) for a map (on page 9) that gives a thorough representation of the extent of grasslands throughout the North American midcontinent. Any discussion of maps that takes place in my work is done so with the recognition that maps themselves are cultural documents that, as Denis Wood makes clear in a number of works, serve unique purposes, interests, and even ideologies. See Denis Wood, \textit{The Power of Maps} (New York: The Guilford Press, 1992) and Denis Wood and John Fels, \textit{The Natures of Maps: Cartographic Constructions of the Natural World} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

\textsuperscript{12} Helzer, \textit{The Ecology and Management of Prairies}, 1.
that fall in between.\textsuperscript{13} Helzer adds a further caveat to the definition of the ecological prairie, stating that, “Historically, prairies were created and maintained by three interconnected natural processes: climate, fire, and grazing… When those processes are eliminated, most prairies transform into low-diversity grasslands or even woodlands.”\textsuperscript{14} Richard Manning echoes these sentiments, noting: “The prairie between the Rockies and the Mississippi River was held by three pillars: bison, fire, and grass, and the place cannot live again until all three return.”\textsuperscript{15} Both Helzer and Manning acknowledge that Euro-American habitation on the prairies has been the primary contributor to the disruption of these three processes during the last two hundred years.

From an ecological standpoint, a prairie thus stands in stark contrast to the fields of monocultural row crops that now dominate most areas of the American Midwest, not to mention the lawns of nonnative grasses like bluegrass and fescue now ubiquitous in neighborhoods throughout the region. Yet, as Jenny Kerber points out, “there is very little original prairie left, and it is widely acknowledged that the prairies are one of the most physically altered, humanized landscapes in the world.”\textsuperscript{16} Included in the chapters that follow will be some discussion of how and why Euro-American settlement has altered the prairie so significantly, particularly as it pertains to converting the land to monocultural row crops and the systematic eradication of the bison. Keeping with the main point of this chapter, however, it is worth reiterating that the assault on the prairie

\textsuperscript{13} Savage, \textit{Prairie: A Natural History}, 23. Savage also helpfully parses the distinction between “prairie” and “Great Plains,” a distinction that will not be given space in this study other than to note that prairie tends to be an ecological term and Great Plains tends to be a geographical term (4). The term Great Plains will not be used extensively in this study.

\textsuperscript{14} Helzer, \textit{The Ecology and Management of Prairies}, 1.

\textsuperscript{15} Manning, \textit{Grassland}, 237. Manning, unlike Helzer, comes from a background in journalism as opposed to ecology; for more precise distinctions and definitions concerning prairie ecology, Helzer offers greater detail and elaboration; Manning, on the other hand, is more explicitly political in his analysis.

\textsuperscript{16} Jenny Kerber, \textit{Writing in Dust: Reading the Prairie Environmentally} (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2010), 68. Likewise, Manning notes that the surface area of Iowa in particular “in terms of native vegetation, is the most disturbed of any state in the union.” Manning, \textit{Grassland}, 249.
was not limited to the removal or destruction of its ecological components. For example, though Mutel, Helzer, and others offer convincing descriptions of the vibrancy and diversity of the pre-settlement prairie, a writer like Washington Irving was still able to describe the nineteenth-century mixed- and shortgrass prairies of Kansas and Oklahoma as a “wild and boundless waste.” Of course, Irving was neither the first nor the last visitor to the prairie to see or describe it that way. Over the last two hundred years countless other observations, interpretations, and misinterpretations have been committed to the cultural documents of the prairie, including written texts, oral performances, maps, paintings, photographs, and even films. There is such fluidity to the cultural prairie that giving it a definition is a serious challenge.

Perhaps the most salient aspect of discourses surrounding the cultural prairie is the tendency to describe it in eschatological terms: namely, that the prairie’s certain disappearance from the North American midcontinent is an inevitability. This vision of the prairie as a “lost landscape” was formulated early in the nineteenth century as Euro-Americans began settling on the prairie and carving it up for agricultural and other uses. It is a view of the prairie that remains prominent today, even among those that ultimately wish to help restore the prairie. A related idea concerning cultural descriptions of this ecosystem is the trope of the “vanishing prairie,” in which writers and artists speak of or visualize the prairie only in a state of disappearance. Like the “lost landscape” image of

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18 See especially David O’Shield’s film America’s Lost Landscape: The Tallgrass Prairie (Oley, PA: Bullfrog Films, 2006), DVD. The film itself does an admirable job of recreating the history of settlement on the prairie and features a number of prominent writers and thinkers on the topic, including those like Wes Jackson and Richard Manning who will be engaged in the pages that follow. Despite the fact that portions of the film are devoted to speaking of the prairie in the future tense, a sense of loss and tragedy nonetheless pervades the film.

19 Likewise, it should be noted that The Vanishing Prairie is the name of a 1954 Academy Award-winning documentary produced by Walt Disney; as the title suggests, the film buys into many of the same misperceptions of the doomed fate of the prairie, though it is highly dated now. Nonetheless, my use of the
the prairie, the trope of the “vanishing prairie” is still prevalent today, indicative of a certain fatalism that pervades much of the contemporary environmental discourse and debate concerning the prairie. For example, Kerber has observed that a movement in Canadian regionalist poetry has introduced the term “post-prairie” as a descriptor for contemporary prairie poets, though this term enables only speaking of the prairie in the past tense.  

The pervasiveness of assumptions that the prairie’s demise is certain in all of these discourses is an index of how difficult it is to talk or write about the cultural prairie. As a concrete illustration, it is worth looking at the text *Home Ground: Language for an American Landscape* (2006), a work edited by Barry Lopez that sets out to “speak more accurately, more evocatively, more familiarly about the physical places we occupy.”

To meet such lofty and ambitious goals, the editors of *Home Ground* enlisted the aid of several dozen writers to produce short vignettes that essentially function as definitions for hundreds of words that constitute “language for an American landscape.” “Prairie” is one of the words included. Its entry is authored by Larry Woiwode, who designates his own “home ground” as southwestern North Dakota, on what would be primarily the shortgrass prairie ecosystem.  

Despite Woiwode’s geographic proximity to the prairie and the fact that he no doubt holds the prairie in high regard, the definition that he offers in *Home Ground* is meant to be more of a unique coinage. The connection between my term and the notion of the “vanishing Indian” will be considered more fully in chapter two.

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20 For more on Kerber’s discussion of this term, see *Writing in the Dust*, 119-120. Kerber herself challenges the term, noting that it “presumes the unity of the category it claims to move beyond, and of the ease with which it seems to detach itself from the inescapable materiality of the physical environment” (119). A connection could seemingly be made to Gerald Vizenor’s use of the term “postindian,” though Vizenor’s term is employed far more subversively than the intent of “post-prairie” as described by Kerber.


22 The critique of this definition that follows is not aimed directly at Woiwode, Lopez, or the ambitious *Home Ground* project. It should also be noted that this is not the only word on the prairie in the book, as related terms like “goat prairie” (Patricia Hampl) and “looking-glass prairie” (Donna Seaman), among several others, are given entries as well.
Ground clearly demonstrates the complexities and difficulties of discussing the cultural prairie in any context:

In his poem “The Prairies,” William Cullen Bryant wrote: “These are the Gardens of the Desert, these / The unshorn fields, boundless and beautiful, / For which the speech of England has no name.” The French named them prairie (meadow or grassland) from glimpses of the phenomenon in their central and southwestern regions. The herbaceous makeup of the prairie was so diverse, each species extending roots as deep as its height, that even the frightful fires from lightning strikes, with flames forming tearing twisters a hundred feet high, couldn’t destroy it. Then plows came. An early passenger on a buckboard said, “As I looked about me I felt the grass was the country, as water is the sea” (Willa Cather, My Ántonia). This sea was later divided: tallgrass prairie, mixed prairie, and shortgrass prairie, all of which now exist only in tracts preserved by ranchers and farmers and bureaus of the government—although the lay of the land remains: as Tim O’Brien writes in The Things They Carried, “All around us the Minnesota prairies reached out in long, repetitive waves of corn and soybeans, everything flat, everything the same.”

There is little to be gained by nitpicking every inaccuracy or missed point made in this definition, but a few details do need to be addressed. For one, Woiwode’s definition buys into the “lost landscape” image of the prairie from the outset by speaking of it in the past tense, as if its “herbaceous makeup” were no longer “so diverse.” Moreover, its suggestion that existing prairie remnants have been “preserved” by “farmers and ranchers and bureaus of the government” is problematic, since the onset of large-scale agriculture and governmentally sanctioned policies like Native American removal and the Homestead Act contributed more than anything else to the degradation of prairie ecosystems. Finally, since my analysis is primarily focused on the cultural prairie, it is worth pointing out that Woiwode’s literary examples are far from the most representative “prairie writers” he could have chosen: William Cullen Bryant only briefly set foot on the

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23 Larry Woiwode, “Prairie,” in Home Ground, 278-279.

24 Native American removal, especially those sanctioned by President Jackson, will be considered more fully in chapter two. The Homestead Act, signed into law by Abraham Lincoln in 1862 and bestowing 160 acres of former government land to anyone willing to “improve” it for five years, serves as a touchstone piece of legislation for any investigation into the Euro-American settlement of the American Midwest and West. For a more comprehensive discussion of the Homestead Act, see Richard White, “It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own”: A New History of the American West (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), especially pages 143-145.
eastern most edge of the tallgrass prairie and his poem “The Prairies” is an early example of the “vanishing prairie” motif in Euro-American literature; Willa Cather is more appropriate, but some acknowledgement ought to be given of her ambivalent, often downbeat, portrayal of the prairie, including her protagonists’ frequent desire to escape it; and O’Brien’s inclusion is the most questionable, since the work referenced is almost exclusively about the Vietnam War and the lines quoted speak about row crops, not native plants.

This definition from Home Ground also treads precariously on the etymology of the word “prairie,” another critical element of the cultural prairie that has long confounded efforts to speak or write about it. Writing in the early twentieth century, for example, William Quayle states that he has “inly resented the prairie was not an Indian word,” going on to proclaim: “Indians, you have lost your chance. The Prairies bear an alien name… You did not name them for yourselves… the prairies you roamed over you coined no word for.”

Though it is markedly untrue that the numerous indigenous cultures that inhabited the prairie prior to Euro-American contact did not have a way to describe these vast grasslands, Quayle is right to point out that the name that stuck is a French cognate for “meadow.” Quayle’s desire to “Americanize” the word by giving it a native etymology, however racist his language, is but one more example of the struggle to find just the right name for this ecosystem. The variety of monikers and nicknames for the prairie are legion and often derogatory: the Great American Desert, the Great Plains, the heartland, the Grain (or Corn) Belt, the breadbasket, and so on. If nothing else, this catalog of euphemisms gives some insight into the history of the transforming, and often competing, interpretations of the grassland ecosystems of the North American

25 William A. Quayle, The Prairie and the Sea (Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1905), 24. Quayle’s text is a rather late example, compared to the work of Irving, George Catlin, and other nineteenth-century writers, that paired the disappearance of Native American communities with the disappearance of the prairie ecosystem, another connection between the “vanishing Indian” and the “vanishing prairie.”

26 Another synonym is “hollow,” according to the OED, but nowhere does the French etymology suggest an extension can be made to “grassland,” as Woiwode insinuates in his definition for Home Ground.
midcontinent. For the purposes of this study, I refer to this ecological and cultural location as the prairie, often specifying among the three main ecoregions of short-, mixed- and tallgrass prairies. “Prairie” is the term embraced by the ecological community, and is the signifier that consistently appears in the cultural documents of most relevance to my argument.

The title of this chapter poses a question that attempts to get to the root of the intersection of ecology and culture, particularly as it pertains to the native ecosystem of the American Midwest. I have two primary goals in asking: “Does the prairie’s presence in this book mitigate its absence from the land?” First, to state outright that the cultural prairie is a presence in my work, not an absence, and thus to revoke the image of the prairie as a “lost landscape.” Second, to interrogate the ability of cultural work, language and narrative in particular, to have positive or negative influence on the physical ecology of a place. Since I view my work here as advocacy for the prairie, I am openly concerned with the positive impact my analysis of prairie literature can have on the ecological prairie. To achieve these two goals I will employ a new term—“prairie survivance.” This term, based on the work of Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor, will help avoid the longstanding conundrums of discussing the cultural prairie and will open up a new avenue of discourse for addressing its concerns. To further enable this revision of the discourse of the cultural prairie, I will also employ the work of narrative ethics, ecocriticism (or environmental criticism), and cultural geography, each of which is expressly concerned with the “real world” consequences of language and narrative.

My use of the term prairie survivance signals a turn away from defeatist prairie discourse. The word “survivance” is Vizenor’s coinage, a term used as a way of

27 Etymology and naming are both relevant to the discussion of bison, or “buffalo” as well, an issue that will be raised directly in chapter three. An analogy can also be made to the problematic history of naming associated with Native American communities, the use of the word “Indian” in particular. Gerald Vizenor offers the best insight into this issue, as he takes issue with the use of the word “Indian” because it is “the simulation of the absence, an unreal name; however the misnomer has a curious sense of legal standing.” Vizenor much prefers the use of the word “native.” Gerald Vizenor, Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 14.
describing the cultural and narrative resistance by Native American individuals and communities since the earliest moments of Euro-American contact. Vizenor’s clearest definition of survivance is found in the preface of *Manifest Manners* (1991), in which he writes: “Survivance is an active sense of presence, the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry. Survivance means the right of succession or reversion of an estate, and in that sense, the estate of native survivance.”28 The words that stand out in the first part of this definition—“active,” “presence,” “continuance”—are positioned in sharp contrast to the “dominance,” “tragedy,” and “victimry” that define the “manifest manners” in historical portrayals of natives by Euro-American writers, historians, politicians, and others.29 This is one reason why Vizenor’s adoption of the term has been such an effective critical tool for his critique of “simulations of dominance” that he sees silencing the legitimate claims and cultural traditions of indigenous Americans. Furthermore, his critical inquiries are more broadly applicable to the exploitation of the environment by many of the same policies, agents, mechanisms, and technologies that were put to use to propagate and promote state-sponsored ideologies of uniformity, homogeneity, and monoculturalism throughout the American Midwest, as well as the fatalistic narratives that employ images of the prairie as a “lost landscape.”

Extending the use of the term survivance from Vizenor’s focus on native culture, literature, and narrative to a more expressly environmental discourse demands a certain flexibility in both the word itself and in Vizenor’s own usage. Fittingly the word survivance, like the word prairie, is a French cognate, as Vizenor himself quotes the


29 The term “manifest manners” is a clear play on the concept of Manifest Destiny, of which Vizenor writes, “Manifest Destiny would cause the death of millions of tribal people from massacres, diseases, and the loneliness of reservations. These histories are now the simulations of dominance, and the causes of the conditions that have become manifest manners in literature.” Ibid., 4.
Robert and Collins dictionnaire français—anglais, anglais-français, which traces the etymology of the word in French to mean “relic, survival… survival of the soul (after death), afterlife.”

Building on this French usage, Vizenor continues to parse the word, going on to note:

*The New Shorter Oxford Dictionary* defines *survivance* as the “succession of an estate, office, etc., of a survivor nominated before the death of the previous holder; the right of such succession in case of survival.” And the suffix *ance* is a quality of action, as in *survivance, relevance, assistance*. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines *ance* as a “state or condition” or “action,” as in *continuance*. Survivance, then, is the action, condition, quality, and sentiments of the verb *survive*, “to remain alive or in existence,” to outlive, persevere with a suffix of *survivancy*.

Two main points may be gleaned from Vizenor’s linguistic work in this passage. First, there is a flexibility and fluidity to the word survivance, even as Vizenor defines it, which opens it up to any number of usages, including the type of environmental discourse that my argument will engage. In other words, Vizenor’s important application of the word to the cultural concerns of Native Americans does not exclude it from application to other contexts.

Second, regardless of the context, the use of the term survivance must emphasize or embody some notion of continuity, either in life after death (from the French) or in refusing to succumb to death (or any other sort of ending). Continuing in this vein, Vizenor makes a prescient link to the work of Derrida, especially his notion of *différance*. Not only do the two words share the “ance” suffix, Vizenor traces a comparable usage in Derriada’s notion of the “afterlife,” meaning most of all “an excess of life which resists annihilation.” As it pertains to the prairie, this notion of survivance...

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31 Ibid., 19.

32 However, keeping with the spirit of Vizenor’s use of survivance, chapters four and five of this study will incorporate texts by native authors, including N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, and Linda Hogan, each of whom lends a unique perspective to the concept of “prairie survivance” in large part because of the way in which Vizenor has developed the word as a critical tool.

is a powerful remedy to the trope of the “vanishing prairie” and eschatological narratives of its certain “annihilation,” which began in essence with the earliest written records of Euro-American exploration of the prairies, such as the accounts published by members of the Corps of Discovery. Prairie survivance therefore prioritizes those narratives that envision the prairie as a place not inevitably doomed to disappearance, but as a place that has withstood, and will continue to withstand, the pressures placed upon it.

Vizenor has actually set the precedent of adopting the term survivance to be used in the context of environmental discourse, and to address the prairie specifically. Though not a “nature writer” or even “environmental critic” in the popular uses of those terms, Vizenor nevertheless actively engages environmental concerns in his work. Some of Vizenor’s earliest writings are haiku, many of which exhibit a finely tuned awareness of the subtleties and minutiae of the natural world:

Under the crossing log
Fresh openings in the ice
Haloed with footprints.

or

Sliding the loft
The mice complained all Winter

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34 The writing produced by the expedition of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, including their official journals and the journals of their compatriots, serves as starting point for the cultural documents and written narratives under consideration in this study. It is also worth noting that Vizenor views Lewis and Clark much more favorably than he does other nineteenth-century Euro-American explorers and authors, even asserting that Lewis and Clark were “diplomatic at a distance, to be sure, and they were certain that their mission would have been threatened not by the presence of the other, but by the absence of the tribes.” Vizenor, Manifest Manners, 1.

35 Given the common critique leveled at studies of this kind, it needs to be stated out front that at no point does my work intend to perpetuate the myth of the “ecological Indian,” a mode of thinking that believes Native Americans lived in a harmonious ecological utopia prior to, and even after, Euro-American contact. The primary work on this topic is Shepard Krech III, The Ecological Indian: Myth and History (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000). Krech’s work will only briefly be noted in the chapters that follow. The topic is also addressed by Lakota scholar Vine Deloria, Jr. in God Is Red: A Native View of Religion (New York: Putnam Publishing Group, 1973), as well as the collection Defending Mother Earth: Native American Perspectives on Environmental Justice, ed. Jace Weaver (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), especially Jace Weaver’s introduction, “Notes from a Miner’s Canary.”

36 Gerald Vizenor, Raising the Moon Vines: Original Haiku in English (Minneapolis: Nodin Press, 1964), 89.
About the coarse hay.\textsuperscript{37}

Though Vizenor has moved away from the haiku genre later in his life, these early poems already resist more conventional forms of Western art and storytelling. Moreover, as Kimberley Blaeser notes, Vizenor’s “haiku… seek not merely to give voice to [a] visionary experience but, acting as stimuli, to assist the reader or listener in the attainment of a similar moment of spiritual awareness or illumination.”\textsuperscript{38} In extending these more minute reflections on the natural world to Vizenor’s notion of survivance, it is important to take into account his understanding of “natural reason,” of which he writes: “The sources of natural reason… are doubt and wonder, not nostalgia or liberal melancholy for the lost wilderness; comic not tragic, because melancholy is cultural boredom, and the tragic is causal, the closure of natural reason.”\textsuperscript{39} Obviously there is a connection to be drawn between survivance and natural reason as Vizenor describes it here, in particular the need to resist both “nostalgia” and “melancholy,” both of which are of the same spirit as “tragedy” and “victimry.” Furthermore, in his clearest articulation of the link between survivance and natural reason, Vizenor again turns his discerning eye to the subtleties of the natural world:

Native storiers of survivance are prompted by natural reason, by a consciousness and sense of incontestable presence that arises from experiences in the natural world, by the turn of seasons, by sudden storms, by migration of cranes, by the ventures of tender lady’s slippers, by chance moths overnight, by unruly mosquitoes, and by the favor of spirits in the water, rimy sumac, wild rice, thunder in the ice, bear, beaver, and faces in the stone.\textsuperscript{40}

The elements of prairie ecology named in this passage—cranes, lady’s slippers, sumac, bear, and beaver—are native to the tallgrass prairie ecotone located in southern


\textsuperscript{39} Vizenor, \textit{Manifest Manners}, 14.

\textsuperscript{40} Vizenor, “Aesthetics of Survivance,” 11.
Minnesota, also the southern extent of the home ground of Vizenor’s Anishinaabe forbears.\textsuperscript{41} Including these plants and animals in this definition of survivance also works as an example of a vibrant depiction of the cultural prairie. Taken literally, Vizenor makes present elements of an ecosystem thought already to be gone from the landscape of southwest Minnesota; taken metaphorically, these images retain much the same power, as Vizenor asserts that, “Metaphors create a sense of presence by imagination and natural reason, the very character and practice of survivance.”\textsuperscript{42} Either way, Vizenor not only engages in environmental discourse to express the unique qualities of survivance, he also expresses an awareness of the unique ecology of the North American prairie.

In these examples Vizenor brings the survivance of natural reason to life by the use of language. Indeed, if the cornerstone of survivance is an emphasis on continuity, continuity is most prominently achieved in Vizenor’s work through language. Echoing these sentiments, Helmbrecht Breinig asserts that, “Survivance lies in the word. It is language; it is the verbal and imaginary construction of an adequate reality that makes survivance more than physical survival.”\textsuperscript{43} Whereas “survival” connotes bodily endurance in the present, survivance differentiates itself by looking far into the future, beyond the mere existence of an individual body—human or otherwise—and into something close to perpetuity, or at least boundless potentiality. For Vizenor, thinking of survivance in this way does not require strict adherence to monotheistic religion, nor a

\textsuperscript{41} An ecotone is a region where one ecosystem transitions into another; in this case, the tallgrass prairie meets the deciduous forests of the Great Lakes in southwestern Minnesota, making this the northeastern extent of the tallgrass prairie. See again Savage, \textit{Prairie: A Natural History} for further reference.

\textsuperscript{42} Vizenor, “Aesthetics of Survivance,” 13. Vizenor’s exploration of metaphor in this essay will be taken up more fully in chapter three, particularly as he applies it to the writing of N. Scott Momaday and James Welch.

“New Agey” belief in a general spiritualism. Instead, Vizenor demands a belief in the potential for language to outlast the “simulations of dominance” that would constrain it. If, as Linda Lizut Helstern argues, survivance “[strikes] a new balance with dominance,” it does not do so with physical violence, but with linguistic resistance, what Vizenor calls the “continuance of stories.” Moving forward, Breinig’s conclusion that “it is language, the spoken and the written word, through which survivance becomes real,” will thus serve as a starting point for envisioning ways that the cultural prairie—comprised in part by language, the written and spoken word, and especially narrative—can influence the ecological prairie.

Having defined the prairie (both ecological and cultural) and elaborated upon how the concept of survivance will help dismantle the image of the prairie as a “lost landscape,” the critical terminology used to bolster this enactment of prairie survivance will be engaged as a further means of fortifying my argument. The different schools of thought that I will employ in the pages that follow are interconnected in that each accepts that language, and narrative in particular, can impact the physical world in significant or meaningful ways. Likewise, some notion of ethics also plays an important role in each of these critical fields. Taken together, my interest in narrative ethics, ecocriticism, and cultural geography is predicated on the belief that work in the humanities has a responsibility that extends beyond traditional academic settings. This belief is embodied in the notion of public scholarship, which encourages collaboration between those

44 In fact, Vizenor often speaks openly against monotheism, even contrasting it directly with survivance, as when he argues that, “Monotheism takes the risk out of nature and natural reason and promotes absence, dominance, sacrifice, and victimry.” Vizenor, “Aesthetics of Survivance,” 11.


46 Breinig, “Native Survivance in the Americas,” 57.
working in the academy and those working in local communities. This belief is also embodied in Elizabeth Ammons’s recent challenge to those working in the humanities to “revive the liberal arts as a progressive cultural force that not only provides critique but also offers workable ideas and inspiration in the real-world struggle to achieve social justice and restoration of the earth.”

Though she is not speaking of prairie restoration specifically, Ammons nonetheless articulates the means through which humanities-based research can contribute to the prairie’s recovery, both on the land and in our national environmental discourse and debate.

The consequentiality of language and narrative, referred to here as narrative ethics, is best expressed in Thomas King’s disarmingly simple statement: “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are.” James Phelan offers another way of conceptualizing narrative ethics, as “an ethics of the told and an ethics of the telling.”

In both King and Phelan, narrative ethics is predicated upon the idea that the transmission of a story from the teller to the listener, or the writer to the reader, involves much more than simply reading a book from start to finish. The narrative process is not static—while the “told” may be the completed narrative, it remains in the active process of “telling” for as long as that narrative can be engaged or experienced. Most importantly, it is an ethical act. Emmanuel Levinas suggests the ethical consequences of these narrative interactions when he interrogates the role of the “Said” and the “Saying” in discursive exchanges:

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47 Elizabeth Ammons, *Brave New Words: How Literature Will Save the Planet* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2010), xiv. Consider also Sidonie Smith’s recent argument that thinking of the English major as “performative social action is to facilitate the classroom as an intergenerational learning community, where everyone collaborates in setting questions, seeking answers, making claims, and producing work.” Sidonie Smith, “The English Major as Social Action,” *Profession* (2010): 199.


Is language meaningful only in its *said*, in its propositions in the indicative, everywhere at least latent, in the theoretical content of affirmed or virtual judgments, in pure communication of information—in its *said*, in all that can be written? Is it not meaningful in the sociality of *saying* [*dire*], in responsibility with regard to the other person who commands the questions and answers of the saying, and through the “non-presence” or the “appresentation” of the interlocutor, which thus contrasts strongly with the presence of things according to the underlying simultaneity of the given universe?  

In this passage, and throughout most of his ethical philosophy, Levinas challenges the preferentiality given to the “Said,” or those narrative exchanges rooted in the normative, established, and accepted modes of mainstream Western discourse, history in particular. To the contrary, and most relevant to narrative ethics, Levinas finds greater meaning in the “Saying,” or those narrative exchanges that exist outside of, and act as a direct challenge to, the hegemonic discourses of Western narrative forms. Looking briefly back to Vizenor, for example, it is clear that narratives of survivance rest in the realm of the “Saying,” given the emphasis on presence and continuity. In the sense that Levinas uses it, therefore, narrative ethics can serve as a subversive means of critiquing Euro-American travel narratives written in the nineteenth-century that perpetuate the trope of the “vanishing prairie,” in large part because such narratives take no account of the “Saying,” or any other narrative of the prairie that contrasts with the story of Western “progress” and settlement—Leopold’s vision of wagons crossing a “flat” prairie.

Adam Zachary Newton builds on Levinas’s analysis of the relationship between the role of the “Said” and the role of the “Saying,” taking his own stance on the ethicality of narrative discourse: “narrative as relationship and human connectivity, as Saying over and above Said, or as Said called into account in Saying; narrative as claim, as risk, as responsibility, as gift, as price. Above all, as an ethics, narrative is performance or act—purgative… malignant… historically recuperative… erotic and redemptive… obsessive

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50 Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 164 (emphasis and brackets in the original). Just before the passage quote Levinas ties the “said” to written texts, arguing that “writing gathers the past and future into the presence of a book—a thing between two covers—or that of a library enclosed within a bookcase,” which he then links directly to the “historical narrative” of mainstream Western discourse (163).
and coercive."\(^{51}\) Again, Newton makes a strong distinction between “Said” and “Saying,” going so far as to insinuate that those narratives falling into the realm of “Saying” are by nature more ethical than those of the “Said.” The argument that I will make about prairie literature, that it can be both detrimental and beneficial to the physical ecology of the prairie, will require an examination of the entire scope of narratives that Newton catalogs: those that envision the prairie as a “lost landscape” might well be identified as “malignant” or “coercive” in the language of narrative ethics, whereas those that offer an image of the prairie as a presence, not an absence, might be described as “recuperative” or “redemptive.” In either case, the main point to take away from Newton’s commentary is his emphasis on “risk” and “responsibility” in regard to narrative, since writing about the cultural prairie in a way that does not perpetuate the trope of the “vanishing prairie” requires a little bit of both. Indeed, there is certainly risk involved in “telling stories of environmental conclusion,” as described by Kerber, but it is a risk that might “challenge us to do some imaginative work in the present.”\(^{52}\)

As evidenced by Kerber’s observations, one of the most timely and effective manifestations of narrative ethics is the incorporation of environmental readings into the more traditional academic work of the humanities.\(^{53}\) While the theory behind ecocriticism will be essential to discuss and engage, it is the practice of environmental

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51 Adam Zachary Newton, *Narrative Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 7. Left out by the ellipses are the more specific examples Newton gives for each element of his definition, none of which have immediate bearing on this study.

52 Kerber, *Writing in Dust*, 10. The larger context of this passage in Kerber is her juxtaposition of “stories of origin” with “stories of environmental endings,” the advantage of the later being that they “can serve as important vehicles of social critique.”

53 The writing of Lawrence Buell remains the strongest example of the effectiveness of this field, in particular his text *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), a text that will be engaged directly in chapter five of this study. Buell also gives attention to the distinction between “environmental criticism” and “ecocriticism,” though my work is less interested in the theoretical caveats that demand making a choice between the two and more interested in advocating for the need of this field—under any name—playing a larger role in all literary studies. See Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).
criticism—of reading texts for what they have to say about the natural world, or understanding how literature can help or hurt a person’s interaction with a given environment—that will be of most use here. In one of the most succinct definitions of what the practice of ecocriticism hopes to uncover, Lawrence Buell has recently remarked that “all artistic work hinges upon the evocation of imagined worlds that may or may not bear a close resemblance to literal or historical environments,” implying that part of the ecocritic’s work is to open up avenues for discussing “the relation (or disrelation) of word-world to actual world” and thus drawing attention to, attempting the recovery of, or downright passing judgment on a given text’s “environmentality.” Thoreau’s Walden (1854) typically serves as the paradigm for a text rich in “environmentality,” and prose nonfiction as a whole has traditionally received the most ecocritical attention, though in the last decade increasing attention is being paid to works across all genres and from authors of most every background.

Yet the concerns of the prairie, and the American Midwest more generally, have not had a great deal of purchase in ecocritical debates, at least not in the United States. John Price’s Not Just Any Land: A Personal and Literary Journey into the American Grasslands (2004) attempts to articulate this lack of ecocritical concern for the prairie, writing that “in grasslands literature, it is hard to find writers who are willing to take these personal and professional risks, to commit to a place in such social and ecological peril, a bioregion where writing about nature is as much about faith in the unseen as knowledge of what remains.”

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54 Buell, The Future of Environmental Criticism, 30.

55 On the other hand, there is a very strong presence of Canadian ecocriticism devoted to the prairie, the most recent of which is Kerber’s Writing in Dust. See also Deborah Keahey, Making it Home: Place in Canadian Prairie Literature (Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press, 1998), Toward Defining the Prairies: Region, Culture, and History, ed. Robert Wardhaugh (Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press, 2001), and History, Literature, and the Writing of the Canadian Prairies, eds. Alison Calder and Robert Wardhaugh (Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press, 2005).

56 John Price, Not Just Any Land: A Personal and Literature Journey into the American Grasslands (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 22.
an attendant critical discourse, is yet another obstacle to those wishing to add weight and precedence to the prairie as a serious component of local and national environmental debates. Those works that do broach the subject of prairie literature and/or criticism of the American Midwest—such as Robert Thacker’s *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination* (1989), Scott Russell Sanders’s *Writing from the Center* (1995), Richard Manning’s *Grassland: The History, Biology, Politics, and Promise of the American Prairie* (1995), and Diane Quantic’s *The Nature of the Place: A Study of Great Plains Fiction* (1995)—are vastly outweighed by those works of literary and cultural theory interested in the trans-mountain and coastal West.\(^57\) Reprioritizing the prairie and the American Midwest within ecocritical discourses, including more attention to the deserving works noted above, is a crucial component of enhancing the status of the cultural prairie as my argument progresses in the pages that follow.

One critic who has turned his attention to the North American midcontinent is William Cronon, whose *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1991) is among the most comprehensive analyses of the interrelationship between Euro-American expansion and the exploitation of the natural world.\(^58\) His essay “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative” (1992) is more directly oriented toward the concerns of this study, as it provides a particularly useful example of both narrative ethics and ecocriticism that is focused upon the American Midwest. Cronon’s primary concern is the Dust Bowl era of the early 1930s and two texts written about it that tell essentially the same story, yet come to two very different conclusions: one is the story of human

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\(^{58}\) William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991). The size and scope of this text is too vast to cover adequately in the space allowed; however, Cronon’s examination of the grain, lumber, and cattle industries in and around Chicago beginning in the early nineteenth century painstakingly documents the slow and steady, but no less dramatic, transformation that Euro-American settlement inflicted on the prairie, riparian, and woodland ecosystems of the upper Mississippi River valley and Great Lakes regions.
perseverance in the face of environmental calamity, the other about the futility of battling a hostile and unforgiving environment that should never have been settled and exploited in the first place. Cronon does not take sides with either of the texts, as his interest is not in which of the two tells the “correct” story of the Dust Bowl; instead he is more interested in making the point that the “cultural constructedness” of each narrative defines its outcomes and conclusions much more so than the reality of the Dust Bowl itself, since “narrative form has less to do with nature than with human discourse.”

This is an important point to make, as it serves as a reminder that all of the texts that will be discussed in the pages and chapters that follow share a similar origin to those examined by Cronon: namely, in spite of the perspective of the prairie taken by Washington Irving in *A Tour on the Prairies* or Aldo Leopold in *A Sand County Almanac*, neither can be separated from the “cultural constructions” that influenced their production. In other words, any narrative, regardless of time or place of production, is subject to influence by ideology and politics—most narratives are, in fact, ideological. This can be a hard pill to swallow in regard to certain environmental narratives, including *Walden* or *A Sand County Almanac*, that are often read as ideologically “pure.” Indeed, even prairie restoration itself—and the narratives written about it—is ideologically driven, a fact that will be considered in greater detail later in this study.

The two texts in question are Paul Bonnifield’s *The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt, and Depression* (1979) and Donald Worster’s *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (1979). Kerber makes a similar observation in her reading of Canadian prairie literature, finding “two dominant plots by which Western Europeans… have attempted to frame the relationship between humans and nature,” the first an “Edenic recovery narrative,” the second a “downward slide from Eden.” Kerber, *Writing in Dust*, 2-3.


For now it will suffice to say that one of the most overt instances of ideology appearing in writing about prairie restoration is the language used in some texts, including Connie Mutel’s *The Emerald Horizon*, to discuss nonnative plants and invasive species. Take, for example, Mutel’s observation that, “A small number of exotic species have taken advantage of this situation and become invasive. Exploding in number and intensifying in vigor, invasives spread like a cancerous growth far beyond the site of introduction.” Mutel, *The Emerald Horizon*, 82.
As an example of environmental discourse that is as attentive to the methods and mediums through which that discourse takes place as it is to the environmental issues at stake, the work that Cronon undertakes in “A Place for Stories” is paradigmatic of the unique contribution that the humanities—as distinguished from the sciences or law or activism—can make to the larger aims of environmentalism. Furthermore, though a historian by trade, Cronon’s work bridges a gap between the humanities and the sciences by engaging in the discourse of cultural geography, a field that looks to culturally oriented issues like race, gender, religion, and education to help explain geographic phenomena like population shifts, mass migrations, and the privatization of the public sphere. For instance, one of the main issues that cultural geography takes into consideration is access—as in, who has the ability to live in or travel to a certain place, or how certain information about a place is disseminated and by whom, or even whose stories about a given place are deemed authentic. Speaking to these issues as they pertain to his analysis of Dust Bowl narratives, Cronon argues:

By writing stories about environmental change, we divide the causal relationships of an ecosystem with a rhetorical razor that defines included and excluded, relevant and irrelevant, empowered and disempowered. In the act of separating story from non-story, we wield the most powerful yet dangerous tool of the narrative form. It is a commonplace of modern literary theory that the very authority with which narrative presents its vision of reality is achieved by obscuring large portions of that reality. Narrative succeeds to the extent that it hides the discontinuities, ellipses, and contradictory experiences that would undermine the intended meaning of its story. Whatever its overt purpose, it cannot avoid a covert exercise of power: it inevitably sanctions some voices while silencing others. A powerful narrative reconstructs common sense to make the contingent seem determined and the artificial seem natural.62

Cronon’s main point of emphasis in this long passage has mostly to do with power. In regard to narrative, power is typically granted to the storyteller, who decides what is “included and excluded” in the particular version of the story told. In regard to place, Barbara Eckstein makes a similar observation when she argues: “Most storytelling—arguably all storytelling—is about setting community boundaries, including some audience members within its territory and excluding others.” Barbara Eckstein, “Making Space: Stories in the Practice of Planning,” in Story and Sustainability: Planning, Practice, and Possibility for American Cities, eds. Barbara Eckstein and James Throgmorton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 13.

decisions about inclusion and exclusion are likewise disproportionately split between the “empowered and disempowered.” Taken together, it is easy to see how a situation can arise in which the empowered placeholder and the empowered storyteller are one in the same. In this situation, the only history of a place that is acknowledged is the one told by the dominant culture. Such is the story of the prairies, where the most recognizable narrative, as Leopold observed at the opening of this chapter, is that of “a flat place once dotted with covered wagons.” There are no doubt countless “discontinuities, ellipses, and contradictory experiences” silenced by the narrative of the “vanishing prairie,” and those are precisely the sort of counternarratives that my work in the coming pages will seek to uncover.

Dominant ideologies, and the empowered who maintain them, are also able to pose on the landscape a “moral geography,” in which decisions are made regarding “the idea that certain people, things and practices belong in certain spaces, places and landscapes and not in others.” Exac̄tly who gets to make decisions about belonging and not belonging obviously has much to do with power and ideology, as Cronon shows above. The cultural geographer Tim Cresswell elaborates upon these issues further, asserting: “Central… is the role of power in constituting the relationship between geography on the ground and the practices of social groups and individuals. Central also is the role of the non-compliant in disturbing these taken-for-granted relationships and opening them up to question.” This back-and-forth between the empowered and disempowered, or “non-compliant,” allows Cresswell to draw the conclusion that, “Moral geographies… are ideological geographies.” Offering further nuance to this concept is David M. Smith, who writes that “the creation of landscapes, locations and places, as

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64 Ibid., 128.
65 Ibid., 128.
well as their interpretation, are intrinsically moral projects: imposing order or ugliness on the natural landscape, locating to an economic or social purpose, or imbuing particular places with value according to what they represent.  It is thus possible to enact a moral reading on virtually any place or landscape, the prairie included. The decision to cast the grassland environments of the North American prairie as open, empty, desolate space has a number of moral and ideological consequences, not least of which is the ease with which one can remove what clearly does not belong—certainly indigenous human populations but also native flora and fauna, like bluestem and bison.

Perhaps the most important way to think about moral geography—and the approach that will be embodied in my argument—takes account of what anthropologist Keith Basso terms “place-making.” This is an endeavor undertaken by all cultures, Basso argues, and includes everything from acts of naming (mountains, rivers, cities, streets) to acts of commemoration (by carving in a tree or building monuments) to acts of consecration (sprinkling with holy water or building a place of worship). Yet acts of place-making, as an endorsement of one narrative of a place over another, are influenced by power and ideology as well, as Basso notes:

What is remembered about a particular place—including, prominently, verbal and visual accounts of what has transpired there—guides and constrains how it will be imagined by delimiting a field of workable possibilities. These possibilities are exploited by acts of conjecture and speculation which build upon them and go beyond them to create possibilities of a new and original sort, thus producing a fresh and expanded picture of how things might have been. Essentially, then, instances of place-making consist in an adventitious flesheing out of historical material that culminates in a posited state of affairs, a particular universe of objects and events—in short, a place-world—wherein portions of the past are brought into being.  

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67 Keith H. Basso, Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 5-6, his emphasis. As the title implies, the focus of Basso’s work is on the Cibecue reservation in east-central Arizona; however, the more general commentary that opens his text is applicable to place-making that occurs within any cultural and in any part of the world.
In other words, any manifestation of place-making that a culture undertakes has a great deal more at stake than simple acts of naming or commemoration. The experiences of those included within, or excluded from, these “place-worlds” are unavoidably shaped by the various processes and results of place-making that have already taken place and are continuously being reinterpreted and revised. As Basso goes on to note, “place-making is a way of constructing history itself, or inventing it, or fashioning novel versions of ‘what happened here.’” In this sense, the place-making that “is remembered” is almost exclusively the privilege of the empowered. Moreover, Basso’s concept of place-making has clear resonance with the intersections of ecology and culture that I explore in this study. In particular, the telling of stories and writing of texts are themselves manifestations of place-making. Narrative as a form of place-making can go a long way toward influencing the way a given place is interpreted and interacted with; these narratives can also stifle, erode, or destroy the place-making endeavors of others operating in the same place. The trope of the “vanishing prairie” is one manifestation of Euro-American place-making that has significantly influenced both the cultural interpretation of the prairie and its physical ecology. It is a form of place-making—as an extension of ideologies of homogeneity, uniformity, and monoculturalism—that has imposed a moral geography upon the prairie.

The most severe consequence of narratives that employ the “vanishing prairie” motif is the creation of a sense of “placelessness.” As the epigraph from John Berger that opens this chapter insinuates, achieving a state of placelessness certainly has its proponents. Since places, and subsequent acts of place-making, are infused with limitless social, cultural, ethical, moral, political, and ideological complexities, simply becoming placeless—disappearing into the suburbs, for example—can be perceived as a solution to the challenges of being “placed.” As Berger is well aware, however, placelessness is in

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68 Ibid., 6.
fact an illusion. Yet the consequentiality of this illusion is easily manifested in a disregard for all places, which Ammons identifies as a “human disconnect from and disrespect for the earth—the much-vaunted Western ideology of endless, unlimited, burgeoning capitalism, now riding high globally, an ethic of constant consumption, advance, and accumulation—that fattens a minuscule portion of the earth’s people while it starves the vast majority, destroys entire ecosystems, burns a hole in the ozone, and drives species into extinction.”\(^\text{69}\) Moreover, the threat of placelessness constantly confronts very real places like Strub Prairie in Johnson County, IA. This remnant prairie, discussed in the opening pages of the prologue, is under constant threat of being swallowed up and made essentially invisible by the “useful” landscape features—cropland, major roads, recreation areas, golf courses—that surround it. Strub Prairie’s disappearance from the Iowa landscape would not result in any drastic ecological consequences, nor would it go much noticed by those living in closest proximity to it. Yet for Strub prairie to fall victim to the threat of placelessness, to become one more “lost landscape,” would mean that those fighting to preserve it, including myself, had not done enough to ensure that it is a presence, not an absence, in the American Midwest.

Returning to Leopold’s question that opened this chapter—“What is prairie?”—it turns out that the question is much more complex and much harder to answer than its simplicity lets on. On the one hand, the prairie is the native ecosystem of the North American midcontinent. On the other hand, the prairie is a place that reflects over ten millennia of human habitation. In the last two hundred years in particular, the prairie has

\(^{69}\) The full context of Berger’s quote, “I was placeless and so innocent” is a dreamlike state he envisions in a time before birth, in which he is also “unparticular,” “invulnerable,” and “happy.” This is a transient state for Berger, as he soon realizes that, “To be conceived [is] a call to come forward, to assume a form.” John Berger, And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 14.

been explored, settled, fought over, altered, degraded, ignored, and forgotten by a culture that is content to think of it as a “lost landscape,” if it is thought of at all. However, because this is a study ultimately about working toward the prairie’s recovery, it is also necessary to think of Leopold’s question in the future tense, as in “what does the prairie have the potential to be?” By making the prairie a presence in this book, I hope in part to give a positive response to that question and contribute to the healing of the prairie on the land—including small remnants like Strub Prairie—and in our collective environmental imagination.

In the chapters that follow I will offer a systematic analysis of how narratives of the cultural prairie can transition from its image as a “lost landscape” to an image of prairie survivance. This chapter has laid much of the groundwork for initiating a discourse on the role that language, narrative, and place-making can play in transforming physical landscapes, for better and for worse. The next two chapters will focus on the latter. Chapter two demonstrates that nineteenth-century Euro-American print culture, and the subsequent mass production of printed texts, contributed to the degradation of the ecological prairie by initiating a devaluation of the cultural prairie. In creating and perpetuating the trope of the “vanishing prairie,” writers like Washington Irving and George Catlin fostered an image of the prairie almost exclusively predicated upon its certain disappearance from the land, as Catlin puts it “to live only in books.” Of equal importance to the “vanishing prairie” motif itself, however, is the work that went into creating it. The self-consciousness that one finds in Euro-American travel narratives is a testament to the fact that the exploration and settlement of the prairies was an extremely textual endeavor. In other words, those like Irving and Catlin who traveled to the North American midcontinent in the years prior to large-scale homesteading and inhabitation often undertook their expeditions simply for the sake of writing about it. The production of travel literature from this region of North America, I will argue, is thus open to similar postcolonial critique as those narratives that emerged from the colonization of central
Africa and the Middle East. In each case, the production of knowledge—in the form of printed texts—is as much a motive for travel as the conquering of lands and the acquisition of resources.

Chapter three focuses on one specific manifestation of the “vanishing prairie” motif that had dire consequences for the prairie ecosystem, the bison hunt narrative. Central to this portion of my argument is Paul Virilio’s concept of the “aesthetics of disappearance,” which entails a critique of mainstream Western ideologies and their influences on art and literature, particularly those that envision a world continually in the process of disappearing. Though Virilio directs much of his critique at cinematic endeavors, his theory is more broadly applicable to any sort of narrative or storytelling that is enraptured by what he calls the “vulgarized violence of movement.” The travel narratives of the nineteenth-century American Midwest and West certainly meet these criteria, especially those that partake in the bison hunt narrative. The general story of the bison’s eradication from the prairie is well known—bison shot from train windows and so on—but the evolution of this narrative from the earliest accounts, including the Lewis and Clark journals, through the era of prairie tourism, exemplified by Irving and Catlin, and culminating with the explicitly militaristic accounts of George Armstrong Custer and “Buffalo Bill” Cody is a further illustration of the textuality of western expansion and settlement. I connect this genealogy of bison hunt narratives to a phenomenon Edward Said calls a “textual attitude,” wherein the material that one reads in a text, when repeated often enough, eventually defines the reality that one experiences. Thus when one writer gives a vividly detailed account of hunting and killing bison on the prairie, a precedent is set for later travelers and writers to the prairie, until no “authentic” prairie experience can transpire without the death of a bison, each account more dramatic and sensational than the last. This feedback loop of bison hunts and bison hunt narratives is among the most conspicuous ways that narrative negatively influenced prairie ecology in the age of exploration and settlement.
The fourth chapter marks a turn in my argument, away from the fatalistic images of the prairie as a “lost landscape” and toward more hopeful narratives of the prairie’s potential for recovery and restoration—what I am calling prairie survivance. Here I offer depictions of bison as a living, even spiritual, presence in writing by Luther Standing Bear, James Welch, N. Scott Momaday, and Mary Oliver. These writers challenge the inevitability of the bison’s—and the prairie’s by extension—demise by using the animal as a figure of survivance, not dominance. Thus Vizenor’s writing on survivance will serve as the cornerstone of this chapter, as will the ethical philosophy and narrative ethics of Emmanuel Levinas. Though Vizenor and Levinas come from very different backgrounds, both offer a similar way of challenging mainstream and hegemonic discourse, in large part by overturning the narrative of Western history that accepts only one version of seeing the world, what Vizenor calls “simulations of dominance” and Levinas refers to as the “totality.” Whereas the narratives discussed in chapter three embodied Virilio’s “vulgarized violence of movement,” Vizneor’s concept of transmotion—a type of movement across and through “imagined boundaries”—will be read alongside the narratives of Standing Bear, Momaday, Welch, and Oliver in order to show that the movement of the prairie is just as often emergent as it is recessive.

My argument concludes with a meditation on the “aesthetics of restoration”—a term that I have coined and owes a great deal to Vizenor’s “aesthetics of survivance.” My final chapter thus describes those narratives that not only make the prairie a presence, but advocate for its permanent return to the landscapes of the American Midwest. Because Aldo Leopold embodies this sort of narrative more than any other writer of the prairie his work serves as the focal point of the chapter, but the nonfiction of Paul Gruchow, the fiction of Annie Proulx, and the poetry of Linda Hogan all lend unique perspectives to the aesthetics of restoration. Before getting to their work, however, I will first offer a reconsideration of prairie aesthetics, or Midwestern aesthetics more generally, that currently tends toward simplified images of the picturesque or pastoral. In
order to truly embrace prairie aesthetics, I will argue, one must first come to terms with its simultaneous subtleties and complexities. The aesthetics of restoration, predicated in part on Leopold’s “land ethic,” has a strong ethical component and places considerable emphasis on healing. Working through writing about the prairie by Leopold, Gruchow, Proulx, and Hogan will serve as illustration of the theme of healing and give further definition to the aesthetics of restoration. Taken together, my work in these chapters is intended not only as a critique of damaging or harmful narratives of the prairie, but to demonstrate that there is a functional narrative discourse in which the prairie is a presence and which can make significant contributions to the restoration of the prairie in the American imagination and on the landscapes of the American Midwest.
CHAPTER 2

“TO LIVE ONLY IN BOOKS”: PLOTTING THE PRAIRIE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY TRAVEL NARRATIVES

...prairie grasses can only creep inches where roots in the dark soil reach out. A voice calling for help, “Let not the prairie grasses die. Keep a plot for memory, for nature.” Green, vivid prairie for remembrance! Remembrance of the morning of the world!

William Alfred Quayle, *The Prairie and the Sea*

Once the environment is understood to have reached its narrative conclusion as a wasteland, it can only be endured, rejected, or escaped.

*Jenny Kerber, Writing in Dust*

Anthropologist Keith Basso has argued that place-making both “guides and constrains how [a place] will be imagined by delimiting a field of workable possibilities,” an observation that I have extended to show how storytelling imposes a distinct moral geography upon a place.¹ This chapter will look at one significant manifestation of prairie place-making that appears throughout nineteenth-century Euro-American travel narratives: acts of “plotting.” The majority of the plotting that appears in nineteenth-century travel narratives constrained how the prairie was imagined by those reading these texts as they were published, and continues to constrain imaginations of the prairie today.² These “plotted” narratives, and the related phenomena of print culture and textual production that grew exponentially in the nineteenth century, will thus be read in part as an extension of state-sponsored ideology. Given my interest in narrative itself as a form of place-making, the conventional definition of the term “plot” as action or movement in

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² Since fictional works are not necessarily the focus of this chapter, one important work that will not be discussed at great length is James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Prairie* (1823). However, this work owes a great deal to some of the early nonfiction travel narratives that preceded it, a fact that Stephanie LeMenager acknowledges when she writes that “*The Prairie* reveals just how shallow the United States’ past in the West had been and how little government policy or public opinion about the desert West had changed from the era of Lewis and Clark to [Cooper’s] own time of writing.” Stephanie LeMenager, *Manifest and Other Destinies: Territorial Fictions of the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 39.
a story is of obvious significance. However, Peter Brooks has shown that the complexity of this word extends far beyond its more familiar usage. In *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (1982), for example, Brooks also makes some interesting claims about the narrative function of plot, particularly as it pertains to what he calls “design” and “intention.”

Though Brooks is mostly interested in Victorian and Modernist fiction, many of his assertions are more broadly applicable to any sort of narrative, including the travel narratives under consideration in this chapter and the next. For example, Brooks’s reading of “desire as a thematic instrumentality of plot” resonates in a number of ways with those texts produced during America’s exploration of the North American midcontinent:

> If plots seem frequently to be about investments of desire and the effort to bind and master intensive levels of energy, this corresponds on the one hand to narratives thematically oriented toward ambition, possession, mastery of the erotic object and of the world, and on the other hand to a certain experience of reading narrative, itself a process of reaching for possession and mastery.

Numerous corollaries arise between Brooks’s analysis in this passage and the body of travel literature written throughout the nineteenth century, many of which are driven by “ambition, possession, and mastery” in a general sense, as they depict a newly formed nation’s desire to explore recently acquired land, study it, and ultimately make some use of it. The texts themselves ought to be thought of as a manifestation of those desires, in large part because, as Ross Chambers has noted, “Narrative is intimately connected with the production of knowledge, and so with effects of power and desire.” Furthermore, the great technological advancements of this era—the railroad, steel plow, and printing press

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foremost among them—that went hand-in-hand with westward expansion are very much a reflection of “the effort to bind and master intensive levels of energy,” including the propulsion west itself. These advancements in travel and communication, the modernization of the printing press, and the institution of a large, educated readership combined to make textual production—and thus the work of plotting narratives—an essential component of any expedition. In other words, those reading the narratives of westward expansion were concomitant with the very same “possession and mastery” that these texts expressed.

Additionally, Brooks parses the multifaceted uses of “plot,” suggesting that the word “has its own semantic range, one that is interestingly broad and possibly instructive,” including in its application to the cultural documents that were produced in the exploration and settlement of the North American prairies. For instance, he notes that the first definition of “plot” given in the *American Heritage Dictionary* is “(a) A small piece of ground, generally used for a specific purpose. (b) A measured area of land; lot.” As it pertains to Euro-American place-making on the prairie, the work of surveying the land and dividing it into square mile plots is one obvious example of this use of the word. It is also this sense of the word plot that William Quayle uses in the first epigraph

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6 Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 11. It should be noted here that Scott Russell Sander’s collection of stories *Wilderness Plots* (New York: Morrow, 1983) uses this same definition as its epigraph; the stories in this collection recreate the settlement, and its subsequent conversion to agriculture, of the Ohio River Valley by Euro-Americans in the nineteenth century.


to this chapter, or again when he writes, “I have a plot of prairie kept for prairie’s sake; and no one can dig a plowshare into that sod.”9 In both cases, the word plot is a demarcation of order or confinement, perhaps even “delimiting,” that marks off a uniform patch of land. The second definition that Brooks quotes works in a similar manner, specifically: “A ground plan, as for a building; chart; diagram.”10 The third definition of plot that Brooks gives is the most familiar to studies of literature, as it is the meaning of the word that encompasses, “The series of events consisting of an outline of the action of a narrative or drama.”11 The fourth and final usage that Brooks notes is, “A secret plan to accomplish a hostile or illegal purpose; scheme.”12 A number of the authors of nineteenth-century travel narratives that will be examined closely in this chapter and the next make use of this sense of the word. Washington Irving writes in Astoria (1836) of an interpreter named Rose who devises a “plot… to rob and abandon his countrymen in the heart of the wilderness.”13 Likewise, George Armstrong Custer writes in My Life on the Plains (1876) of a “plot which had been formed by the malcontents to desert in a

9 Quayle, The Prairie and the Sea, 51.

10 Brooks, Reading for the Plot, 11. One might imagine that this sort of “plotting” went into the work of constructing sod houses by the earliest Euro-American settlers to the prairie, such as depicted in Cass G. Barns’s The Sod House (1930), in which he writes of “those who made their first homes in ‘dug outs’ and sod houses and subdued the prolific prairie land and converted it to the use of mankind.” Though Barns does not speak directly of “plotting” these houses, he nonetheless speaks at length of those early pioneers who both “laid the foundation” of both sod houses and the emergent pioneer settlements on the early Nebraska prairie. Cass G. Barns, The Sod House (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 23.

11 Brooks, Reading for the Plot, 12. Most of this chapter will be devoted to analysis of this meaning of the word as it applies to, and appears literally, in nineteenth-century travel literature, but it is interesting to note that this is the third of four definitions that Brooks uncovers in his parsing of the term.

12 Ibid., 12.

13 Washington Irving, Astoria (New York: Modern Library of America, 2004), 370. The concept of “plotting” a narrative as it regards this text will be considered in greater detail later in this chapter, along with Irving’s other narrative accounts of the prairie, A Tour on the Prairies (1835) and The Adventures of Captain Bonneville (1837).
In both examples, the authors use the term to describe a “scheme” perpetrated by individuals looking to desert their companions on the prairie, which double as scenes of action, or “plot points,” in their own narratives. Not only do these examples demonstrate the “schematic range” of the word plot, as well as the overlapping nature among the different definitions themselves, they also show that a general interest in acts of plotting were very much on the mind of those Euro-American authors who chronicled the expansion and settlement of the North American prairies.

Before delving too deeply into those later narratives in which acts of plotting are the most conspicuous, it is worth looking first at the best known instance of state-sponsored exploration of the North American midcontinent, Lewis and Clark’s Corps of Discovery. Though the written material that was produced during this expedition is less concerned with plotting a cohesive narrative, the individual members were nonetheless readily involved in making the journey a textual endeavor: Thomas Jefferson solidified the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and soon after commissioned the Corps of Discovery; Lewis and Clark set out in 1804 on their well-known expedition to the western United States, many members of the party compiling records and journaling observations as they traveled; upon returning in 1806, the first member to prepare his journal for publication was Patrick Gass, who published in the United States in 1807 and England in 1808. Thus it took a single year for the first accounts of this expedition, much celebrated throughout the nation, to reach a general readership in the United States. The material published by the members of the Corps of Discovery tends to offer a more balanced view

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14 George Armstrong Custer, *My Life on the Plains: Or, Personal Experiences with Indians*, ed. Edgar I. Stewart (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), 105. This text will be taken up in greater detail in chapter two, particularly as Custer “plots” the narrative accounts of his bison hunts on the prairie.

15 Oz Frankel has noted that Meriwether Lewis was less than pleased that his former sergeant was first to publish an account of the trip, quoting a March 14, 1807 *National Intelligencer* statement referring to Gass’s work as “spurious publications.” It was not until 1814 that the first edition of the journals composed by Lewis and Clark, heavily edited by Nicholas Biddle, was made available to the public. Oz Frankel, *States of Inquiry: Social Investigations and Print Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain and the United States* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 127.
of the prairie than later accounts, yet it is still possible to find in their travel narratives certain tropes that perpetuated a constraining image of the prairie, such as calling the North American midcontinent the “Great American Desert.” Gass’s early publication, for example, offers a description of the shortgrass prairie region in central Montana, near what is now the Upper Missouri Breaks National Monument, as “a country which presents little to our view, but scenes of barrenness and desolation,” which he then goes on to refer to as “the Sterile desert.” Clark’s own observations are equally bleak, as he writes that “this Countrey may with propriety I think be termed the Deserts of America, as I do not Conceive any part can ever be Settled, as it is deficient in water, Timber & too Steep to be tilled.” In both of these examples, not only is the shortgrass prairie given the constraining label of “desert”—significant because they were among the first printed accounts of the region read by policy makers, civic leaders, and the general populace back East—these observations are obviously made with an eye toward potential Euro-American expansion and settlement in the region.

This is not to say that the depictions of the prairie in the Lewis and Clark journals are devoid of nuance. In these texts the region is often admired for its beauty, evaluated for its economic or agricultural potential, and treated skeptically or cautiously. Yet, even when the prairie is described in a more positive light, the depiction carries with it a hesitancy about the potential “usefulness” of the land. Clark’s journal entry from July 4,

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16 LeMenager, for one, attributes the coinage of this term to the early American explorer Zebulon Montgomery Pike, going on to call the term a “nineteenth-century fiction that nonetheless prophesied some of the United States’ unique failures of settlement and colonization,” Manifest and Other Destinies, 24.


18 The Lewis and Clark Journals: An American Epic of Discovery, ed. Gary E Moulton (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 137. All quotations from the Lewis and Clark journals will adhere to Moulton’s editorial principles, including errors in spelling, punctuation, and spacing, unless otherwise noted.
1804 is characteristic of such writing, when he describes a stretch of prairie in northeast Kansas:

nature appears to have exerted herself to butify the Senery by the variety of flours Delicately and highly flavored raised above the Grass, which Strikes & profumes the Sensation, and amuses the mind throws it into Conjectering the cause of So magnificent a Senerey in a Country thus Situated far removed from the Sivilised world to be enjoyed by nothing but the Buffalo Elk Deer & Bear in which it abounds & Savage Indians.19

Clark has a casual appreciation for this stretch of prairie, and yet the passage’s most lasting impression is that of a place that looks nice but nevertheless remains distinct from the “Sivilised” world of the eastern United States. Moreover, unlike the mountains the explorers sense looming ahead or even the river upon which they travel, the grasslands that spread out before them are “enjoyed by nothing.” Not seeing much in the way of economic potential in the prairie at this time, Clark appears content to leave the prairie to the “Buffalo Elk Deer & Bear… & Savage Indians” that currently occupy it. Prairie settlement is far from Clark’s mind; it is not yet a feasible place-making option. The prairie is useful primarily as a pathway to the new commercial centers that the Corps of Discovery can sense burgeoning on the west coast. As Stephanie LeMenager notes, “The Lewis and Clark expedition might have foretold U.S. expansion across the continent, but its ideas of expansion were informed by the old British model of maritime commerce.”20

In other words, though the writings from the Corps of Discovery serve as a far more benign act of place-making than the travel narratives that would emerge later in the century, Lewis and Clark certainly do not envision the prairies as a place for the American government to begin establishing itself as a world power.

The written material from the Corps of Discovery—especially the journals of Lewis and Clark—served as a touchstone for the travel narratives that would emerge in the years and decades following their expedition, not because they recounted the

19 The Lewis and Clark Journals, 21.
20 LeMenager, Manifest and Other Destinies, 40.
experiences of the first Euro-Americans to travel through the prairies, but because of their inextricable connection to the apparatus of the state. The role that the United States government played in the publication of these earliest accounts of the prairie is of great importance to the argument that follows, since the government’s actions were often motivated by an image of the prairie as an obstacle to be overcome or even a threat that needed to be eradicated—what Jenny Kerber calls the “idea of the prairies as a region unable to coexist with the transformative forces of modernity,” a further extension of the “kinds of stories that have shaped invader-settler thinking about the prairie region.”21 This fact is another part of what makes narratives of the prairie’s exploration and settlement so unique among other North American ecosystems, for the movement of Euro-Americans onto the prairie coincided not only with the rise of print culture in America, but also with the national government’s intervention in the growth and progress of the publication industry. This is precisely the argument of Oz Frankel’s States of Inquiry (2006), which asserts that “[the government] engaged in unprecedented scientific, literary, and aesthetic documentation of the country, its social circumstances, economy, and history as well as its natural environment… In other words, official reportage facilitated the representation of the centralized, modern state to its publics and, in turn, the representation of the nation by (and to) the government itself.”22 Jefferson’s commissioning of the Corps of Discovery stands as one of the first real forays into the simultaneous documentation of the newly acquired continent’s size, scope, and natural resources, alongside the desire to make that documentation available to a wide reading audience.

Frankel terms this nineteenth-century phenomenon “print statism,” an idea derived from Benedict Anderson’s concept of “print capitalism” in Imagined

21 Kerber, Writing in Dust, 4, 9.

22 Frankel, States of Inquiry, 1-2.
Print statism, for Frankel, encompasses the often heavy-handed role the national government played in the reading habits of its constituents. “The state interjected itself into the literary marketplace,” Frankel argues, “by distributing and even selling documents and by paying attention to the reading habits of its citizens. In this regard, print capitalism often served as a template for the manner in which print statism circulated texts in society.” This is not to say that there were not privately funded accounts of nineteenth-century expansionism, but that the government’s role in legitimizing those accounts that best served its interest certainly influenced readership patterns and textual consumption, not to mention public perception more generally. Print statism also likely influenced evolving tastes in specific genres, which further gave shape to the newly empowered literary marketplace of nineteenth-century America. As Frankel notes, “By the mid-nineteenth century, the state itself became a cultural force, producing official literature that, in turn, shaped genres of fiction and nonfiction… It was not a coincidence that the federal government’s accelerated production of books and reports occurred during the mid-1840s through the late 1850s, which historian William Charvart labeled ‘America’s first great literary boom.’” Moreover, few types of writing were more popular than the travel narrative, a fact no doubt accounted for by what Diane Quantic calls “westering myths,” which depicted the prairie as “the last expanse of free land, the last hope for the American dream of democratic utopia… Told and retold, these myths of the westward course of empire became self-fulfilling prophesies.”

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23 Anderson’s use of this term pertains mainly to the commodification of printed texts, to the extent that print capitalism “made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways.” Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1992), 36.


25 Ibid., 30-31.

26 Quantic, *The Nature of the Place*, xviii.
Frankel uses a number of examples from the mid-nineteenth century to solidify his arguments about the state’s role in producing textual documents of American expansion and settlement, but John C. Frémont’s expeditions to California in the 1840s receive the most attention and analysis. For his purposes, a work like Frémont’s *The Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains, Oregon, and California* (1845)—which has a complex publication history, received a great deal of congressional attention, and inspired numerous similar works by explorers looking to mimic Frémont’s success—allows Frankel to demonstrate with reasonable transparency the degree to which the United States government wanted to get the word out, at home and abroad, about the nation’s topographical diversity and vast resources. Frémont’s publications, Frankel argues, are indicative of print statist’s role in the era immediately before the Civil War wherein “government support for expeditions, explorations, and comparable scientific enterprises amount to between one-fourth and one-third of the total federal budget.”

While Frankel’s attention to Frémont in *States of Inquiry* is certainly warranted, I would like to emphasize that the sort of print statist work that Frankel identifies in *The Exploring Expedition* had been taking place since the publications by the Corps of Discovery and continued unabated throughout the 1820s and 1830s, in texts by Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, Edwin James, Washington Irving, and George Catlin, to name a few. Nevertheless, Frankel’s argument that “Frémont’s early reports became templates for the expeditions of the next two decades,” supports a main argument of this chapter: namely,

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27 Frémont isn’t the only example considered by Frankel, as the travel writing of Charles Wilke and the surveyors of the Pacific Railroad also play an important role. Frémont, however, is clearly paradigmatic in Frankel’s mind.

28 Frankel, *States of Inquiry*, 104.

29 Schoolcraft published two influential works prior to Frémont, *Journal of a Tour into the Interior of Missouri and Arkansas* (1821) and *Algic Researches, Comprising Inquiries Respecting the Mental Characteristics of the North American Indians* (1839); Edwin James two volume *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains*… was published in 1821-1822; Irving published three works set in this region prior to Frémont, but of most interest here is *A Tour of the Prairies* (1835); and Catlin’s work of most interest is his *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians* (1841); the latter two will be considered in greater detail in this chapter and the next.
that authors of later travel narratives used the work of their predecessors as “templates” for their own accounts, further perpetuating constraining images, like the Great American Desert, and plot lines, like the bison hunts to be explored in chapter three.  

Furthermore, some recognition needs to be given to the role that print culture and print statism played on the prairie specifically. Though Frankel’s chapter on Frémont is expressly interested in the documentation of the trans-Mississippi West, he focuses almost exclusively on Frémont’s experiences in the Mountain West and beyond. The area falling between the Mississippi and the Rockies is essentially passed over with comments like, “In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, much of the West was perceived via the trails that cut through it. Together with the appended maps, detailed descriptions of western routes rendered reconnaissance and exploration narratives doubly useful as guidebooks for prospective emigrants en route to the Pacific coast.”

In this statement Frankel echoes the tone of the Lewis and Clark journals—among other early travel narratives—that the literature documenting the North American midcontinent was primarily useful for showing the way through, as if there was no reason to stop between the Mississippi and the Pacific, or at least the Rockies. Likewise, Frankel’s own attention does not dwell on the midcontinent, but looks instead to Frémont and later publications that chronicle journeys to the mountains, the Pacific coast, and even the Arctic.  

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30 Frankel, States of Inquiry, 108. The use of early travel narratives as templates for later writing was not limited to nonfiction, as many prominent poetic works and fictional texts made use of earlier travel accounts as well. Schoolcraft and James, for example, influenced two extremely important literary texts of the nineteenth century: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s Song of Hiawatha (1855) and James Fenimore Cooper’s The Prairie (1827), respectively.

31 Frankel, States of Inquiry, 106.

32 This despite the fact that Frémont himself devotes considerable space to his time spent in the region between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains. For example, while traveling through the prairies of what is now Kansas, Frémont stops to describe a number of native prairie plants, including asclepias tuberosa (butterfly milkweed), today one of the most prized plants found in remnants and included in restorations. John Charles Frémont et al, Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842: and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843-44 (Washington, D.C.: Gales and Seaton, Printers, 1845), 14.
unfortunate, as it misses a good opportunity to account for the role of publication and print culture on the prairie regions of North America.

The absence of book history studies and print culture analyses of the nineteenth-century American Midwest is a vexing problem found throughout the entire field. For example, Jen A. Huntley-Smith’s contribution to the encyclopedic *Perspectives on American Book History* (2002) is charged with addressing—and providing cultural documentation of—“Print Cultures in the American West.” By and large Huntley-Smith’s work for this volume offers worthwhile insight and analysis of the evolution of print culture west of the Mississippi. For example, she observes that certain texts had an especially important role in shaping the people and the land of the West, writing: “Print culture in the American west was not only a feature of the institutions spread by settlers, but also an essential vehicle for their efforts to assert power over a cultural and physical landscape marked by diversity.”33 Though not stating it outright, Huntley-Smith takes steps to argue that textuality intensified the ideological processes of assimilation and homogenization that contributed so significantly to altering the ecological and cultural prairie. Her commentary on the rise of print in the western United States never gets this far, however. Like Frankel, Huntley-Smith’s coverage of this important topic is primarily interested in print culture as it existed west of the Rocky Mountains and along the Pacific Coast, California in particular. Again, she leaves the reader with the false impression that, like the explorers whose work is often being discussed, the explosion of printed texts that were disseminated throughout the country during the middle portion of the nineteenth century completely passed the midcontinent by.34 That this obviously was not the case is a central part of my argument in the rest of this chapter.


34 This assertion is verified in part by Nathaniel Lewis’s observation, “That literature (by any definition) thrived in the early West is beyond dispute, although literary history often overlooks the prolific output,” though Lewis himself only dwells briefly in what would be considered the American Midwest, giving some
Despite the lack of critical documentation of print statist activities in the nineteenth-century American Midwest, an argument can be made that conspicuously plotted narratives were among the most pervasive place-making strategies employed by Euro-American writers visiting the prairies, beginning with the Corps of Discovery. Perhaps the clearest indication of the importance of print culture, and print statism specifically, to nineteenth-century travel narratives set in the North American midcontinent is the frequent self-consciousness, or textual self-awareness, with which certain authors went about writing, publishing, and promoting their texts. Frankel describes this as a “heightened sense of authorship” that emerged as more and more explorers wrote about their travels—or writers went on explorations for the purpose of writing about it—which created “incessant expressions of subjectivity in expedition narratives, no less than the explicit authorial ambitions of explorers.”

Speaking more generally of the growing self-awareness of authors throughout the nineteenth century, Richard Brodhead adds:

Writing always takes place within some complete concrete cultural situation, a situation that surrounds it with some particular landscape of institutional structures, affiliates it with some particular group from among the array of contemporary groupings, and installs it some group-based world of understandings, practices, and values… in any instance, writing orients itself in or against some understanding of what writing is, does, and is good for that is culturally composed and derived.

Making the extension from Brodhead to Frankel, an argument can be made that among the more prominent “cultural situations” that those composing travel narratives are writing within or toward are the multivalent pressures of westward expansion, a

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attention to Garland, Cather, and other canonical Midwesterners without much reflection on the evolution of print culture in the region. Nathaniel Lewis, *Unsettling the Literary West: Authenticity and Authorship* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 22.

35 Frankel, *States of Inquiry*, 133.

36 Richard Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 8. As with Brooks, Brodhead does not focus much attention on the travel literature that was central to the textual production of the nineteenth century; nevertheless, his observations are wholly applicable to this genre of writing as well, in that the diversity of texts he takes up allows for some flexibility in his critique.
burgeoning print culture, and the ideological imprint of print statism. Therefore it makes sense that those writing about their experiences in the prairie regions of the central United States would feel compelled to speak directly of their own involvement not just in the explorations of which they were a part—which predominate these texts—but the act of writing as well. As a result, some of the most prominent early examples of travel writing about the American Midwest include detailed descriptions and self-conscious reflections of the work that went into producing those texts, making it even more evident that the exploration and settlement of the prairies was largely a textual endeavor.

Following several decades of explorations by soldiers and other agents of the American government, a number of artists, writers, and other intellectuals began making tours to the regions west of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. In spite of the more personalized nature of these expeditions, the work they produced nonetheless tended to reinforce the print statist agendas of state-sponsored expeditions like that of Frémont, none more so than the travel writing of Washington Irving and George Catlin, who toured different regions of the prairie at roughly the same time in the early 1830s. Irving traveled a more southerly route to the mixed- and shortgrass prairies of Kansas and Oklahoma, while Catlin began his much longer forays along the western edge of the tallgrass prairie near the Missouri River before following a northerly route to the mixed- and shortgrass prairies of the Dakotas and Montana. Interestingly, both acknowledged a desire to see this region of the United States before the indigenous plants, animals, and people vanished from the continent; that each felt this sentiment in the early 1830s, well before large-scale transformation of the prairies began in earnest, is perhaps the most

37 For more on the emerging tourist culture and economy in the nineteenth century, certainly not unrelated to the burgeoning print culture of most interest to this chapter, see John F. Sears, *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), especially chapter seven, “Yellowstone and ‘The Wild West’.”
striking similarity of all. In many ways these two writers are paradigmatic of the motif of the “vanishing prairie,” a discursive formation central to this chapter and the next.

Frankel’s observation that the textual production of travel accounts in the early nineteenth century often included a “race between exploration leaders and their underlings for the printing press,” can be extended to the bourgeois artists / tourists seeking to publish later in the century, as part of the self-conscious nature of these travel narratives is an anxiety over who got to print first. For example, Catlin writes in the introductory note to the first volume of his *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of North American Indians* (1841) that, “I was undoubtedly the first artist who ever set out upon such a work, designing to carry his canvass to the Rocky Mountains; and a considerable part of the following Letters were written and published in New York Papers, as early as the years 1832 and 1833; long before the Tours of Washington Irving; and several others whose interesting narratives are before the world.” Catlin’s allusion to the “New York Papers” that printed some of the letters comprising the body of *Letters and Notes* reaffirms Frankel’s assertion that many of those writing about their expeditions felt a need to be in print before their compatriots or competitors, that doing so in some way validated a sense of primacy regarding their own accounts of the region. The work of George Catlin presents an especially interesting case among nineteenth-century travel narratives, as the content of his early letters may be regarded as a sequel of sorts for the Lewis and Clark journals. For one, he followed a

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38 Roderick Frazier Nash gives some space to Catlin’s desire to experience and paint the prairies “before the advance of civilization obliterated it.” Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1967), 100. Likewise, Quantic notes that Irving expressed a desire to see the prairie “while still in a state of pristine wilderness… before they are driven beyond the reach of a civilized tourist.” Quantic, *The Nature of the Place*, 43.

39 George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians*, vol. 1 (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1973), 4. An example of Catlin’s printed correspondence can be found in the Tuesday, November 13, 1832 edition of the *Commercial Advertiser*, which features a reprint of a letter “From Our Correspondent,” meaning Catlin, who was writing from a Mandan village on the Upper Missouri River in August of 1832.
route up the Missouri River quite similar to that taken by the Corps of Discovery.
Second, it was William Clark himself that gave Catlin access to the destinations up the Missouri River, many of which were first documented in the journals of Lewis and Clark. Serving as Superintendent of Indian Affairs in St. Louis, Clark was functioning in an official state capacity, further strengthening the tie between Catlin’s pseudo-ethnography—much of the language tying his paintings to his written observations expresses a desire to sound scientific—and the print statist desires of the United States government. Catlin was not alone in looking to ground the work of the Corps of Discovery as validation of his own prairie travel and writing. Washington Irving also met with Clark in St. Louis two years later in the early stages of his own expedition to the prairies.

The first letter that Catlin includes in the first volume of Letter and Notes serves as an introduction to the whole book, as was customary in nineteenth century travel literature. This introductory note is explicitly self-consciousness about the very nature of print culture and textual production into which Catlin’s book was entering, far more so than any self-consciousness that he exhibits regarding his presence as a bourgeois tourist on the prairie. For instance, by the fourth paragraph of this opening letter Catlin writes, “Amidst the multiplicity of books which are, in this enlightened age, flooding the world, I feel it my duty, as early as possible, to beg pardon for making a book at all; and in the next (if my readers should become so much interested in my narrations, as to censure me for the brevity of the work) to take some considerable credit for not having trespassed too

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40 Marjorie Halpin elaborates in some detail on the nature of the relationship between Catlin and Clark, who met in 1830, noting that, “Besides answer his many eager questions, [Clark] allowed Catlin to set up an easel in his headquarters to paint the Indians who came there from the surrounding country on tribal business,” before pointing out that Clark took Catlin on a trips up the Mississippi and Kansas Rivers, and setting him up with contacts for his later Missouri River expeditions. Marjorie Halpin, “Introduction,” Letter and Notes, ix.

41 As Andrew Burstein shows, Irving and Clark appear to have had a far less prolonged interaction than Catlin and Clark, the former spending an evening at the famous explorer’s home during a brief stay in St. Louis. Andrew Burstein, The Original Knickerbocker: The Life of Washington Irving (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 261.
long upon their time and patience.” This comment is curious for several reasons, not least of which is Catlin’s desire to distance himself from the cultural work of western exploration, despite the fact that, as LeMenager points out, he “portrayed the Far West as a place of self-interested movement.” Catlin’s comment is also inconsistent with his initial rationalizing of the expedition in the first place, since he openly acknowledged his goal of documenting the region and its indigenous inhabitants, either through painting or writing, before it disappeared. Catlin unquestionably felt this way about the Native American individuals and communities that he painted and wrote about while on his expedition, making frequent assertions about “lending a hand to a dying nation,” while simultaneously advocating for the worthiness of native life and culture. At the same time, it is ironic that he apologizes to his Euro-American readership for “trespassing” on their “time and patience,” but gives no attention to his “trespassing” on the established home grounds of the Native American communities he visits on his tour. Catlin’s competing claims of apology and advocacy epitomize the uncertainty with which early chroniclers of prairie life and culture often wrote about the region and their own work.

One thing of which Catlin was certain, however, was that the world he was witnessing as he explored the middle and upper Missouri River regions would not be around for long. At one point in his introduction he makes the confident statement that, “Black and blue cloth and civilization are destined, not only to veil, but to obliterate the grace and beauty of Nature”; while these words do not acknowledge his own complicity in this “obliteration,” they do make explicit his goal of becoming the place’s “historian” nevertheless. Much later in the work Catlin appears to have a change of heart regarding the role of his, or any, book in preserving the people and places he is certain are on the

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42 Catlin, Letters and Notes, 1.

43 LeMenager, Manifest and Other Destinies, 85.

44 Catlin, Letters and Notes, 3.

45 Ibid., 2.
decline. The best example of this attitude in Catlin’s writing comes in his reflection on the slaughter of the bison, a passage that can be applied to his thoughts on the whole region—its indigenous plants, animals, and people—more generally:

> These noble animals [bison] of the ox species, and which have been so well described in our books on Natural History, are a subject of curious interest and great importance in this vast wilderness; rendered peculiarly so at this time, like the history of the poor savage; and from the same consideration, that they are rapidly wasting away at the approach of civilized man—and like him and his character, in a very few years, to live only in books or on canvass.46

This passage shares William Quayle’s view of the prairie that served as this chapter’s epigraph, “Let not the prairie grasses die. Keep a plot for memory, for nature.” In both, there is an assumption that part, if not all, of the prairie is inevitably at risk of disappearing. But Catlin goes further. More than Quayle, his belief that the bison are destined “to live only in books” underscores the centrality of plot and print statism to his project. On the one hand, Catlin’s statement makes full acknowledgement of the power and influence of the printed medium, since books will preserve what the natural world cannot; on the other, it fully accepts the disappearance of the prairie as a given, without any acknowledgement of the author’s, or the book’s, own complicity in that disappearance. In fact, for Catlin, the presence of bison or Native Americans or the entire prairie in books makes their disappearance from the land far more acceptable. Thus Catlin’s ideas in this passage are the essence of what I have been calling the motif of the “vanishing prairie.”

Before moving on to the work of Washington Irving—who exemplifies print statist ideologies in his western narratives to an even greater degree than Catlin and for whom exploration of the prairies was steeped even further in print culture and textual

46 Ibid., 247. Obviously this study is much more concerned with the “book” portion of this quote, rather than the painted “canvass” to which Catlin includes as well. This is not to reduce the importance of painting as an important component of the cultural prairie; chapter two will address the role of painting—and film and photography—in greater detail.

47 Quayle, The Prairie and the Sea, 52.
production—it is worth exploring the connection between the “vanishing prairie,” a term introduced early in this study, and the “vanishing Indian,” a stereotype and misperception about the fate of North America’s indigenous human populations that was in use before Catlin and Irving began their expeditions. Obviously, the use of the term “vanishing prairie” is a play on the earlier term, exposing a similar fixation on the inevitability of the prairie ecosystem’s disappearance. Moreover, the “vanishing prairie” as a motif came to life within essentially the same bourgeois Euro-American cultures that took so much stock in the “vanishing Indian.” Gerald Vizenor, whose idea of survivance is a cornerstone of the argument I am making throughout this study, has written on the cultural implications of the “vanishing Indian,” asserting that, “Modernity beset the indigéne with cultural alternations, and the simulations of the native became the vanishing Indian… a theme of absence, cultural dominance, and aesthetic victimry.”

While the human consequences of the “vanishing Indian” motif cannot be understated, it is possible to envision how the prairie was subjected to very much the same set of cultural and aesthetic circumstances that Vizenor elucidates in regard to the “vanishing Indian.” One needs to look no further than the passage by Catlin quoted above as evidence of the “aesthetic victimry” of the prairie, via the bison’s fate “to live only in books,” that ties these two concepts together.

Furthermore, just as I am making the case that the creation of the “vanishing prairie” motif was largely a textual enterprise, so too have others shown that the “vanishing Indian” was brought to life and perpetuated through a variety of textual mediums. Carolyn Merchant, for one, points out that the trope of the “vanishing Indian” was popular particularly among artists and writers visiting the trans-Mississippi West, who initiated in turn a “growing perception that Indians were doomed.”

48 Vizenor, Manifest Manners, 97.

John M. Coward discusses the perpetuation of this term in the newsprint of the nineteenth century, noting that, “By promoting and repeating the idea of the vanishing Indian in print, the papers helped advance a way of thinking about Indians and their flawed character that helped make removal not only possible but absolutely necessary.” Taking aim at the “adult equivalent of the school readers, the literary magazines,” which reached their peak of popularity in the 1830s through 1860s, Lucy Maddox observes in *Removals: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Politics of Indian Affairs* (1991) that these serially distributed genres “began to publish more and more sentimental eulogies for the vanishing Indian.” Each of these examples draws a clear connection between the artistic / literary pursuits of the nineteenth-century educated elites and the trope of the “vanishing Indian.” Ironically, much of the “proof” that Native Americans were disappearing on the North American continent came from the pseudo-ethnography of Catlin and likeminded artists, writers, and historians—what Kerber labels “imperialist nostalgia”—the very people who then had a vested interest in popularizing and sustaining this motif back East. The same is true of the “vanishing prairie.”

Perhaps what is most striking about the idea of the “vanishing Indian,” and why it can be so readily transposed with the idea of the “vanishing prairie,” is both the speed at which it was popularized and the degree to which it pervaded nineteenth-century writing, policy, and even morality. Thus when Steve Conn writes that “[Indian extinction] was a conviction, rather than a prediction, and it was such a ubiquitous belief that it did not exist so much in the realm of empirical observation as in the world of unquestioned


51 Lucy Maddox, *Removals: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Politics of Indian Affairs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 31. Also worth consideration is Maddox’s observations of the “peculiarly unitarian character of American new-nation ideology,” which prevented American citizens from embracing Native American nationhood, but more generally prohibited the legitimacy of any narrative of Western progress other than the one undertaken by Euro-American explorers and settlers (10).

52 Kerber, *Writing in Dust*, 90.
assumption,” one easily gets a sense of how one misconception could have so much ill effect on the social, cultural, and political interactions between Euro-Americans and Native Americans. Finally, the ideological implications of the “vanishing Indian” are worth noting as well. Philip Deloria has characterized the role of “propagandists” working within the parameters of Andrew Jackson’s policies of removal attempting to popularize this idea, as a process by which “popular American imagery began to play on earlier symbolic linkages between Indians and the past, and these images eventually produced the full-blown ideology of the vanishing Indian, which proclaimed it foreordained that less advanced societies should disappear in the presence of those more advanced.” Again, without reducing the human implications of Jackson’s removal policies, it is clear that the trope of the “vanishing prairie” went hand-in-hand with the “vanishing Indian” because so many of the policies and the practices underlying these discourses were the same, especially those that encouraged the eradication of anything deemed inconsequential, useless, or resistant to the forward movement of Western progress, expansion, and settlement.

Washington Irving’s writing on the prairie epitomizes the convergence of the motifs of the “vanishing Indian” and the “vanishing prairie” in a series of print statist texts that embody so much of what is at stake in this chapter. Additionally, even more

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53 Steve Conn, *History’s Shadow: Native Americans and Historical Consciousness in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 31. The ubiquity of the “vanishing Indian” is particularly noteworthy, as Conn points out, given his later assertion that, “Indians were everywhere when the American nation was born, present at some of the most critical moments of revolution and founding” (35).

54 Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 64. Deloria’s work as a whole is among the most thorough in its exploration of the trope or image of the “vanishing Indian.” Chapter three, “Literary Indians and Ethnographic Objects” in particular raises a number of relevant and original points, including the concept of “salvage ethnography,” which one could argue is very much the project of Catlin, Irving, and other Euro-American authors who set out to chronicle the prairie and its native human inhabitants.

55 Even though Irving’s three western narratives were published several years prior to the publication of Catlin’s *Letters and Notes*, Catlin technically made it to print first, demonstrated in part by his own self reference to the “New York papers” that published his letters in the early 1830s. Therefore,
than Catlin, a number of events in Irving’s life set him up to be a figure of extreme importance in understanding the intersection of print culture, place-making, and politics on the prairies of the North American midcontinent. The trajectory of his life coincided with numerous events and occurrences of the early and middle nineteenth century that would go on to shape life and policy in the American Midwest and West. Though perhaps best known as America’s first legitimate literary celebrity, author of such works as “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (1820) and “Rip van Winkle” (1820), Irving also displayed a lifelong wanderlust. One critic has even compared him to his most famous creation, writing that “like Rip van Winkle, [Irving] was uncertain of his place in the new Jacksonian order.”

Irving’s early travels around the Northeast, his midlife travels to Europe, and his brief visit to the trans-Mississippi West all gave shape to the fiction and history that he was best known for, in part because Irving kept consistent and detailed notes wherever he traveled. Moreover, the time of his travels to the prairie regions of the United States coincided with some of the most significant, and tragic, events in the relationship between Native Americans and the American government. Irving, who earlier in life had published a pro-Indian, revisionist essay on “Philip of Pokanoket,” remained mostly neutral, perhaps ambivalent, on the subjects of treaty breaking, removal, and the so-called “Indian wars.” In addition to meeting with William Clark at the outset of his western travels, Irving also made a visit to a recently captured Black Hawk, who had just led an unsuccessful war against the United States. Certainly few writers of

chronologically, Catlin has been placed ahead of Irving, despite the fact that Catlin’s work makes direct reference to Irving’s writing, not vice versa.

56 Quantic, *The Nature of the Place*, 43.

57 For a more complete discussion of this essay and Irving’s mostly ambivalent views on Jacksonian removal policy, see Burstein, *The Original Knickerbocker*, 257-259.

58 In a letter to his sister written just after his meeting with Black Hawk, Irving describes him as “an old man, upward of seventy, emaciated and enfeebled by the sufferings he has experienced, and by a touch of cholera.” He later goes on to note that he has trouble picking a side in these “feuds between the white and red man,” though his “sympathies go strongly with the latter.” *The Life and Letters of Washington Irving*, ed. Pierre M. Irving, vol. 3 (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1967), 37-38.
Irving’s time could speak with direct experience of interacting with so many important figures—including a chance encounter with his namesake, the first president, when he was six—that had played a role in shaping the nation to that point. 59

Yet the most important encounter that Irving had at the outset of his journey to the trans-Mississippi West took place as he traveled across Lake Erie to Detroit. Here he met Henry Levitt Ellsworth, a well-connected young man who had just been commissioned by President Jackson to evaluate the suitability of the area southwest of the Arkansas River for the relocation of Creeks and Cherokees from their home grounds in the Southeast. Irving quickly jumped at the opportunity to travel with Ellsworth, putting him at the epicenter of Jacksonian political endeavors aimed at overturning century-old treaties with indigenous communities now standing in the way of American expansionism. The expedition with Ellsworth that Irving joined was directly linked to the removal policies that would eventually become the Trail of Tears. 60 This connection to Ellsworth’s official government work links Irving to one of the major premises of print statism. As Frankel argues: “Indian policy, namely, the policy of removal west of the Mississippi, triggered national controversy that spawned reports and counterreports. The federal government accumulated information about the tribes within (and sometimes outside) its territorial confines and launched research projects into Indian history and culture.” 61 Thus, like Catlin, much of the immediate context of Irving’s writing from this trip to the North American midcontinent concerned the growing problem of the “Indian

59 This meeting is recounted in Burstein The Original Knickerbocker, 7-8.

60 Maddox offers a helpful discussion of the intersection between Native American removal policy and the burgeoning American literary community in Removals. Chapter four, “Points of Departure: Fuller, Thoreau, and Parkman,” is particularly relevant because Maddox addresses Francis Parkman’s The Oregon Trail (1849), a work that will be discussed briefly in the next chapter as it pertains to bison hunt narratives. Like Catlin and Irving, Maddox makes the case that Parkman’s expedition was a largely textual endeavor, as she notes that he went “to the prairie-wilderness with a pencil in one hand and a rifle in the other, ready to use the former on the poets’ Indians he has read about and the latter on the real Indians he encounters” (138).

61 Frankel, States of Inquiry, 8.
question” that was gaining steam throughout the country. Not that Irving, at least at the moment of his arrival on the prairie, was much concerned with some of these larger, looming questions. Instead, as LeMenager points out, he had other things on his mind, most especially his own reputation in the United States as a literary celebrity and man of leisure: “Irving leapt past what we might call ‘the old imperialism’ of Indian Removal and the larger project that came to be known as Manifest Destiny to embrace what has been called ‘the new imperialism’ of tourism.”62 Irving’s tourist identity plays an important role in A Tour on the Prairies in particular, because it enables a detachment and aloofness toward the very real social issues with which he is confronted but does not allow himself to be overly concerned by. Nurturing his literary persona as a detached observer took far greater precedence.

The importance of narrative and textual production to the exploration and settlement of the prairies—really the whole Midwest and West—is well illustrated by three works Irving wrote in the late 1830s: A Tour on the Prairies, Astoria, and The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, published in 1835, 1836, and 1837 respectively. These three works are, in some ways, the culmination of Irving’s experience as both writer and traveler in the preceding half century of his life. As Wayne R. Kime has noted, “They all exhibit a confident certainty of touch, an easy grace, and a resourcefulness that bespeak an artist at the height of his powers. Through his varied experience Irving had learned to gauge the potentialities of a given body of material and then to mold that material into an artistically and popularly satisfying product.” 63 Irving’s three travel narratives thus bear the mark of craftsmanship: they are carefully

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62 LeMenager, Manifest and Other Destinies, 76. Quantic reads much the same intent in A Tour on the Prairies, noting that along with nurturing his “literary celebrity,” Irving was also interested in becoming “reacquainted with his country and his countrymen.” Quantic, The Nature of the Place, 43.

constructed, despite an effort to seem more offhand and aloof, and work hard to depict a specific image of American exploration, travel, and trade west of the Mississippi River. More than that, all three narratives are all supremely conscious of their own authorship and entrance into the world of print culture of nineteenth-century America. Ralph M. Alderman asserts that these texts above all others in Irving’s oeuvre “represent his fortuitous use of American materials at a time when his countrymen were clamoring for a serious literary treatment of the West.”64 Contemporary reviews of these texts uphold these later critical reflections, with many reviewers taking special note of the craft that Irving put into all of his writing. For example, a statement in the July 1835 North American Review asserts that, “The American father, who can afford it, and does not buy a copy of Mr. Irving’s book [A Tour on the Prairies], does not deserve that his sons should prefer his fireside to the bar-room.”65 Similarly, an anonymous write-up of The Adventures of Captain Bonneville from the Monthly Review in June of 1837 observes: “As a literary production, every one may make himself sure that these volumes possess the ease and grace of style which Mr. Irving could not, if he would, throw aside; that they at the same time appear to furnish a specimen of the very prevalent practice of late years, viz, of book-making, is not less manifest.”66 Such reviews from Irving’s contemporaries affirm the influence of his authorial prowess, as well as the degree to which his work carried serious weight in the world of American print culture. Thus, when Donna Hagensick writes more recently that “these books are deemed largely responsible for


subsequent western migrations,” such commentary cannot be taken as hyperbole, nor can the importance of Irving as a place-maker of the prairies be ignored.\footnote{Donna Hagensick, “Irving: A Littérateur in Politics,” in \textit{Critical Essays on Washington Irving}, ed. Ralph M. Aderman (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Co., 1990), 185.}

Like Catlin’s \textit{Letters and Notes}, Irving begins \textit{A Tour on the Prairies} with a statement that seeks not only to introduce the content of the work but also to justify its existence, what Nathaniel Lewis calls Irving’s “authorial self-positioning.”\footnote{Lewis, \textit{Unsettling the Literary West}, 36. For Lewis, Irving serves as the “model” for authors writing on their western expeditions, particularly those whose “authorial self-positioning” takes place within a “subtle” introductory notice or preface.} As such, the tone of this introduction feels uncustomary for an author as well established as Irving. For instance, Irving feels compelled to reintroduce himself to the reader by quoting directly from his earlier work, the \textit{Sketch Book} (1820), before telling of the anxiety he felt returning from Europe and the need to prove his Americanness. From here, Irving writes as if he is reluctantly undertaking his task to write about his recent excursion to the North American midcontinent, stating: “Having, since my return to the United States, made a wide and varied tour, for the gratification of my curiosity, it has been supposed that I did it for the purpose of writing a book; and it has more than once been intimated in the papers, that such a work was actually in the press, containing scenes and sketches of the Far West.”\footnote{Washington Irving, \textit{A Tour on the Prairies} (New York: Library of America, 2004), 11. The analysis that follows for this work and Irving’s other western narratives is primarily a look at his self-conscious introductory notes. Chapter three will take up more fully the content of the narratives themselves.} The two paragraphs that follow this comment show Irving feigning surprise at such “expectations” from his readership, as it is something he has commonly met with “repugnance.” He goes on to state, however, that he wishes to satisfy the “desire of the public” and has “plucked a few leaves out of my memorandum book, containing a few month’s foray beyond the outposts of human habitation, into the wilderness of the Far West.”\footnote{Ibid., 11-12.} As Kime suggests, the existence of this “memorandum book” is enough to cast
doubt on Irving’s claims that he did not intend to publish a longer work based on his travels to the mixed- and shortgrass prairies of Kansas and Oklahoma, as the journal foretells Irving “no doubt anticipating some future use.”

The introductory note ends with Irving continuing to lower expectations for his readers, an action that nonetheless reveals an obsession with the value of the work’s narrative and his success in creating a readable plot. To this end Irving describes *A Tour on the Prairies* as “an episode, complete as far as it goes… It is a simple narrative of every day occurrences; such as happen to every one who travels the prairies. I have no wonders to describe, nor any moving accidents by flood or field to narrate,” before warning that those “who look for a marvelous or adventurous story at my hands” stand to be disappointed. Irving must be aware, however, that the content of his work is not of “every day occurrences,” because his audience is certainly not “every one who travels the prairies.” Instead, he is knowingly writing for an Eastern audience who will surely find in his work the “marvelous or adventurous” and hang on his every word. The consciously crafted encounters with Native Americans, the long passages devoted to lost companions, and especially the vivid recreations of bison hunts—the topic of chapter three—all unravel the image of *A Tour on the Prairies* that Irving creates in his introduction. As much as Irving tries to insist, the work is not a modest collection of mundane anecdotes, but rather a carefully plotted narrative of an outsider’s intrepid journey into dangerous terrain. Indeed, it is the conspicuous plotting that begins in the introductory note and continues throughout the whole text that makes *A Tour on the Prairies* such an interesting work to read in the context of both Frankel’s print statism and this study’s interest in the evolution (or devolution) of the cultural prairie. As Brooks asserts, it is “plotting,” the “dynamic aspect of narrative,” that “moves us forward as

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71 Kime, “The Author as Professional,” 239.

readers of the narrative text, that which makes us—like the heroes of the text often, and certainly like their authors—want and need plotting, seeking through the narrative text as it unfurls before us a precipitation of shape and meaning, some simulacrum of understanding of how meaning can be construed over and through time.”

Looking at the first of Irving’s three western narratives in this way, then, the image of the author as “hero” giving shape and meaning to the “desolate waste” of the prairies overwhelms his posture of feigned modesty to expose the real ideological purpose of the text.

True to the narrative form of a carefully plotted hero’s quest, the conclusion of Irving’s journeys in *A Tour on the Prairies* represents a transformative experience. Irving is transformed from cosmopolitan urbanite to expert of the unsettled regions of the midcontinent, a writer able to convey (or translate) both the mundane and extraordinary happenings of life on the prairie to the masses back home. Although nascent in *A Tour on the Prairies*, Irving’s confidence in his newfound expertise is actually overtly expressed in the next two works that he published, *Astoria* and *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville*. These two works are ostensibly biographical accounts of the eponymous explorers, their compatriots, and the lengthy expeditions that they led, neither of which Irving participated in. This does not stop Irving from adopting the tone and style of a participant or witness in both, a feature that might seem odd if not for the inclusion of an introductory note at the opening of each text greatly concerned with authorship, publication, and, of course, the creation of plot. LeMenager, for one, addresses these works as Irving’s “darker western histories” and sees in them “high drama.” In *Astoria* and *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville* Irving wrestles with the competing forces of “radical mobility, aggressive self-interest, and ethnic amalgamation,”

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73 Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 35.

74 The latter text’s original title was *The Rocky Mountains: Or, Scenes, Incidents, and Adventures in the Far West*. As an exercise in appealing to a wider readership, the less wordy title *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville* is also more transparent in terms of “plotting” a narrative that meets that readership’s expectations.
that he sees playing out among the different soldiers, trappers, hunters, and explorers that fill up the many pages of these latter two works. Superseding all of these, however, is Irving’s own “aggressive self-interest” in authorship and his role as preeminent chronicler of the American Midwest and West.

*Astoria* begins with a short introduction that briefly recounts the circumstances that enabled Irving to write this history of the western fur trade. Early in this introduction Irving is quick to note that his first meeting with John Jacob Astor took place “not long after my return from a tour upon the prairies of the far west.” This not-so-subtle reminder to the reader that Irving now embodies a certain expertise on this subject shows that his audience believed as well that “the West had to be *seen* to be textually represented.” After agreeing to write Astor’s history—with significant help condensing and culling material from his nephew Pierre—Irving recounts how he was able to piece together the journals of men “little versed in science” who kept sketchy details by borrowing “occasionally of collateral lights supplied by the published journals of other travelers who have visited the scenes described,” including those of Lewis and Clark (among others), upon whom Irving bestows a “general acknowledgement of aid received.” Irving goes on to alleviate any anxiety the reader might feel by a work of “somewhat disjointed nature,” concluding with the assurance that “the work, without any labored attempt at artificial construction, actually possesses much of that unity so much

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75 LeMenager, *Manifest and Other Destinies*, 79. She also argues that Irving’s text succeeds in conveying this “lawless interval” precisely where James Fenimore Cooper had failed, despite his best efforts, in *The Prairie*.

76 For more information on John Jacob Astor’s role in the western fur trade, see Eric Jay Dolin, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire: The Epic History of the Fur Trade in America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 189-222.


sought after in works of fiction, and considered so important to the interest of every
history. In other words, Irving the professional author—and recent western traveler—is able to plot the otherwise shapeless reminiscences of a group of fur traders, aided by what he has read in previously published accounts of the region. Nathaniel Lewis offers a nuanced account of Irving’s authorship, tracing the “layered” sources that contributed to Astoria’s production, noting that Irving “employed… Astor’s notes and files, Wilson Pierce Hunt’s journal, Robert Stuart’s journal, Henry Marie Brackenridge’s narrative, Jonathan Carver’s writing, and, of course, Biddle’s rewriting of the Lewis and Clark journals.” The result is the longest of Irving’s so-called “western narratives” that nonetheless manages, as he asserts in his introduction, to retain a cohesive narrative structure—indeed, much more so than any of the travel narratives that he utilized as source texts. More importantly, the amalgamation of texts that went into composing Astoria reaffirms the highly textual enterprise that the exploration and settlement of the North American midcontinent was turning out to be.

Unsurprisingly, Irving gives the reasons for imposing order on this daunting collection of notes, maps, journals, and personal accounts in primarily textual terms: he knows that his audience will be used to the conventions of plot popularized over the last two centuries of novel and history writing, so the story of Astor’s fur-trading expeditions should hew to the popular conventions. He employs a similar technique in the introductory notice to the last of his three western narratives, The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, in which Irving again focuses upon ensuring the reader that his practiced hand has gone into producing a readable text. Even more than in Astoria, Irving here goes to great lengths to depict the chaos from which he created an orderly, structured

80 Ibid., 180-181.
81 Lewis, Unsettling the Literary West, 64.
narrative and linear plot. For example, in relating the scene of one of Irving’s first meetings with Bonneville, he writes:

I found him quartered with a worthy brother in arms, a major in the army. He was writing at a table, covered with maps and papers, in the centre of a large barrack room, fancifully decorated with Indian arms, and trophies, and war dresses, and the skins of various wild animals, and hung round with pictures of Indian game and ceremonies, and scenes of war and hunting. In a word, the captain was beguiling the tediousness of attendance at court, by an attempt at authorship; and was rewriting and extending his travelling notes, and making maps of the regions he explored. As he sat at the table in this curious apartment, with his high bald head of somewhat foreign cast, he reminded me of some of those antique pictures of authors that I have seen in old Spanish volumes… The result of his labors was a mass of manuscript, which he subsequently put at my disposal, to fit for publication and bring it before the world.  

Irving’s brilliance in this passage is his decision to place this image of Bonneville, wrapped up in the act of constructing the text the reader has yet to encounter, before any of the actual narrative takes place. In other words, it is the book itself that the reader already has in hand that matters most, more so than the actual events that unfold within it. What’s more, Irving goes on to inform the reader that he has seen to it himself that what follows is in fact readable, since Bonneville’s notes only form the “staple” of the text, as Irving has “given it a tone and coloring drawn from my own observation, during an excursion into the Indian country beyond the bounds of civilization,” again using his short trip to the prairies of Kansas and Oklahoma for justification of his authorial expertise in travel writing set west of the Mississippi River, despite the fact that much of what takes place in Bonneville’s narrative occurs north and west of the area visited by Irving on Ellsworth’s expedition. 

The hard work of plotting that Irving puts into the copious materials of Astor and Bonneville gives him the opportunity to craft a sort of master narrative that, not incidentally, aligns itself with other print statist texts like Frémont’s The Exploring  

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83 Ibid., 632-633. The prairie regions covered by Bonneville’s expedition are in fact much closer, both geographically and ecologically, to the region visited by the Corps of Discovery and Catlin than by Irving.
Expedition to the Rocky Mountains, Oregon, and California. Irving’s connection to the Ellsworth expedition in A Tour on the Prairies is one example of print statism at work, so too the fact that Astoria concludes with Irving openly advocating for a more prominent governmental role in sustaining a presence in the western fur trade. But, as Andrew Burstein argues, The Adventures of Captain Bonneville reveals most clearly that, by the end of writing these three western narratives, Irving “had become a government man.”

Burstein’s commentary relates primarily to Irving’s change in attitude toward white-native relations, from one of impartial ambivalence to an advocate of military enforcement and control, to the extent that the book might now be rightly viewed as “an expansionist government’s propaganda.” Burstein’s phrasing is particularly relevant considering Philip Deloria’s accusation that the “vanishing Indian” motif was largely perpetuated by “propagandists” working under the auspices of Jacksonian removal policy. By implication, this would then place Irving squarely in the line of Deloria’s critique and position him as a key purveyor of both the trope of the “vanishing Indian” and, according to my argumentation, the “vanishing prairie.”

Read in succession, these introductory notes make clear that Irving’s conscious interest in how his readership would perceive his role in creating each text increased with each edition. The feigned hesitancy of A Tour on the Prairies easily gives way to the authorial certainty of Astoria and The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, despite the fact

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84 Frankel recounts an anecdote of Frémont’s oral narration of his accounts to his wife Jess Benton Frémont that echoes many of these same assertions about Irving’s ordering of Astor’s and Bonneville’s accounts, noting that, “It was the safety and warmth of the domestic sphere that allowed Frémont to be ‘himself,’ a natural raconteur rather than a writer, and to communicate the supposedly unadorned yet engaging narration of his travels.” Frankel, States of Inquiry, 107.

85 Burstein, The Original Knickerbocker, 287.

86 Ibid., 288.

87 In regard to Deloria’s critique in Playing Indian, Irving also very much embodies the concept of “salvage ethnography” that Deloria defines as “the capturing of an authentic culture thought to be rapidly and inevitably disappearing,” an idea that could be applied to both the “vanishing Indian” and the “vanishing prairie” of Irving’s western narratives. Deloria, Playing Indian, 90.
that the former is actually pulled from personal experience while the latter relies mostly on the work and observations of others. These introductory notes also indicate Irving’s concern for upholding established conventions of narrative and plot, a further sign that he was thoroughly steeped in the rise of American print culture growing and expanding all around him. It is a reasonable expectation that his first interest would be the production of a readable, linear text. However, the imposition of linear narrative technique on the boundless, disordered prairie (and other western) environments that these texts describe—perhaps best symbolized in the frantic image of Bonneville trying to organize his own notes—is precisely where the intersection of print culture and American expansionism becomes problematic. Moreover, if the most consistent image of the region conjured in Irving’s western narratives is that of “a boundless waste, covered with herbage, but without trees,” one is confronted with a situation like that described by Kerber in this chapter’s second epigraph. Kerber goes on to suggest that the narratives of “invader-settler” authors were both highly constructed—“neither impromptu nor natural”—and were predisposed to becoming “self-fulfilling prophecies.” When that prophecy is an image of the “vanishing prairie,” the consequences to the native plants, animals, and people is much more dire.

Since the work of textual production, or “plotting the prairies,” served as the primary mode of place-making exercised by Euro-Americans making their way onto the prairies, accounting for the implications of the travel writing genre from a postcolonial perspective is a fitting way to conclude this chapter. The travel narratives of Catlin, Irving, and many of their contemporaries writing about the North American midcontinent run parallel to a world-wide colonial discourse in which European and American explorers, soldiers, settlers, and policy-makers set about creating what Brooks identifies with.

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88 Irving, Astoria, 237.

89 Kerber, Writing in Dust, 9. Fittingly, Quantic uses the same concept of the “self-fulfilling prophecy” to describe the “myth” of western expansion and empire that was popularized in the nineteenth century.
as “narratives thematically oriented toward ambition, possession, mastery… of the world.” Or, in the words of Emmanuel Levinas writing on “the whole of Western history,” this colonial discourse “takes the relation with the Other as enacted in the destiny of sedentary peoples, the possessors and builders of the earth. Possession is preeminently the form in which the other becomes the same, by becoming mine.” In other words, the place-making that occurs in the production of a text like The Adventures of Captain Bonneville is largely possessory—taking observations of the unknown, imposing order through the work of plotting, and turning out a narrative that prioritizes “the destiny of sedentary peoples.” Edward Said and Mary Louise Pratt have written at length about European and American travel literature emanating from explorations of the Middle East and Central Africa, examining a number of texts produced roughly during the same time period as those works of most interest here. These two postcolonial scholars offer helpful terminology for making a connection between imperialistic motives for travel and the subsequent production of hegemonic narratives about the prairies of the American Midwest.

The portion of Said’s work in Orientalism (1979) most relevant to this study is the concept of the “textual attitude” that he explores in his opening chapter. At its most basic, Said defines a textual attitude as “apply[ing] what one learns out of a book literally to reality.” Said specifically connects the phenomenon of the textual attitude to the genre of travel literature, writing: “Travel books or guidebooks are about as ‘natural’ a

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91 It should be noted that the theory engaged here is done with extreme caution, so as not to conflate the unique political, cultural, and geographical circumstances that informs their scholarship. For example, by employing a term from Edward Said’s Orientalism (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), I do not intend to suggest that the endeavors of primarily French and English Orientalists are identical to the practices of Euro-American explorers, settlers, and tourists in the American Midwest. Similarly, what Pratt indentifies in her examination of travel narratives written about the Africa continent cannot simply be transplanted to similar types of writing about the North American midcontinent. Above all else, the complexity of each situation must be acknowledged and upheld.

92 Edward Said, Orientalism, 93.
kind of text, as logical in their composition and in their use, as any book once can think of, precisely because of this human tendency to fall back on a text when the uncertainties of travel in strange parts seem to threaten one’s equanimity." The problem arises, Said continues, when the text becomes the defining experience of the travel, more than the actual people, places, and things that one encounters along the way. Furthermore, Said postulates that a textual attitude often coincides with ideological aspirations on the part of the author, if not the reader as well, greatly raising the stakes of this no longer innocuous phenomenon. “[M]any writers of travel books or guidebooks,” Said points out, “compose them in order to say that a country is like this, or better, that it is colorful, expensive, interesting, and so forth. The idea in either case is that people, places, and experiences can always be described by a book, so much so that the book (or text) acquires greater authority, and use, even than the actuality it describes." Applied to a community of readers—such as the burgeoning American readership of the nineteenth century—textual attitudes can acquire significant power to alter not only opinions or perceptions, but actions and policies as well.

Extending Said’s postcolonial theory to the prairie depicted in Irving’s western narratives, it is possible to envision what might happen when an authoritative text misrepresents a place as empty or barren or useless. If enough people buy into this characterization of the prairie, acts of place-making—and official government policy—that constrain its ability to survive are soon to follow, such as the 1841 Preemption Act, the 1862 Homestead Act, and the 1887 Dawes Act, all of which prioritized Euro-American settlement and the implementation of large-scale, sedentary agriculture at the expense of indigenous plant, animal, and human communities. Said goes on to argue

93 Ibid., 93.

94 Ibid., 94 (emphasis in the original).

95 Richard White’s “It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own”: A New History of the American West goes into considerable detail for all three of these acts, including some consideration of their environmental implications (see chapter one, n. 24).
that a particular textual attitude can be sustained into perpetuity by fostering “a rather complex dialectic of reinforcement by which the experiences of readers in reality are determined by what they have read, and this in turn influences writers to take up subjects defined in advance by readers’ experiences.” Numerous examples of this final caveat of Said’s textual attitude abound in nineteenth-century travel literature, from the Great American Desert to the “vanishing Indian” and the “vanishing prairie.” Chapter three will take up this idea as it pertains to the bison hunt narrative, arguably the most violent manifestation of the textual attitude in nineteenth-century travel literature.

The ideological consequences of nineteenth-century travel writing are also addressed by Mary Louise Pratt, whose work largely focuses upon the European colonization of central Africa. Nevertheless, like Said, Pratt’s postcolonial critique draws numerous parallels with Euro-American exploration, expansion, and settlement on the prairie, in particular the production of those texts, or the plotting of those narratives, in which print statist ideologies predominate:

With exploration, and a great many other kinds of travel as well, the journey and the writing about it are inseparable projects—they presuppose each other and create each other’s significance… Likewise, journey and account mutually determine each other’s shape—what you say in the book has everything to do with what you experienced on your trip, but what you experience on your trip has everything to do with the book you are planning to write.⁹⁶

Not only is Pratt’s analysis conversant with Said’s textual attitude, it actually raises the stakes of travel narratives in particular, in essence suggesting that explorations were often undertaken simply for the purpose of having something to write about. Irving’s introductory notes—particularly A Tour on the Prairies—express this desire to find something to write about in order to validate the expedition, which otherwise might be seen as serving no real purpose. Moreover, the unique elements of the genre of travel writing that Pratt identifies in this passage also correspond to Frankel’s notion of print

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statism, particularly his argument that government involvement in the textual production of an explorer’s account created a “heightened sense of authorship” that ultimately came to be “officially sanctioned and… emblematic of the culture that evolved around the conquering of the West.” Thus it was not mere coincidence that so many of those who ventured out onto the prairies following the Corps of Discovery also happened to pen their own narrative accounts of what transpired there. Nor is it coincidence that so many of those narrative accounts look and feel so similar. The work that went into “plotting the prairie” was a group effort, facilitated by a number of writers looking to capitalize on newly opened markets for printed books, which in turn was facilitated by a rapidly growing readership with a steady appetite for the embellished occurrences of the “far West,” no matter how often they were repeated.

A final nineteenth-century American literary example to consider in light of these postcolonial readings of travel narratives is Josiah Gregg’s *Commerce of the Prairies* (1844). This text is not as well known as those produced by Irving and Catlin, but it is important because it opens with an explicit acknowledgment of much of the travel writing that has preceded it—and is acutely aware of its own place in prairie print culture—clearly exemplifying Said’s textual attitude and Pratt’s idea that “journey and writing… are inseparable projects.” Regarding the former, the opening lines of Gregg’s work depict his awareness of “adding another to the list of works which have already been published” about “life upon the Prairies,” ultimately cataloging five other works on this topic, Irving’s *A Tour on the Prairies* included. Gregg fully expects that his travel narrative will be likewise consulted or referenced by those who follow him onto the prairie, which is why he offers occasional asides “for the benefit of future travellers,” that

97 Frankel, *States of Inquiry*, 133.

98 Josiah Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies*, ed. Max L. Moorhead (Norman, OK: Univeristy of Oklahoma Press, 1954), 3. In addition to Irving, the other authors whose narratives Gregg names are Charles Augustus Murray, Charles Fenno Hoffman, and George Wilkins Kendall; the most famous explorer to write about the region covered in Gregg’s text is Zebulon Montgomery Pike, whose expeditions and writings are named by Gregg over a dozen times in *Commerce of the Prairies*. 
they might learn something from his work and know what to expect when they begin their expeditions. Finally, that the reader’s expectations are front and center in Gregg’s conception of his own work is fully evidenced in his preface’s affirmation of the originality and authenticity of his text: “I think I may also assure my readers that most of the facts presented in my sketch of the natural history of the Prairies, and of the Indian tribes who inhabit them, are now published for the first time… [I] have contented myself with presenting such matters and observations as I thought least likely to have come before under the notice of my readers.” Of course, Gregg’s book is not filled with original observations, but with similar occurrences, and direct references, to the narratives of Irving and other earlier travelers on the prairie. In this way, Gregg’s Commerce of the Prairies is indicative of Pratt’s statement that the “European [or American] ‘discoverer’ doesn’t really bring home anything at all, only the claim to having seen something with European [or American] eyes.” The end result of travel itself thus becomes the privilege of authorship—documenting for readers what he has seen himself—and an opportunity for Gregg to plot the prairies as he sees fit.

For a disproportionate number of the indigenous inhabitants of the prairie—its native plant, animal, and human communities—the price of this newly acquired privilege of authorship and hunger for reading was removal, eradication, even extinction. Not that the prairie ecosystem, or its Native American communities, had much of a presence in these narratives to begin with. As the plotted narratives of Irving, Catlin, Gregg, and others well illustrate, the prairie ecosystem is almost entirely absent in nineteenth-century depictions of the cultural prairie. Writing on a similar phenomenon in European accounts of travel in Africa, Pratt suggests that “one cannot help seeing in these depopulated verbal landscapes of the travel books the ideological preparation for the real depopulation

99 Ibid., 27.

100 Ibid, 4-5.

that was to come.”\textsuperscript{102} Though she is speaking primarily of indigenous human communities, a similar extension can be made to native ecosystems, such as the prairie, which were also left off of the cultural documents of the times—the maps, paintings, narratives, and so on—clearly a precursor to the overplowing and overhunting that was to follow when Euro-American settlement began in earnest. In this way the “vanishing Indian” and “vanishing prairie” motifs of these texts become, using Kerber’s term, “self-fulfilling prophecies.”

Elsewhere Pratt introduces the idea of the “contact zone,” by which she means “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.”\textsuperscript{103} Though not a spatial theorist in the traditional sense, Pratt’s idea of “contact zones” nonetheless enables a final thought to be given to the spatial implications of the travel narratives under consideration in this chapter and the next. In particular, Pratt enables a further extension to be made from the place-making—and subsequent imposition of Euro-American moral geography—central to the travel writing of Irving and others to a complete transformation of prairie space, from a native ecosystem into a colonial interpretation of the American Midwest as wholly uniform, static space.

Such a reading is consistent with spatial theorist Doreen Massey’s critique of the colonial endeavors of the Age of Exploration in her work \textit{For Space} (2005), which opens by critiquing predominant and widely accepted perceptions of space in the Western world. Writing specifically about the Spanish conquest of Aztec land and culture throughout Mexico, Massey’s critique is nonetheless immediately applicable to the colonial endeavors of the United States government during the height of nineteenth-

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 208.

\textsuperscript{103} Pratt, \textit{Imperial Eyes}, 6.
century exploration and expansion. From the colonizer’s point of view, Massey writes, “‘Space’… is an expanse we travel across.” My reading of the travel narratives of Catlin, Irving, and others follows a similar line of thought as Massey’s critique, especially in regard to those who saw the North American midcontinent merely as space to be passed through on the way to the mountain and coastal West. Moreover, Massey’s indictment of the larger political and ideological desires of colonial spatial perception further implicates the print statist narratives of Euro-American travel on the prairie:

Conceiving of space as in the voyages of discovery, as something to be crossed and maybe conquered, has particular ramifications. Implicitly, it equates space with the land and sea, with the earth which stretches out around us. It also makes space seem like a surface; continuous and given… It is an unthought cosmology, in the gentlest sense of that term, but it carries with it social and political effects. So easily this way of imagining space can lead us to conceive of other places, peoples, cultures simply as phenomena “on” this surface. It is not an innocent manoeuver, for by this means they are deprived of histories… They lie there, on space, in place, without their own trajectories.

If Massey’s use of the word “trajectories” can be imagined in a narrative sense, the imposition of Euro-American print culture—and print statism—on the story of life on the prairie, one can see the ease, or “naturalness,” with which the North American prairie was envisioned to be a “lost landscape.” Making the next logical extension, one begins to see the ecological implications of colonial spatial perception, as the “trajectories” of established native plants and animals are deprived of their legitimacy as well. Native peoples are removed, bluestem and compass plants are plowed, and bison are shot; Massey’s analysis helps make sense of the role that Euro-American place-making endeavors, like the state-sponsored publication of expansionist travel narratives, played in all three.

Said, Pratt, and Massey all offer useful postcolonial critiques of the narrative “trajectories” of Euro-American exploration and settlement in the nineteenth-century,

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105 Ibid., 4.
especially in regard to the inherent textuality of the colonial project. The next chapter will build on this postcolonial critique by looking at the most violent manifestation of the “textual attitude” that emerged in nineteenth-century Euro-American travel narratives, as well as the clearest example yet of the “vanishing prairie” motif: namely, the bison hunt narratives that were included in the earliest written accounts of the prairie and escalated throughout the century, eventually becoming a stock narrative technique and a verification of an “authentic” prairie experience. The escalation of violence in these narratives further corresponds to the increased presence of the American military on the prairie, as well as the enactment of removal policies and the systematic eradication of the bison by extension. Taken together, these bison hunt narratives will be included in an examination of what Paul Virilio calls the “vulgarized violence of movement” and that characterizes the content of so much travel writing from this period.
CHAPTER 3

“I WANTED HIS HEAD AND HORNS”: BISON HUNT NARRATIVES AND THE AESTHETICS OF DISAPPEARANCE

They’re gone. Ever one of them that God ever made is gone as if they’d never been at all.

Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*

We learned as hunters and later as authors never to let a wounded animal suffer. Wounded animals were put out of their miseries; at heart, our miseries of the animal other in literature.

Gerald Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses*

Plate number nine of *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of North American Indians* (1841) is unique in part because it is one of the few paintings produced by Catlin during his travels through the North American prairie in which he paints himself into the scene.¹ This painting, entitled *Batiste and Catlin Running Buffalo*, further sets itself apart by depicting a scene in motion, as opposed to the far more common, and typically stationary, Native American portraiture and landscape paintings that make up the majority of this collection. Indeed, of those paintings in which Catlin does depict a scene in motion, the subject tends to be some act of hunting, often of bison, and almost always of Native American hunters. Thus *Batiste and Catlin Running Buffalo*, an image that depicts exactly what its title describes, is especially significant for putting Euro-Americans at the heart of a hunting scene. In addition to the two white, horse-mounted hunters giving chase, the painting also visualizes a handful of fleeing bison and a blur of landscape that includes a few trees, a couple of hills, and the insinuation of grass. The focal point of this image is its depiction of one of the bison doubling back into Batiste’s horse, throwing the rider from his mount and into the melee of the hunt. The second rider, presumably Catlin, is largely nondescript and moving a

¹ The plate number corresponds to Catlin’s ordering in the original edition of *Letters and Notes*; this is the numbering system that will be adhered to throughout this study. This painting is also sometimes titled *Batiste and I Running Buffalo, Mouth of the Yellowstone*. The shorter version is used here because that is how it appears in the edition of *Letters and Notes*. To see a version of this painting online, go to http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=3894.
safe distance behind the more dramatic action depicted in the foreground. In the corresponding narrative account of this scene in *Letters and Notes*—which confusingly refers to the rider as “Chardon”—Catlin writes: “Amidst the trampling throng, Mons. Chardon had wounded a stately bull, and at this moment was passing him again with his piece levelled for another shot… the bull instantly turned and receiving the horse upon his horns, and the ground received poor Chardon, who made a frog’s leap of some twenty feet or more over the bull’s back, and almost under my horse’s heels.”  \(^2\) What matters most in both the painting and the narrative account is the scene of violence that it depicts, a firsthand account of the killing of the prairie’s keystone animal species, undertaken “not for ‘meat,’ but for a *trophy,*” by one of the most prominent and widely read Americans to travel and write about the prairies.  \(^3\)

Art historian Joni Kinsey writes about Catlin’s paintings in her study of prairie artwork *Plain Pictures: Images of the American Prairie* (1996). Specifically, Catlin serves as a key example for what she terms “the aesthetics of absence,” a phenomenon she isolates among artists visiting the prairies and Great Plains who were challenged by “the lack of visual elements with which to construct pictorial compositions.”  \(^4\) Kinsey’s terminology corresponds to the “vanishing prairie” trope central to this study, though for the artists she examines the prairie has already vanished. As with writers like Irving who worked hard to shape and mold conventional narrative plots onto the barren prairie landscapes they depicted in their travel narratives, Kinsey notes that painters on the prairie faced a similar problem, namely “that their subject lacked almost all the elements in traditional landscapes and did not conform to any of the rules.”  \(^5\) These “rules,” of

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\(^3\) Ibid., 26 (emphasis in the original). This is the same passage from which the title of this chapter comes, where Catlin writes: “I went not for ‘meat,’ but for a *trophy*; I wanted his head and horns.”


\(^5\) Ibid., 12.
course, are rooted in the same European understanding of natural history and aesthetic principles that caused this region to be mislabeled a “desert” by its earliest Euro-American visitors.\(^6\) This perception of openness (or emptiness) had a number of consequences of immediate relevance to this study. As Kinsey notes, “Much like America itself in the eyes of the early European settlers, the prairie was so formless that it could be manipulated or filled at will to incorporate an entire range of ideas, cultural values, and metaphorical allusions.”\(^7\) The “metaphorical allusion” of most interest here is that of the “vanishing prairie,” which, as seen in *Batiste and Catlin Running Buffalo*, occasionally allows the very real violence of Euro-American expansion and settlement of the prairie to rise to the surface.

Modifying her terminology somewhat in a later essay—writing this time of an “aesthetics of plainness”—Kinsey goes on to discuss some of the artistic consequences of painters finding a world devoid of traditional subjects to paint. For instance, some of the artists that Kinsey examines have clear links to state-sponsored ideologies of the time, comparable to their counterparts in print. Speaking to this, Kinsey argues that, “In their original state, the grasslands received many characterizations, but one of the most compelling was that they were a kind of tabula rasa, an apparently empty landscape that seemed almost entirely without promise or infinitely malleable to human aspiration.”\(^8\)

Building on these observations, I believe that a clear link can be drawn among the visual artists that are the subject of Kinsey’s analysis, the writers of travel narratives like Catlin and Irving, and the agents of the American government who promoted an image of the

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\(^6\) For more on the creation of this misnomer of the prairies, see LeMenager’s chapter “Inventing the American Desert” in *Manifest and Other Destinies*, 23-30. Chapter five will pick up in greater detail the challenge of fitting European landscape aesthetic principles to images of the prairie.


prairie wide open and ready for Euro-American settlement. In other words, the aesthetics of absence (or plainness) serves as but one more way for the plant, animal, and human communities indigenous to the prairie to be ignored, removed, or eradicated—literally painted out of the picture—thus enabling “Americans’ proprietary and imperialistic response to the prairies.”

In her analysis of Catlin’s work, Kinsey gives close attention to his painting *Nishnabottana Bluffs, Upper Missouri*, which was painted around the same time as *Batiste and Catlin Running Buffalo*, a work consisting of little more than a few deep-green hills transecting an equally beige horizon. This painting exemplifies for Kinsey a true aesthetics of absence and refers to it as “one of the few pure prairie images of the nineteenth century.” Kinsey implies that Catlin did not feel compelled, as did many of his contemporaries, to fill in the picture with objects—people, trees, animals—that his counterparts struggled to see on the prairie. In any case, this painting does meet Kinsey’s criteria for the aesthetics of absence, since it is all hills and sky, with no major landmarks to be seen. *Batiste and Catlin Running Buffalo* obviously adheres to a far different aesthetic principle, one that Kinsey does not name in her study of prairie painting. One might be tempted to insist that this painting of a bison hunt is directly influenced by the defining prairie aesthetic of which Kinsey writes, as Catlin feels pressured to fill an

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9 Richard Slotkin, for one, traces the notion of the “tabula rasa” back to the earliest settlers in the North America, asserting that, “What they desired above all was a tabula rasa on which to inscribe their dreams.” Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), 38. Paul Virilio, so crucial to the argument of this chapter, also weighs in on the “tabula rasa,” writing that it “is only a trick whose purpose is to deny particular absences any active value.” Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* trans. Philip Beitchman (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 42.


11 Ibid., 39.

12 An image of this painting can be found online http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=4286. A modern-day viewer of this painting might see in this painting more similarities with a lawn of nonnative fescue or bluegrass than with a diverse prairie ecosystem made up of hundreds of different grasses and forbs.
empty landscape with a contrived moment of movement and action, much like the forcibly plotted narratives considered in chapter two.

Yet, to interpret Batiste and Catlin Running Buffalo in such a way is also to attribute to it a certain inconsequentiality or irrelevance. Instead, it is worth considering Catlin’s painting of a bison hunt as part of a larger phenomenon in nineteenth-century art and literature, in which killing bison offered writers and painters opportunities to document “authentic” prairie experiences while also allowing for convenient “plotting” to take place. Moreover, print statist narratives of exploration and settlement were especially interested in the hunting and killing of bison, including Frémont’s Exploring Expedition, the narrative that Frankel uses as his touchstone print statist work. Before the so-called “Indian wars” of the latter part of the nineteenth century, where Native Americans became the most popular target of state-sponsored narratives of removal, no component of prairie life was subjected to so frequent and detailed scenes of great violence as Bison bison. The history of the bison’s near-extirmination on the prairie throughout the nineteenth-century has been well chronicled. What I am most interested in is the manner in which these bison hunt narratives illustrate or embody so clearly the trope of the “vanishing prairie” and the desire of Euro-American explorers and settlers to inhabit a space devoid of indigenous plant, animal, or human life. Finally, bison hunt narratives deserve close attention especially because they tend to be invested with the most dramatic flair and attention to detail. In other words, recreating a bison hunt is the place in many travel narratives, and the occasional fictional text, in which the writer (or

13 For example, Frémont tells of a bison hunt he partook in with Kit Carson somewhere between the Kansas and Platte Rivers on July 1, 1842, part of which includes the pursuit of a “grand herd of buffalo, some seven or eight hundred in number.” Frémont et al, Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842, 19.

14 Bison bison is the binomial name given to the species, generally referred to as American bison, that is indigenous to North America. This study will thus refer to this animal as “bison,” despite the fact that most nineteenth century travel narratives—and most people still today—refer to the animal as “buffalo.” The prevalence of this misnomer is so long standing that nitpicking over the difference is largely redundant, though technically “buffalo” more accurately describes a species native to Africa and Asia.
painter) works hardest to adhere to conventions of “plotting,” what Brooks calls the “dynamic aspect of narrative.”

As this chapter will demonstrate, the investment in plot by narrators of bison hunts increases dramatically as the century progresses, with more mundane accounts of the hunt occurring earlier in the century, as in texts like the Lewis and Clark journals, and with the ever more outrageous accounts becoming more common in later texts, such as those that appear in the writing of George Armstrong Custer and Buffalo Bill Cody. In addition to being a violent manifestation of the “vanishing prairie,” as well as an extension of the print statism that dominated nineteenth-century travel narratives, I will argue that the escalation of dramatic violence in bison hunt narratives is an illustration of Said’s concept of the textual attitude at work; in particular, I will demonstrate that writers later in the century not only came to the prairie with the expectation of killing bison, but also that the documentation of these hunts—in the case of Cody especially—became a case of narrative one-upmanship.

Returning to Batiste and Catlin Running Buffalo, its difference from a painting like Nishnabottana Bluffs, Upper Missouri illustrates one of the main arguments that I want to make in this chapter. Kinsey’s concept of an aesthetics of absence captures the artistic principles that define so much art and literature, not to mention public sentiment, concerning the “plainness” of the North American prairie. But Kinsey’s terminology does not adequately address the aesthetic principles at work in Catlin’s painting of a bison hunt, nor in the many written accounts that will be considered in what follows. In particular, both “absence” and “plainness” imply stasis, a state of existence that is devoid of life, movement, or action. The scenes of violence depicted in bison hunts, however, feature an ongoing, continuous process of removal, eradication, and death. In some sense, this reading of bison hunt narratives fits well with Frankel’s concept of print statism, as when he argues that, “Expeditions and explorations yielded a print archive that

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15 Brooks, Reading for Plot, 35.
was predicated on a strong sense of temporality, since the recorded world disappeared at the moment of registration… The West would vanish as a consequence of its own discovery, as railroads, settlers, and towns took over the land.”

The two verbs that stand out in these lines from Frankel are “disappeared” and “vanish,” both of which are verbs of action and emphasize the connection between the ideologies of print statism and the “vanishing prairie” motif introduced at the outset of my argument. Thus, because the phenomenon that Frankel describes is not captured in Kinsey’s terminology, we need a way of accounting for the fact that such travel writing often “observe[s] the world only as it is in the process of disappearing.” With this in mind, I will employ Paul Virilio’s concept of the “aesthetics of disappearance” to analyze the bison hunts that appear in nineteenth-century travel literature, narratives predicated upon verbs of action, scenes of violence, and a constant movement toward the “vanishing prairie.”

An architectural theorist by trade, Virilio roots his aesthetic theory in “movement” in the visual world—film in particular, but also photography and even painting. Thus Virilio’s emphasis on the visual is especially helpful in analyzing Batiste and Catlin’s Running Buffalo, which is not only an image of movement, of “the recorded world disappear[ing] at the moment of registration,” but also an image that encapsulates the two most prominent elements of Virilio’s aesthetics of disappearance: speed and violence.

Speed and violence interest Virilio because power and ideology are the “modulation and manipulation of vectorial speeds… the surest elements of mass cohesion in Europe and America,” which allows him to assert that “the goal sought by power was less the

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16 Frankel, States of Inquiry, 133-134.

17 Phillip A. Snyder, “Disappearance in Cormac McCarthy’s Blood Meridian,” Western American Literature 44.2 (2009), 129. Though McCarthy’s work will not play a major role in this chapter, aside from the opening epigraph, Snyder’s discussion of Virilio’s work in the context of Blood Meridian served as a helpful starting point for the reading of nineteenth-century bison hunt narratives that follow.

18 For more on the role of speed and violence in Virilio’s work, as well as its connection to ideology, see Steve Redhead, Paul Virilio: Theorist for an Accelerated Culture (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 60.
invasion of territories, their occupation, than a sort of *recapitulation of the world* obtained by ubiquity, the suddenness of military presence, a pure phenomenon of speed, a phenomenon on the way to the realization of its absolute essence.”¹⁹ Given the rapidity with which the exploration and settlement of the American Midwest and West occurred, Virilio’s more general theorizing on the topics of state ideology and military dominance to the travel narratives under consideration here offers an incisive critique of some of the overt colonial acts undertaken by Euro-American society as it spread out over the prairies, including the production of print statist narratives and the stories of bison hunts that many included. Even the setting of these narratives on the so-called Great American Desert fits into Virilio’s aesthetic model, as he envisions scenes of violence that characteristically unfold within a “technician-culture… creating finally emptiness and desert because only nothingness can be continuous, and therefore conductive.”²⁰

Furthermore, Virilio uses the idea of the aesthetics of disappearance to speak of cultural—including literary, artistic, and cinematic—creations almost strictly in terms of politics and ideology. When applied to bison hunt narratives, the aesthetics of disappearance uncovers in nineteenth-century narratives of hunting and killing bison what Virilio calls the “vulgarized violence of movement.”²¹ In other words, it is precisely the ideological components of these narrative accounts, and particularly the way they work as a repeated trope or motif in the travel literature of the era of exploration and settlement, that are of most interest in what follows. Beginning with the Lewis and Clark journals, working through the tourist accounts of Irving, Catlin and others, and concluding with the more explicitly militaristic “memoirs” of Custer and Cody, this chapter aims to show how the colonization of the prairie is depicted in these printed texts in part as “perpetual assaults on distance [that] also endlessly reproduce the original rite-

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²⁰ Ibid., 116.

²¹ Ibid., 110.
of-passage, a résumé of the universe realized by the speed of the assault.” While Virilio’s language is perfectly suited for an analysis of the militaristic endeavors of Euro-American colonization of the prairies, the less obvious employment of his work that I will take up in the rest of this chapter is a close reading of hunting narratives that document concomitant “assaults” on the native ecology of the region, often to achieve the same ends as military endeavors.

However, before getting to the narratives themselves, some consideration of the environmental history of hunting on the prairie is in order. Hunting as a means for sustenance, as well as a social, cultural, and spiritual exercise, had taken place on the North American prairie for thousands of years prior to Euro-American settlement. Archaeologists studying the prairies and plains of North America commonly regard evidence of hunting as among their most important discoveries. W. Raymond Wood, for example, notes that “the most sought-after sites on the High Plains, and those that are often best excavated and reported, are not campsites but bison kills sites,” going on to point out that, “The discovery, driving, entrapment, and killing of large numbers of bison… demand a high level of organization,” a process that he demonstrates has been occurring in places like shortgrass prairies of eastern Colorado for more than 10,000 years. Bison hunting also involves important cultural acts, not the least of which is the creation of a unique bond between the hunter and his prey, or more generally, between the human and the natural world. Few have written more passionately on this topic than Paul Shepard, who argues in a number of works for the benefits and positive outcomes of hunting. Among other reasons, Shepard supports most forms of hunting because of their cultural importance: “To share in life is to participate in a traffic of energy and materials

22 Ibid., 98.

23 W. Raymond Wood, Introduction to Archaeology on the Great Plains, ed. W. Raymond Wood (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 6. Many of the essays included in this work are expressly interested in the discovery of hunting sights, verifying Wood’s assertion the importance of so-called “kill-sites” to understanding early human civilization on the prairies.
the ultimate origin of which is a mystery, but which has its immediate source in the bodies of plants and other animals. As a society, we may be in danger of losing sight of this fact. It is kept most vividly before us in hunting.” Most of Shepard’s philosophy on this and other topics is beyond the scope of this study. Yet any serious environmental discourse is remiss if it does not acknowledge the ecological, cultural, and political complexity of its core concerns. For this study, hunting is obviously one of those concerns.

In spite of his advocacy for hunting as a social activity, however, Shepard would be the first to acknowledge that human hunting on any scale has unavoidable, unforeseen, and long-lasting consequences on any ecosystem. Thus it must be acknowledged that pre-contact hunting practices may not have been ecologically neutral. Indeed, a good deal of evidence published recently suggests otherwise. Native peoples hunted and killed bison on the prairie for thousands of years; whether or not their practices were sustainable by today’s standards is irrelevant. However, the hunting that took place on the prairie throughout the nineteenth century greatly departed from these earlier forms of


25 Again, I have no interest in promoting an image of the “ecological Indian.” Shepard Krech III’s influential text of the same name is introduced in chapter one, so no further mention of it will be made in this chapter.


27 Perhaps the most thorough and interesting case study of a single site where bison were killed in larger numbers up to 10,000 years ago is found in Jack W. Brink, Imagining Head-Smashed-In: Aboriginal Buffalo Hunting on the Northern Plains (Edmonton, AB: Athabasca University Press, 2008); Brink takes a close look at the archaeological record of one of the first known “buffalo jumps” in southern Alberta, depicting in clear detail not only the sophistication of early bison hunting but also its practical importance as a source of food, shelter, and clothing and its cultural importance as a site of communal activity.
hunting, with the possible exception of those few times when human hunting may have led to mass extinctions across multiple continents.\textsuperscript{28} As the opening epigraph from Cormac McCarthy’s novel \textit{Blood Meridian} (1985) emphasizes, the level of killing that took place, particularly when directed at the bison, reached levels unseen in the recent memory of modern human society.\textsuperscript{29} The overhunting of the bison was not simply ignorance or carelessness by a few misguided individuals; it was both ideological and systemic, eventually becoming interwoven into the fabric of Euro-American society that was taking up more space in the North American midcontinent as the century progressed.

In regard to this ideology, Ken Zontek points out the heavy hand the United States government had in these practices of overhunting, writing that, “The [United States] army confined the Indians to reservations and applauded the demise of the bison; Euro-American hide hunters blasted the herds into oblivion; the American government failed to lift a finger to prevent such injustice.”\textsuperscript{30} The narratives of Custer and Cody vividly

\textsuperscript{28} The so-called “overkill hypothesis,” championed most passionately by Paul S. Martin, is a controversial idea in the history of early human settlement on North and South America, arguing that humans were responsible for the mass extinctions of dozens of large mammal species—with the interesting exception of the American bison, which appears to have thrived in the centuries following the Pleistocene extinctions. A full discussion of overkill is beyond the scope of this study, though its corollary to the bison’s near extinction in the nineteenth-century is worth mentioning. See Paul Martin, \textit{Twilight of the Mammoths: Ice Age Extinctions and the Rewilding of America} (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2005) for an argument in favor of overkill, and Donald K. Grayson and David J. Meltzer, “A Requiem for North American Overkill,” \textit{Journal of Archaeological Science} 30.5 (2003): 585-593 for a review of arguments against the overkill hypothesis.

\textsuperscript{29} Though McCarthy’s novel is beyond the historic and generic scope of this chapter, the inclusion of the “old buffalo hunter” in chapter twenty-three is a fitting link between the horrendous human violence that the novel depicts for its first 300 pages and the violent overhunting that led to the near extinction of the prairie’s keystone animal species. \textit{Blood Meridian} is in many ways a novel of death tolls, and clearly the bison are no exception. See Cormac McCarthy, \textit{Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West} (New York: Vintage, 1985), 316-318.

illustrate that the hunting and killing of bison even became a key military strategy for the American government in the so-called “Indian wars,” in which the elimination of a primary food source for native populations turned into a sort of ecological warfare against the animal itself. As Richard White notes, the United States army experienced success during the Indian wars more than once by “their ability to prevent the Indians from securing food for themselves and their families, not by battlefield victories.” This is not the type of hunting that Shepard and other defenders of the practice have in mind when arguing for the cultural importance of hunting. Instead, it is a use of hunting, under the guise of both sustenance and sport, as a means of further subjugating societies that had come to rely heavily on the bison for their basic necessities, as well as for their cultural and religious traditions.

In addition to the dramatic ecological consequences that resulted from the decimation of the bison, an equally important cultural dimension is worth considering as well. The cultural significance of the bison to native communities did not go unnoticed by those working to undermine Native American life throughout the prairies, which is why eliminating the bison acquired great symbolic importance. One manifestation of this symbolic element is the trope of the bison hunt that began occupying travel narratives throughout the century and that will be the subject of the rest of this chapter. Another important cultural / symbolic component to the decimation of the historic bison herds is the introduction of cattle as a far more docile, controllable “replacement” animal, especially in the semi-arid shortgrass prairies of Wyoming, Montana, western Nebraska, and the western Dakotas. For instance, environmental historians like Donald K. Sharpes have addressed the consequences of introducing domesticated cattle—most of which had origins in Europe or Latin America—to the region: “Cattle are not indigenous to

31 White, “It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own,” 106.

32 Chapter four will devote more attention to the specific cultural significance of the bison to many indigenous communities, particularly in the works of Luther Standing Bear, Nicholas Black Elk, Bull Lodge, N. Scott Momaday, and James Welch.
America. Longhorn cattle, initial descendents of the Iberian aurochs and the open-range crillo Spanish cattle imported from the Antilles islands by the Spanish were eventually interbred with Shorthorns, Herefords, Polled Angus and Galloways introduced by the British and Scottish.” Frieda Knobloch extends this analysis to explore the “colonial” aspect of the importation of cattle to the prairies, arguing:

[Raising cattle] claimed and held territory (while making a profit) in the subhumid West that in the 1860s and 1870s could not be claimed directly by sedentary agriculture. This colonial imperative to territorialize the grasslands resulted in violent and rapid deterritorialization of a preexisting Plains economy and ecology, long before Euro-Americans knew how to farm the western grasslands with even marginal success.34

Thus, as far as bison were concerned, cattle raising stood as an even more inimical threat to prairie ecology than large-scale agriculture. From a cultural perspective, moreover, the implications of raising cattle became an important component of late nineteenth- and early twentieth century fiction, particularly for writers like Hamlin Garland, Owen Wister, and Upton Sinclair.35 The ramifications of this symbolic shift in the predominate prairie ungulate are still felt today, as the cattle industry continues to grow in influence and fights off efforts to reintroduce bison to the prairie grasslands; on the other side of the debate, efforts to preserve and restore the historic bison herds go back to the late nineteenth-century, particularly in the figure of George Bird Grinnell, and continue to this day, the most extreme example coming from those that wish to return the semi-arid


35 Garland, for example, explores the conflict between Native Americans and Euro-American cattle ranchers in a number of works, including The Captain of the Gray Horse Troop (1902) and The Book of the American Indian (1923); Wister’s novel The Virginian (1906) was among the first fictional “westerns” and spends considerable time on the cattle ranches of Wyoming; and Sinclair’s graphic documentation of the feedlots and slaughterhouses of turn-of-the-Chicago in The Jungle (1906) even famously got the attention of the United States Congress. The bison’s absence in all of these works is implied through the omnipresence of cattle culture in both the tallgrass and shortgrass prairie regions, only a couple of decades removed from the collapse of the historic bison herds. Obviously there is more to say on this topic, but it lies beyond the scope of this study.
shortgrass prairie to a “buffalo commons,” an issue with obvious social, cultural, and political ramifications.36

Before the prairie could be filled with cattle, the space had to be opened for them by eliminating the species with which they would compete most for resources. This elimination is chronicled in part in the bison hunt narratives of Euro-American explorers, tourists, soldiers, and settlers included in the travel literature produced throughout the nineteenth century. Chapter two established why the travel narrative genre is so important to the political and ideological implications of textual production—part of what is being called narrative ethics in this study—throughout the nineteenth century, wrapped up as it was in print statism and the creation of textual attitudes. Therefore, given the importance of speed and violence to Virilio’s aesthetics of disappearance, travel (and movement more generally) is necessarily at the heart my argument in this chapter as well. For, as Virilio asserts, “From the very beginning the search for high speeds was combined with destructive games of war and hunting, creators of elites… from now on the traveler, in peopling the modes of rapid transport, becomes a negator of terrestrial dimensions.”37 Virilio’s linkage of bourgeois travel, war, and hunting is exemplified most clearly in the Custer and Cody narratives I discuss at the end of this chapter. To give them proper context, however, the evolution of the literary bison hunt must be traced from early works like the Lewis and Clark journals through the travel narratives of touring intelligentsia like Irving and Catlin and ending with those texts that most clearly reflect the government’s heavy hand in bringing about the end of the of the prairie’s keystone animal species.

36 For more on Grinnell’s efforts to preserve remnants of the historic bison herds, see Michael Punke, Last Stand: George Bird Grinnell, the Battle to Save the Buffalo, and the Birth of the New West (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2007); for more on the idea of the “buffalo commons,” see Deborah E. Popper and Frank J. Popper, “The Buffalo Commons: Metaphor as Method,” Geographical Review 89, no. 4 (1999): 491-510.

In a journal entry for August 23, 1804 John Ordway, a sergeant accompanying Lewis and Clark on the Corps of Discovery, makes the brief observation in his journal that “Jo. Fields came to the Boat informed us that he had killed a Bull Buffelow.”

This seemingly inconspicuous account of private Joseph Fields’s successful hunt—which came several months into the expedition as the party entered South Dakota—actually marks the first documented killing of a bison by the Corps of Discovery, the first time quill was put to paper during this iconic expedition to tell of a hunt of the prairie’s keystone animal species. Of course, this was not the only bison killed by members of the Lewis and Clark expedition. There are dozens of journal entries that recount the routine hunts for these animals that took place over the two years that the expedition crossed the trans-Missouri West. Sharpes points out that, “Lewis and Clark… were the first white men to encounter these buffalo herds and discover how useful and hearty was their meat. Yet… none of these explorers thought of domesticating them.”

This observation is consistent with the point made in chapter two, that Lewis and Clark expressed little or no interest in the settlement of the prairies during their expedition. The mobility of the historic bison herds that they witnessed almost daily in some ways mirrored their own movement across the region, not lingering in one place for long and taking advantage of whatever resources, including the bison, they could find.

As with other aspects of the Lewis and Clark journals, their documentation of bison hunts do not dabble much in dramatic flair or vivid descriptions of excessive violence, as they generally do not get caught up in the “thrill of the hunt” so common in later travel narratives. As the members of the Corps of Discovery hunted and killed bison, they did so mainly to procure food for themselves and often to interact with the

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38 The Lewis and Clark Journals, 43. Gass’s journal, mentioned briefly in chapter one, verifies Ordway’s account, as he notes that “Captain Clarke and one of the men killed a deer and a buffaloe,” going on to state that Clark christened the area—located somewhere close to the confluence of the Niobrara and Missouri Rivers—near the site of this first bison hunt “Buffaloe Prairie” (22).

39 Sharpes, Sacred Bull, Holy Cow, 102.
indigenous communities along the Missouri who also relied on bison as a food source. Clark’s journal entry from December 7, 1804 is a good example of this type of narrative. Here the members of the expedition are interacting with a group of Mandans who are hunting bison for the winter:

Capt. Lewis took 15 men & went out joined the Indians, who were at the time he got up, Killing the Buffalows on Horse-back with arrows which they done with great dexterity, his part killed 14 Buffalow, five of which we got to the fort… those we did not get in was taken by the indians under a Custon which is established amongst them ‘i. e. any person Seeing a buffalow lying without an arrow Sticking in him, or some particular mark takes possession, many times (as I am told) a hunter who Kills maney Buffalow in a chase only Gets a part of one, all meat which is left out all night falls to the Wolves which are in great numbers, always in the Buffalows —

This passage reveals a number of interesting details about the role that bison hunting played in the Lewis and Clark expedition, as well as the purpose of writing about it. For one thing, it gives a sense of the number of bison that were often killed during one successful hunt, though obviously this number varied according to the size and need of the hunting party. Moreover, Clark is clearly impressed by the hunting prowess of his Mandan counterparts, as were other explorers like Zebulon Montgomery Pike, who once begrudgingly acknowledged, after a failed hunt with his own rifle: “I think that in the prairies of this country the bow and arrow could be used to more advantage than the gun; for you might ride immediately alongside, and strike them where you pleased, then leave them and proceed after others.” Finally, the mention of “Wolves” in this passage speaks somewhat to the diversity of animal life on the prairie at this time, of which the bison functioned as the principle species.

40 Lewis and Clark Journals, 88.

41 Zebulon Montgomery Pike, Exploratory Travels through the Western Territories of North America, ed. William M. Maguire (Denver, CO: W.H. Lawrence & Co., 1889), 74. Originally published in 1810, the written accounts of Pike’s expeditions, which took place in the two years following the Corps of Discovery, actually made it to print earlier than those of Lewis and Clark.

42 It should be noted here that the bison is obviously not the only animal to be subjected to overhunting and mass killings, just the most prominently featured in the travel narratives of the nineteenth century. Wolves were another animal quickly eradicated, with some places like Iowa establishing laws as early as 1817; the
Above all else, what stands out about the bison hunts in the Lewis and Clark journals is the fact that they do not appear to take the hunting and killing of this animal for granted. Indeed, the sight of bison on the return trip east after months of eating nothing but fish and horseflesh in the Columbia River valley is one of relief for the party, and Lewis’s account of the first meal of bison meat in nearly a year is treated almost ceremoniously: “Joseph fields killed a very fat buffaloe bull and we halted to dine. we took the best of the meat as much as we could possibly carry on our horses. the day continuing rainy and cold I concluded to remain all day. we feasted on the buffaloe.”

This particular “feast” could not have taken place without the abundance of bison that thrived on the prairie during the extent of the Lewis and Clark expedition. Throughout the journals, for the most part, the members of the Corps of Discovery show restraint in killing this animal, whose vast numbers at times seem to baff the party. Yet the writing produced and published as a result of this early and significant foray into the prairie needs to be acknowledged for what it contributed to those travel narratives written later in the century. To use Frankel’s term, the journals of the earliest explorers can rightfully be considered “templates” for many of the bison hunt narratives that followed. Lewis and Clark may not be complicit in the wholesale slaughter of the bison captured in the accounts of Custer, Cody, and others, but the act of documenting the hunt, even taken on a symbolic level, initiates the trope of the bison hunt narrative that would continue to escalate in frequency and intensity as the century progressed. The early explorers—

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Iowa DNR notes that the state even placed a bounty on the animal, a fact verified by Mutel in *The Emerald Horizon*. An early example of a wolf being killed in eastern Nebraska by the Corps of Discovery can be found in Clark’s journal entry for July 20, 1804.

43 *Lewis and Clark Journals*, 403.

44 Lewis writes on June 17, 1805, for example, that he “saw a vast number of buffaloe feeding in every direction around us in the plains, others coming down in large herds to water at the river; the fragments of many carcasses of these poor anamals daily pass down the river, thus mangled I presume in descending those immence cataracts above us.” Ibid., 164.
Lewis and Clark, Pike, Frémont—must rightfully be distinguished from later Euro-American writers, but they cannot be separated completely.

Returning to the work of Washington Irving, it is worth recalling that one of the source texts for *Astoria*, the second of his three “western narratives,” was Nicholas Biddle’s 1814 edition of *The History of the Expedition Under the Command of Lewis and Clark*.\(^45\) The influence that these journals had on Irving’s own conception of bison hunt narratives is unknown; however, it is no small stretch to imagine that Irving’s reading of this text did play some role in shaping his expectations for his own foray into the region, as well as how he would go about publishing an account of his travels. As such, Nathaniel Lewis asks, “Who wrote Lewis and Clark’s *Journals*? Who wrote Irving’s *Astoria*? None of these… seminal works was produced by a single voice or vision; none had an individual author.”\(^46\) Edward Said also lends a helpful way of thinking about these issues of layered authorship, particularly his argument that within examples of a textual attitude “[t]here is a rather complex dialectic of reinforcement by which the experiences of readers in reality are determined by what they have read, and this in turn influences writers to take up subjects defined in advanced by readers’ experiences.”\(^47\) What follows are but a few examples in which later travel narratives give evidence that a textual attitude did indeed exist among the many explorers, soldiers, tourists, and settlers publishing accounts of their travels. Moreover, this textual attitude appears particularly pervasive in regard to the hunting of bison. Those texts published later in the century often show direct awareness of the earlier texts; moreover, the repetition of images, sequences, and themes from the bison hunt narrative goes to show its evolution into a

\(^{45}\) For more on Biddle’s role in this earliest edition of the Lewis and Clark journals, see Elin Woodger and Brandon Toropov, *The Encyclopedia of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* (New York: Facts on File, 2004), 47-48. See also Nathaniel Lewis, who asserts that “Nicholas Biddle, the wealthy, Princeton-educated literary Philadelphian, ‘edited’ and essentially rewrote the Lewis and Clark journals for the 1814 publication.” Lewis, *Unsettling the Literary West*, 45.

\(^{46}\) Lewis, *Unsettling the Literary West*, 45.

\(^{47}\) Said, *Orientalism*, 94.
fairly standardized literary trope, one that had drastic consequences for the life and ecology of the prairie.

For example, early in Irving’s *A Tour on the Prairies* clear indication is given that travelers to the prairie come with expectations about hunting and killing bison. A little more than midway through that work Irving writes of a moment in the journey where the party was “roused by the cry of Buffalo! Buffalo! The effect was something like that of the cry of a sail! sail! at sea.” The mood that sets in on the party after the rising of this alarm is of great interest to Irving, who continues to write, “There was a general movement to set off in pursuit and it was with some difficulty that the vivacity of the younger men of the troop could be restrained,” a restraint that was apparently short lived, as eventually “there was again a cry of Buffalo, and two were pointed out on a hill to the left. The Captain being absent it was no longer possible to restrain the ardour of the young hunters. Away several of them dashed full speed and soon disappeared among the ravines.” Though this particular scene does not end in the death of a bison, the way in which the men traveling with Irving react to the opportunity to hunt and kill the animal—not to mention the excitement with which Irving writes about it—is just as interesting as an actual hunt scene. This particular scene is just one of many that Irving includes in *A Tour on the Prairies* where the desire to hunt bison overwhelms the members of his traveling party—and thus the narrative itself—well before any actual bison hunting takes place.

Waiting until so late in the text to describe a bison hunt shows Irving’s prowess as a professional writer and his familiarity with the conventions and expectations of a well-plotted text. Just as the identity of the so-called “headless horseman” is not revealed until the very end of the “Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” Irving prolongs the narrative tension

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48 The journals of Lewis and Clark are not mentioned in *A Tour on the Prairies*, but the story of the Corps of Discovery is alluded to and directly invoked in *Astoria* and *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville*, which were published within two years after *A Tour on the Prairies*.

until the closing chapters of *A Tour on the Prairies* to execute the big payoff that he has been alluding to throughout the whole text. In the case of the latter, the logical culmination of more than twenty chapters of teases and false alarms is a grandiose and violent encounter with a herd of bison. In this way Irving’s narration mimics the anxiety of his trigger-happy companions described throughout *A Tour on the Prairies*. At times Irving’s narratorial stance is to maintain an air of distance from his more rugged and “primitive” companions, but he clearly wants the hunt to get underway as well. At one point Irving writes about a young “Swiss Count” who was a member of his touring party and was quickly overtaken by the enthusiasm for the hunt.\(^50\) In particular, Irving points out that the count had too readily taken to heart the many stories of the prairie he had read and heard: “Indeed the imagination of the young Count had become completely excited on the subject. The grand scenery and wild habits of the prairies had set his spirits madding, and the stories that little Tonish told him of Indian braves and Indian beauties, of hunting buffaloes and catching wild horses, had set him all agog for a dash into savage life.”\(^51\) The count is not the only one to show an unsettled anxiousness to get on with the hunt. In chapter nineteen, for example, Irving tells of an incident in which the camp was in a bustle at an early hour: “the expectation of falling in with buffalo in the course of the day roused every one’s spirit. There was a continual cracking off of rifles, that they might be reloaded: the shot was drawn off from double barrelled guns and balls were substituted.”\(^52\) Coming as late as it does in the text, the violent restlessness of the hunters in Irving’s party runs parallel to a narrative tension that has been building up to this point.

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\(^{50}\) The count is a historical figure, Count Albert-Alexandre de Pourtalés, who was not yet twenty at the time of the expedition. His own journals and letters have since been published, including his own accounts of some of the party’s bison hunts. See *On the Western Tour with Washington Irving: The Journal and Letters of Count de Pourtalés*, ed. George F. Spalding, trans. Seymour Feiler (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968).

\(^{51}\) Irving, *A Tour on the Prairies*, 16.

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 86.
as well, with Irving equally anxious to commit his experiences to print, the bison hunt being the most salacious plot he can conceive of including in his travel narrative.

Irving finally gets around to describing an actual bison hunt in the twenty-fourth chapter. This is a short chapter, the majority of which is given to the description of the hunt and is largely characterized by the aesthetics of disappearance. Speed and violence make their way into this portion of Irving’s narrative more prominently than at any other point in the text. For example, when bison are sighted in the chapter’s second paragraph, Irving describes the reaction of his fellow travelers, again emphasizing their excitability and lack of restraint: “In an instant half a score of rifles cracked off; there was a universal whoop and halloo, and away went half the troop helter skelter in pursuit, and myself among the number.”

Though he quickly gives up this particular chase, Irving has finally acknowledged his own enthusiasm and desire to participate in a full-scale bison hunt. As the chapter proceeds, with Irving taking some time to describe how he came to ride “the best horse in the troop,” the narrative again takes up the trigger-happy actions of Irving’s companions while the group rests at a former encampment of Osages. First documenting “a universal firing of rifles” in the direction of a flock of turkeys, the attention of Irving and his compatriots soon turns toward “nobler game,” as bison are again spotted in the vicinity.

The hunt now fully engaged, Irving concludes the chapter with a long description of the death of a bison, the speed and violence of the earlier part of the narrative giving way to the bison’s eventual disappearance and the sort of elegiac language that paradoxically works its way into these otherwise brutal accounts. Telling first of the “Frenchman Tonish”—a “swarthy, meager, wiry French Creole” who acts as the comic

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53 Ibid., 109.

54 Among the most interesting historical components of these travel narratives is the shifting anxieties the Euro-Americans have for the different Native American societies residing on the prairie at the time of a given expedition. In Irving’s narratives, the Osages are commonly viewed as friendly while the party treads anxiously whenever coming into “Pawnee hunting grounds,” 110. Later, in the works of Custer and Cody, the Sioux overtake the Pawnee as the most feared group living on the prairies.
relief for much of *A Tour on the Prairies*—wounding a bison, Irving gives this “grand and comic” description of the scene: “The Buffalo stood with his shagged front always presented to his foe, his mouth open, his tongue parched, his eyes like coals of fire and his tail erect with rage; every now and then he would make a faint rush upon his foe, who easily evaded his attack, capering and cutting all kinds of antics before him.” The mocking of this wounded bison is quickly followed by “repeated shots” into the “mountain of flesh” of the bison by the whole hunting party, before Irving finally turns the narrative over to the coup de grâce:

[The bison] made a slow and grand retreat into the shallow river, turning upon his assailants whenever they pressed upon him; and when in the water took his stand as if prepared to sustain a siege. A rifle ball, however, more fatally lodged, sent a tremor through his frame. He turned and attempted to wade across the stream but, after tottering a few paces, slowly fell upon his side and expired. It was the fall of the hero, and we felt somewhat ashamed of the butchery that had effected it; but, after the first shot or two, we had reconciled it to our feelings by the old plea of putting the poor animal out of his misery.

The barbarism of the actual killing of the bison in this scene—wounded, then toyed with by Tonish, circled and shot repeatedly by the whole group, chased to a “shallow river,” and finally hit by the mortal “rifle ball”—is all but forgotten in the grand gesture that concludes this passage. For all of the narrative buildup that has brought Irving and the reader to this point, however, there really could be no other way to finish off the bison. Anything less than the death of a “hero” would be seen as both a failed hunt and a literary failure, and thus Irving embellishes the scene with near-Homeric language and imagery. The drama of the moment and seeming respect or integrity bestowed upon the fallen bison is immediately tossed aside, however, as in the very next paragraph Irving mundanely reports that “Two other buffaloes were killed this evening, but they were all

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55 Irving, *A Tour on the Prairies*, 111. As a way of suggesting that the textual attitude is not limited to the printed word, Catlin’s painting of a wounded bison (Plate 406) is almost identical to the description that Irving gives in this account.

56 Ibid., 111. The theme of the coup de grâce will be taken up more fully at the conclusion of this chapter, particularly as it regards the work of Gerald Vizenor.
bulls, the flesh of which is meager and hard at this season of the year. A fat buck yielded us much more savory meat for our evenings repast.” Not only do these lines imply that the bison, championed as a “hero” in the previous paragraph, died in vain, but also signals the forthcoming ineffectuality and wastefulness that will characterize bison hunts later in the nineteenth century.

A similar hunt scene comes in chapter twenty-nine of *A Tour on the Prairies*, with Irving escalating the images of death and violence to ever greater degrees. The characterization of the bison as a heroic figure during the death scene of chapter twenty-four is contrasted dramatically early in chapter twenty-nine, with Irving instead giving a far more demonic description of the wounded animal: “Of all animals a Buffalo, when close pressed by the hunter, has an aspect the most diabolical. His two short black horns curve out of a huge frontlet of shaggy hair, his eyes glow like coals; his mouth is open, his tongue parched and drawn up into a half crescent, his tail is erect and the tufted end whisking about in the air, he is a perfect picture of mingled rage and terror.” Irving’s villainization of the bison at this point in the narrative serves several purposes. It is much easier to justify the slaughter of a creature so clearly described as “diabolical,” not unlike the devilish characterizations of Native Americans that would emerge in the years leading up to and during the Indian wars. Moreover, thinking back to Peter Brooks’s commentary on the mastery of “intensive levels of energy” in many plotted narratives, the narrative intensity of Irving’s text is raised exponentially if he is able to persuade the reader that he is squaring off with a monstrous, demonic animal—as opposed to a creature that often succumbed to the hunt all too easily.

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57 Ibid., 111.

58 Ibid., 132-133. Again, these written descriptions by Irving have numerous corollaries in paintings by several artists of the time, including Catlin and his contemporary Karl Bodmer. A particularly demonic-looking bison can be seen in Bodmer’s painting *Buffalo Hunt*, and image of which can be found online at http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3a05139/.

59 The characterization of the bison as a “stupid” animal emerges from time to time in these travel narratives and even continues to this day, as Dale F. Lott notes when he writes that, “Some saw, and still
Yet, just a few pages later Irving recounts his ability to bring down a bison with a single shot, which allows for another opportunity for him mourn over his “victim” and reflect, “I am nothing of a sportsman: I had been prompted to this unwonted exploit of the magnitude of the game and the excitement of an adventurous chase.”

Like the hunt he recreates earlier in *A Tour on the Prairies*, Irving’s compassion—and what appears to be an impending sense of guilt—comes only after the violent death of the animal he has just documented in such vivid detail for his reader. Whatever sincerity can be found in these postmortem proclamations of “hunter’s remorse” are overshadowed by the amount of textual space and narrative energy that Irving devotes to the hunt scenes themselves, not to mention the number of places throughout *A Tour on the Prairies* where Irving teases the reader with hints and intimations that a hunt is soon to get underway. Analysis of Irving’s other western narratives verifies this reading, as both *Astoria* and *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville* allow for the author to devote even further narrative attention to the hunting and killing of the bison, mostly without the pseudo-moralizing found in *A Tour on the Prairies*.

Chapter twenty of *Astoria*, for example, opens with one of Irving’s stock images of the prairie: “Boundless wastes kept extending to the eye, more and more animated by herds of buffalo.” A reader familiar with any of Irving’s western narratives, moreover, knows by now that the fate of these bison is sealed, as Irving recounts that, “Several of the best marksman stationed themselves in the bow of a barge which advanced slowly and silently,” before moving the narrative toward the scene of the kill: “The buffalo stood gazing quietly at the barge as it approached, perfectly unconscious of their danger. The fattest of the herd was selected by the hunters, who all fired together and brought down

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see, bison not as dangerous but merely obnoxious,” before noting how he recently overhead someone refer to the animal as “stupid,” *American Bison*, 182.

60 Ibid., 136.

their victim."\[62\] Given that this scene has the look and feel of those bison hunts described by Irving in *A Tour on the Prairies*, it is easy to forget that he was not a firsthand witness of such occurrences, but instead pulled these scenes together from a variety of sources. *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville* works much the same way, these later works indicative of the high degree of textuality that went into the crafting of Irving’s western narratives. \[63\]

Following Irving’s lead, other professional writers made their way to the prairie regions of North America to give their own accounts of hunting expeditions. For example, in his work *Commerce of the Prairies* Josiah Gregg writes, “I have often heard backwoodsmen speak of the ‘buck ague,’ but commend me to the ‘buffalo fever’ of the Prairies for novelty and amusement.”\[64\] This so-called “buffalo fever” is aptly named, as it fitfully describes the urge to partake in a hunt for these animals. Like Irving, Gregg goes to great length to show that he is not alone in wanting to join the hunt, as he describes the fervor of his traveling companions, including American soldiers, to find and kill as many of these animals as they can. In *Commerce of the Prairies* Gregg details several expeditions along the Santa Fé Trail, setting much of his work in the same prairie ecosystem as Irving’s *A Tour on the Prairies*, a fact made more significant by the fact that Gregg acknowledges having read Irving’s work, even quoting *A Tour on the Prairies* at one point. Most interesting of all, however, is Gregg’s allusion to Irving’s *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville* in a discussion of native bison hunting practices, disagreeing with the eponymous explorer’s assertion that bison could be killed “without

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\[62\] Ibid., 340-341.

\[63\] The bison hunt scene of most interest in *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville* occurs when several months of trapping—ostensibly the purpose of Bonneville’s expedition—are forsaken in order to give a full account of a single bison hunt (pp. 745-746). Clearly Irving believes that his reader will find greater interest in the hunt scene than in the more mundane work of trapping beavers and otters for their pelts, despite the fact that this resulted in the deaths of a much larger number of animals.

\[64\] Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies*, 235.
guns or arrows.” These brief examples from Gregg’s work, which has received far less critical attention than the work of Catlin and Irving, nevertheless demonstrate that early bison hunt narratives were widely read and contributed to the expectation of later travelers that hunting and killing a bison—and then writing about it—was central to an “authentic” prairie experience.

Another writer who published after Irving and shows some knowledge of his work is Francis Parkman, who makes a quick—but no less important—allusion to Astoria. Detailing the more northerly route to the western states, Parkman’s The Oregon Trail (1849) also finds its author giving ample narrative space to the hunting of bison. In a close parallel to Irving, Parkman also recounts the excitement caused in camp by the raising of the alarm “Buffalo! buffalo!” In fact, Parkman lends a whole chapter to the topic, entitled simply “The Buffalo,” wherein he tells of his own attempts to hunt and kill bison. As the main action of the hunt unfolds, the speed and violence that Virilio places at the center of his theory of the aesthetics of disappearance show up prominently in Parkman’s narrative. After chasing the animals for some time, Parkman—referring to the bison as “fugitives” and riding a horse named Pontiac (apparently without irony)—offers the requisite account of his own face-to-face encounter with a bison:

Gradually I came up abreast of him, urging Pontiac with leg and rein nearer to his side, when suddenly he did what buffalo in such circumstances will always do; he slackened his gallop, and turning toward us, with an aspect of mingled rage and distress, lowered his shaggy head for a charge. Pontiac, with a snort, leaped aside in terror, nearly throwing me to the ground, as I was wholly unprepared for such an evolution. I raised my pistol in a passion to strike him on the head, but thinking better of it, fired the bullet after the bull, who had resumed his flight… Pledging

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65 Ibid., 371. The larger context of Gregg’s disagreement with Capt. Bonneville is whether or not bison could be chased until tired and then killed by spear from close range; Gregg does seem to think that spears can be used, but only if thrown from a distance.

66 Francis Parkman, Jr., The Oregon Trail, ed. David Levin (New York: Penguin Classics, 1985), 178. David Levin’s introduction addresses the literary context of this work, writing that, “The date of Parkman’s adventure is of central importance from a literary as well as a historical point of view. A number of excellent contemporary writers… were turning their adventurous experiences into literary art,” 11.

67 Ibid., 120.
myself (and I redeemed the pledge) to take my revenge at a future opportunity...

Lacking some of the melodrama of Irving’s bison hunts, Parkman’s account in The Oregon Trail nonetheless adheres to many of the same conventions—the buildup of excitement in expectation of the hunt, the painstaking recreation of the author’s own interaction with the animals, the effort to rationalize the violence carried out, and a reflection on the bison’s simultaneously gruesome and pathetic appearance—that typify this subgenre of nineteenth-century Euro-American travel writing. Because so many of these texts follow so similar a model, it is no large stretch to imagine that writers like Irving, Catlin, and Parkman had a clear readership in mind when putting their respective narratives together. Though the tropes of speed and violence certainly existed in other genres of literature from this time, rarely were they executed with such consistency and regularity than in describing the hunting and killing of the bison. Published right at the halfway point of the nineteenth century, Parkman’s narrative illustrates that it took less than fifty years for the “vanishing prairie” motif to become firmly and inflexibly entrenched in the cultural work of Euro-Americans making their way onto the prairie.

To this point, all of the literature considered in this chapter has been from America’s Antebellum era, a period characterized by copious amounts of violence in its own right, but nowhere near the level of violence concentrated over the years immediately prior to and during the Civil War. Walt Whitman’s poem “Pioneers! O Pioneers” serves as a fitting link between the violence of western expansion and the war, because much of it is set on the prairie, while the poem itself was originally included in Whitman’s Civil War collection Drum Taps (1865). Perhaps most importantly, this poem articulates something of the pent up energy that Whitman famously sensed in the years leading up to the Civil War and that was increasing being acted out in activities of western settlement: “We primeval forests felling, / We the rivers stemming, vexing we

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68 Ibid., 123.
and piercing deep the mines within, / We the surface broad surveying, we the virgin soil upheaving, / Pioneers! O pioneers!“\(^{69}\) That some of this energy was released in the hunting and killing of the bison—captured as narrative energy or tension on the printed pages of the travel writing of Irving, Catlin, and others—is evident in many of the examples noted above.

While the war itself falls outside the scope of this study, numerous parallel events and circumstances between the war and the settlement of the prairie exist to make the connection worth considering. For example, two of the most important pieces of legislation passed during the Civil War era, the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 and the Homestead Act of 1862, were firmly rooted in the life and politics of the prairie.\(^{70}\) Chapter two made note of some of technological innovations that greatly influenced prairie life and culture, some of which had an equally profound effect on the war years, perhaps none more deeply than the railroad.\(^{71}\) The ideological shifts away from Jeffersonian agrarianism, and the concomitant fights over the issue of slavery, likewise rippled throughout the prairie states, many of which sent soldiers to fight for both the Confederacy and the Union. Finally, the most important connection between the war and western settlement as far as this study is concerned is the return of soldiers to the prairie following the cessation of fighting, some taking up Whitman’s spirit of settlement and progress in “Pioneers! O Pioneers,” others, perhaps still hungry for a fight, getting

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\(^{70}\) See White, “It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own” for a fuller discussion on the role these acts had on the settlement of the Midwest and West during the middle of the nineteenth century.

\(^{71}\) One of the more interesting connections between the prairie and the Civil War in this regard is the photography of Alexander Gardner, who was a prominent photographer during the war—often capturing grisly post-battle scenes—before serving as a survey photographer for the railroads as they expanded into prairie states like Kansas and Nebraska. For more on his work, see Jane E. Simonsen, “On Level Ground: Alexander Gardner’s Photographs of the Kansas Prairies,” *Recovering the Prairie*, ed. Robert F. Sayre (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 61-85.
involved in the so-called “Indian wars.” The latter circumstance accurately describes both George Armstrong Custer and William Frederick “Buffalo Bill” Cody, who fought for the Union Army in the Civil War, partook in numerous fights and battles against various Native American tribes, and composed memoirs that give space to the hunting and killing of bison. Virilio’s notion of the aesthetics of disappearance is also most fully realized in the work of these two writers, as the combination of expansionist ideology, clearly stated objectives of removal (for both humans and animals), and narrative descriptions of what Virilio terms “pure violence” make the work of Custer and Cody resonant with “a kind of absolute colonization” that defines the post-war period of expansion and settlement in the American Midwest and West.

Custer’s writing serves as an excellent example of the evolution of the bison hunt in nineteenth-century travel literature, from the straightforward, matter-of-fact documentation of the earliest explorers to the capricious violence that characterizes these later narratives. That Custer was uniquely situated in relationship to the United States military, the indigenous civilizations of the prairie, and a curious reading public—made ever more so after his death at Little Bighorn—make My Life on the Plains essential to understanding the way in which the eradication of the bison became concomitant with the larger aims of print statism. Custer’s text also serves as a capstone to my argument that the production and proliferation of bison hunt narratives throughout the nineteenth

72 The theme of Civil War veterans returning to the prairie is also a topic taken up by a number of fiction writers from this time, most notably Hamlin Garland in stories like “Return of a Private” from the short story collection Main-Travelled Roads, ed. Joseph B. McCullough (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 129.

73 A major figure in the narratives of Custer and Cody is General Philip H. Sheridan, a prominent general for the Union during the Civil War and the head of the United States military for most of the Indian wars. Sheridan’s presence in these texts is important because he is often seen as the propagator of the official policy of slaughtering the bison in order to compromise the food sources and culture practices of those Native American communities with which he was at war. For more on his role in Western expansion, settlement, and war, see Paul Andrew Hutton, Phil Sheridan and His Army (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).

century were largely the result of the textual portrayal of the hunt as the authentic prairie experience. With this in mind, it should come as no surprise when Custer writes, “Although an ardent sportsmen, I had never hunted buffalo up to this time; consequently I was exceedingly desirous of tasting of its excitement.”75 Surely Custer did not dream up this desire to hunt bison; instead, his reflection here serves as one more indication that narratives of bison hunts were circulated far and wide throughout the nineteenth century, greatly increasing the demand to hunt these animals. It also should be noted that Custer’s text is unique among the travel narratives considered in this chapter for not making some direct reference or allusion to some of the narrative accounts that precede him, though this does not mean that his writing is devoid of the language of textuality. For example, in his long reflection in what to do about the “Indian problem,” Custer notes that, “To me, Indian life, with its attendant ceremonies, mysteries, and forms, is a book of unceasing interest. Grant that some of its pages are frightful and, if possible, to be avoided, yet the attraction is none the weaker.”76 Custer’s wording here is enough to indicate the prevalence of a textual attitude in his writing, not only about the life and culture of Native Americans, but the whole of the prairie as well.

Taking a close look at Custer’s first encounter with a bison serves as the best opportunity to gauge the degree to which he took the hunting of this animal seriously, as well as his association of the animal with the indigenous human populations he was actively and openly at war against. In 1867 Custer was part of a military expedition in central Kansas, a few hundred miles northwest of where Irving had hunted bison as part of Ellsworth’s expedition in the early 1830s.77 Though several decades of intense

75 Custer, My Life on the Plains, 49.

76 Ibid., 19-20.

77 As noted above, among the changes that had taken place in this region over the thirty or so years separating Irving and Custer was the principle Native American group of most concern to American military at the time of the expedition: Irving’s A Tour on the Prairies, for instance, is filled with anxious encounters with the Pawnee; Custer, on the other hand, is actively pursuing the Sioux and Cheyenne.
hunting by both Native Americans and Euro-Americans in this region had thinned the pre-contact bison population, enough remained for Custer to assert that he personally encountered “hundreds of thousands” of bison during his years on the prairie.\textsuperscript{78} Nevertheless, he sets apart his first sighting of a bison as a momentous occasion in his travels, as he writes, “I had never seen a wild buffalo, but I at once recognized this as not only a buffalo, but a very large one. Here was my opportunity.”\textsuperscript{79} As the actual narrative of the hunt progresses, Custer strives to emphasize three primary details: the speed at which he and the bison are traveling, the size of the bison he is hunting, and his unwillingness to kill the bison as the chase ensues out of pure enjoyment of the hunt. These details are drawn out over the course of a long paragraph that minutely chronicles the action as it takes place:

How long or how fast we flew in pursuit, the intense excitement of the chase prevented me from knowing. I only knew that even the greyhounds were left behind, until finally my good steed placed himself and me close alongside the game... My horse was above the average size, yet the buffalo towered even above him. I had carried my revolver in my hand from the moment the race began. Repeatedly could I have placed the muzzle against the shaggy body of the huge beast, by whose side I fairly yelled with wild excitement and delight, yet each time would I withdraw the weapon, as if to prolong the enjoyment of the race. It was a race for life and death, yet how different the award from what could be imagined... Mile after mile we traversed in this way, until the rate and distance began to tell perceptibly on the bison, whose protruding tongue and labored breathing plainly betrayed his distress.\textsuperscript{80}

One might expect that the logical conclusion of this narrative would be Custer’s eventual killing of the bison. However, as the chase nears its conclusion, Custer gives a description of the bison in a defensive state ready to charge him and his horse, not unlike the “devilish” bison described by Irving and Parkman in their narratives.\textsuperscript{81} The

\textsuperscript{78} Custer, \textit{My Life on the Plains}, 50.

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 50.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 50.

\textsuperscript{81} There is obviously much to say about the presence of horses in these narratives, as well as their historic role on the prairies in making it much easier for both natives and whites to hunt and kill bison, most of which is beyond the scope of this study. It is worth quoting Virilio on this topic however, as he discusses
suddenness of this movement startles Custer’s horse to such a degree that he loses control of it and his revolver simultaneously, which brings about a tragic end to his horse, as Custer “discharged the pistol, and sent the fatal ball into the very brain of the noble animal [he] rode.”82 From here Custer is flung over the top of his horse—almost precisely the image captured by Catlin in his painting *Batiste and Catlin Running Buffalo*—and ends up alone on the prairie, having missed his first opportunity to kill a bison.

For modern readers, this account fits the popular image of Custer as among the most inglorious Americans to partake in the expansion and settlement of the North American prairies. Indeed, it is easy to find additional examples in Custer’s own writing of his ineptitude, prompting writers like Elliott West to proclaim that, “Most would-be nimrods quickly tired of the sport [of bison hunting] and soon returned to the grind of travel.”83 But Custer’s narrative cannot simply be tossed aside because the popular perception of him today is largely that of an incompetent leader and military strategist. For one thing, Custer fully bought into the ideological practice of killing bison in order to starve out the indigenous populations with which he was doing battle. Nor was this violence toward animals limited to bison; Blackfoot writer James Welch shows that Custer strategically slaughtered other animals as well. In one instance, after capturing Black Kettle’s village (and killing over 100 Cheyenne men) on the Washita River in 1868, “Custer gave the order to slaughter [875 horses and mules] by cutting their throats,

the role of “zoophilism” in the aesthetics of disappearance, noting that, “The horse in particular was treated like a god by the polemarch,” *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, 95.


83 Elliott West, *The Way to the West: Essays on the Central Plains* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 55. West is noteworthy as well because he offers the most vocal critique of the belief that Euro-American settlers brought about the near collapse of the historic bison herds. As far as West is concerned the idea that “the bison died in their millions almost wholly at the bloody hands of greedy, mindlessly wasteful pioneer invaders” is the misguided story of the prairie in need of revision (82). Obviously much of the material presented here and in the next chapter disagrees with West’s perspective, though his overall belief that just looking for one culprit for the bison’s demise is well taken—though actually argued more convincingly by the likes of Flores, Isenberg, and Lott.
but the horses feared the white men and shied away, and after several attempts, the men grew tired. Custer gave the order to shoot the animals instead. Custer himself slaughtered camp dogs.\textsuperscript{84} The point here is not to diminish the human lives that were lost in his massacre, but to show that Custer embraced a wholesale approach to mass slaughter in his efforts to undermine the indigenous human communities on the prairies. Finally, in the years following Custer’s death at the Battle of Little Bighorn, a cult emerged celebrating his life and death as a hero, making him one of the most mythologized figures in American history. Tim Lehman speaks to this “cult of Custer” when he notes that, “As a famous Indian fighter, he symbolized both nostalgia and progress, both the longing for the purity of earlier times when individualism reigned supreme and the ambition for material advancement.”\textsuperscript{85} Since part of that “material advancement” involved clearing the prairies of bison, among other vital elements of the prairie ecosystem, the bison symbolically filled the role of inhibitor to “progress,” an ally to the Sioux and other native tribes, and thus the natural enemy of Custer.

In many ways, The Life of Hon. William F. Cody Known as Buffalo Bill, the Famous Hunter, Scout, and Guide: An Autobiography (1879) picks up precisely where Custer’s narrative leaves off. Unlike Custer, Cody explicitly acknowledges some of the texts that precede his own writing and likely influenced the shape, content, or message of his narrative. The text that stands out most, of course, is Custer’s My Life on the Plains, which shows up early in Cody’s work, as he quotes a long passage of it to describe the

\textsuperscript{84} James Welch, Killing Custer: The Battle of the Little Bighorn and the Fate of the Plains Indians (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 63. Welch’s fiction will be taken up more fully in the next chapter; for now, his text on Custer stands as one of the most comprehensive analyses of the circumstances surrounding Little Bighorn, particularly as it takes account of so much testimonial—written and spoken—from the perspective of the native participants.

\textsuperscript{85} Tim Lehman, Bloodshed at Little Bighorn: Sitting Bull, Custer, and the Destinies of Nations (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 155. In addition to speaking directly to the mythologizing of Custer’s life, Lehman’s work also helpfully contextualizes Cody’s place in it as well, noting that Cody’s Wild West show quickly went to work making Custer’s death seem like a sacrifice: “By ‘scientifically’ taking ‘the first scalp for Custer’ [from Yellow Hand], Cody established a persona as Custer’s avenging angel who adopted the ferocity of the Indians without fully crossing into savagery” (154).
character of Wild Bill Hickok. Print culture and textual production play a substantial role in Cody’s narrative, in everything from the questionable authorship of the text to Cody’s growing awareness of his own notoriety in dime novels and newspapers in the East. In one example, Cody kills “eleven buffaloes with twelve shots,” before anyone else is able to kill a single bison, noting that, “They felt a little sore at not getting a single shot at the buffaloes, but the way I had killed them had, they said, amply repaid them for their disappointment. They had read of such feats in books, but this was the first time they had ever seen anything of the kind with their own eyes.” In another example, in which Cody is leading the “Grand Duke Alexis, of Russia” on a bison hunting tour of the mixed-grass prairies of Nebraska and Kansas, he tells of how it was “reported in a great many newspapers that I shot the first buffalo for Alexis, while in some it was stated that I held the buffalo while His Royal Highness killed it,” recalling the moment in Catlin’s introductory note where he alludes to the “New York papers” that have been printing his own letters from the prairie. In any case, this example serves as yet one more instance of the manner in which Cody was fully immersed in print culture, to the extent that “many have suspected, or believed, that he must have been the creation of somebody else.”

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87 Don Russell’s forward, for example, takes issue with the “cynics who see Buffalo Bill as entirely the invention of press agents,” and notes the numerous plays and books, including Ned Buntline’s Will Cody, the Pony Express Rider (1885), that were published during Cody’s lifetime (v-vi).

88 Cody, Buffalo Bill, 155 and 157 (my emphasis).

89 Ibid., 309. Recall the moment in Letters and Notes, discussed in chapter two, in which Catlin uses his presence in the “New York papers” prior to Irving’s publication of A Tour on the Prairies to authenticate his own journey to the prairie as the first to print, and thus the most legitimate.

More than any other text considered thus far, Cody’s narrative relies heavily on devices of “plotting,” creating a work that borders at times on the fictional, if not the fantastic. Unsurprisingly, the two places in which *Buffalo Bill* is the most indulgent in its narrative flair and enthusiasm are scenes of bison hunting and battles with Native Americans.\(^91\) Since the emphasis of this chapter is on the former, Cody’s retelling of his “celebrated buffalo hunt with Billy Comstock” will work to demonstrate the degree to which the bison hunt narrative had evolved by the publication of Cody’s autobiography. In narrating the events of this hunting contest, which “had been pretty well advertised and noised abroad,” Cody skillfully builds the tension of the hunt with a series of small details before relating a scene of the kill that relishes in the vividness of its description:

> At last the time came to begin the match. Comstock and I dashed into a herd, followed by the referees. The buffaloes separated; Comstock took the left bunch and I the right. My great *forte* in killing buffaloes from horseback was to get them circling by riding my horse at the head of the herd, shooting the leaders, thus crowding their followers to the left, till they would finally circle round and round.

> On this morning the buffaloes were very accommodating, and I soon had them running in a beautiful circle, when I dropped them thick and fast, until I had killed thirty-eight; which finished my run... mine lay close together. I had “nursed” my buffaloes, as a billiard-player does the balls when he makes a run.\(^92\)

Cody concludes this particular narrative sequence by noting that he went on to kill eighteen more bison, for a total of fifty-six in just this one contest.\(^93\) The gaudy (or grotesque) numbers of bison killed in this single hunt aside, the most notable part of this passage from Cody’s narrative is its tone and styling. The scene recreated at this point in the narrative is obviously a far cry from the hunts recounted by Lewis and Clark and even those included in the travel narratives of Irving and Catlin. This is the “vulgarized

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\(^91\) To emphasize this point, one of the most outrageous instances of the text occurs when Cody and his fellow “scouts” are besieged by a group of nameless “Indians” and, while holding them off, still “finished our hunt, and went back to the post loaded down with plenty of buffalo meat, and received the compliments of the General for our little fight.” Cody, *Buffalo Bill*, 217.

\(^92\) Ibid., 173.

\(^93\) Shockingly, this is not the largest number of bison Cody claims to have killed in one hunt, as he attests to killing “sixty-nine buffaloes in one day” at another point in the narrative. Ibid., 153.
violence of movement” discussed by Virilio in its purest form, at least in the context of these nineteenth-century travel narratives, an ongoing and continual assault on the native ecology of the prairie and its keystone animal species in particular. Not even the notorious stories of railroad passengers firing on bison from train windows can rival the severity of these hunt scenes, which George C. Frisson asserts is “difficult to find a category into which to place this kind of killing of animals.”

For the purposes of my argument, Cody’s own narrative accounts of bison hunts are the most important, as they give clear documentation of the evolution of this trope, as well as that of the “vanishing prairie,” by the end of the nineteenth century. Moreover, Cody is paradigmatic of the type of aesthetics of disappearance discussed by Virilio, because he was likewise fascinated by what Virilio terms the “regimes of the visual.” One such regime, of course, was his staged spectacle of the “conquering” of the trans-Mississippi West, the Wild West show for which he is best known. Though much about this show is beyond the scope of this study, it is worth noting that Cody incorporated the bison hunts that had earned him the nickname “Buffalo Bill,” and that he so carefully plotted in his autobiography, into his stage show. As Isenberg notes, “Cody’s mission, as he saw it, was to instruct city-dwellers in the virtues that the winning of the West, including the hunting of bison, had produced. In one of the Wild West acts, handlers drove a small herd of bison into an arena… With Buffalo Bill in pursuit, the bison fled the arena and headed back to their corrals.” Unsurprisingly, the only image of the bison that Cody put on display at his shows was that of the bison disappearing.

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94 The larger context of this comment is not Cody himself, but “historical accounts of bison hide hunters dropping animals as long as they remained standing; hunters aboard trains shooting bison out of open windows; and hunters, realizing the bison would soon be a thing of the past, frantically rushing to bison country to be able to claim they killed one of the few remaining specimens,” more than one of which describes Cody’s actions in his autobiography. George C. Frisson, *Survival by Hunting: Prehistoric Human Hunters and Animal Prey* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 33.

95 Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison*, 174. Louis S. Warren’s *Buffalo Bill’s America* is among the best recent works to contextualize Cody’s Wild West show, particularly because Cody’s own narrative ends before getting to this part of his life. Joy S. Kasson’s *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West* is another helpful reference.
For Virilio, the most important “regime of the visual” in the production of ideological portrayals of speed and violence is the filmic, because “cinema is important as one of the most pervasive ways in which the absences in human perceptions are both supplemented and redeployed by an external production of speed, displacement and luminosity.”96 Thus it is fitting that Cody and elements of his Wild West show were among the first to be filmed at Thomas Edison’s Black Maria studios in the late summer and early fall of 1894.97 No bison were filmed during these sessions, but short films of Annie Oakley shooting a rifle, a person riding a “bucking bronco,” and two Sioux dances—the buffalo dance and the ghost dance—were captured on film.98 The latter two in particular are of immediate relevance to this study, considering the connection that has been made between the tropes of the “vanishing Indian” and the “vanishing prairie.” Bringing in the work of Virilio, these short films are doubly significant, given the fact that “Virilio [understands] cinema as part of a crisis of belief, in which we no longer believe in the world.”99 As Joy S. Kasson points out, moreover, Cody saw in film the potential to “tell the story of Indian wars directly, replicating in a new medium the powerful blend of documentation and fictionality the Wild West show deployed so successfully.”100 It comes as no surprise, then, that Cody was among the initial participants in the Western film genre, which Kasson notes quickly accounted for 20

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98 These four short films can be found at the Library of Congress website, part of the “American Memory” portion of the site; a chronological list of Edison’s early films, including those featuring members of the Cody’s Wild West show, can be found at http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/edhtml/edmvchrm.html.


100 Kasson, *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West*, 256.
percent of the films made in the early twentieth century. Among the consequences of the rise of the filmic mode for Virilio is the onset of “apatheia,” which he defines in relation to the cinema as: “The perceived world ceas[ing] to be deemed worthy of interest by dint of being theatrically exhumed, analyzed, purified by the pillagers of tombs.” To trace modern-day instances of this apatheia in a Western like Kevin Costner’s Dances with Wolves (1990)—which fittingly includes a bison hunt scene with Costner’s Euro-American character alongside the Sioux—back to Cody’s early participation in the medium might be something of a stretch, but his implication in the bison’s disappearance across genres and technologies solidifies his role in the popularization and perpetuation of the “vanishing prairie” motif well into the twentieth century.

Perhaps the most consistent manifestation of the aesthetics of disappearance that repeatedly appears across these bison hunt narratives is the notion of putting a wounded animal “out of its misery.” In its own way, this idea is also a perfect metaphor for the “vanishing prairie”—the notion that the prairie’s demise is inevitable, so the quicker it happens, the better—an idea that contains its own perverse sense of morality. In his essay “Escape Distance” (1998), Gerald Vizenor reflects on the coup de grâce, or mercy killing, that concludes his own failed hunting experience with the squirrel: “The Boy Scouts of America and the Izaak Walton League taught me and other hunters of my generation the monomercies of the coup de grâce. We learned as hunters and later as authors never to let a wounded animal suffer. Wounded animals were put out of their miseries; at heart, our miseries of the animal other in literature.” The guilt that Vizenor feels as he fires each “mercy bullet” into the wounded squirrel has many corollaries in the bison hunt narratives of Euro-American authors of nineteenth-century travel literature. For the two main bison death scenes in A Tour on the Prairies, for

102 Vizenor, “Escape Distance,” in Fugitive Poses, 130.
example, Irving uses the phrase “out of his misery” in each instance of the firing of the final shot, including the coup de grâce of chapter twenty-nine:

It became now an act of mercy to give him his quietus, and put him out of his misery. I primed one of the pistols therefore and advanced close up to the buffalo. To inflict a wound thus in cool blood I found a totally different thing from firing in the heat of the chase. Taking aim, however, just behind the foreshoulder my pistol for once proved true; the ball must have passed through the heart, for the animal gave one convulsive throe and expired.103

The coup de grâce in Irving’s narrative is thus an attempt to rationalize, and moralize, the killing that has just taken place. However, what Vizenor realizes and Irving does not, is that the firing of a mercy bullet only further delegitimizes the integrity of the victim. Moreover, whereas Vizenor feels shame and guilt for his participation in the death of the squirrel, Irving only feels pity for the wounded bison and a sense of honor for his own good deed of bringing a quick death, however imaginary, to the animal. The coup de grâce is thus the final erasure of the bison’s alterity, a symbolic end to the prairie’s viability on the North American midcontinent as well.104

As a way of concluding this long look at bison hunt narratives, it is worth turning to a couple of cultural critics who give perspective to the human relationship with the animal “other,” a complex relationship that includes, among many other things, both artistic representation and hunting for food, sport, and leisure. Vizenor, for one, envisions two possible outcomes for the artistic portrayal of animals, writing that “authored animals in literature are wild tropes, fantastic creatures, and others are mundane similes of domestication and cultural dominance.”105 I have made the argument throughout this chapter that the bison found in nineteenth-century travel narratives like A

103 Irving, A Tour on the Prairies, 137.

104 Alterity is an important concept to the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and will be considered in greater detail in chapter four. For now, the most concise definition offered by Levinas of this term is that of “the radical heterogeneity of the other,” an idea that fits well with the importance of diversity and heterogeneity (including animals) of healthy prairie ecosystems. Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 36.

105 Vizenor, Fugitive Poses, 127.
Tour on the Prairies and My Life on the Plains tend toward the latter, their very existence in these texts a form of “cultural dominance.” Similarly, speaking to a time period and genre close to those works considered above, John Berger contends that, “The treatment of animals in 19th century romantic painting was already an acknowledgement of their impending disappearance. The images are of animals receding into a wildness that existed only in the imagination.” I would contend further that Berger’s analysis can be extended to include not only “romantic painting,” but many of the written texts from this era as well. Furthermore, the tropes of the “vanishing Indian” and the “vanishing prairie” are implicit in Berger’s argument that the “reduction of the animal… is part of the same process as that by which men have been reduced to isolated productive and consuming units. Indeed, during this period an approach to animals often prefigured an approach to man.” As the above analysis of bison hunt narratives demonstrates, the concomitant removal and eradication of the prairie’s native plant, animal, and human communities not only commonly shared the same agents and executors, but were complicit in the ideological underpinnings of Western expansion and settlement.

As Edward Said argues in Orientalism, “texts can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe.” Put simply, the bison’s absence from the cultural prairie of nineteenth-century travel narratives reinforces the logic of the bison’s absence from the ecological prairie as settlement ensues and monocultural land-use practices are put in place. From the point of view of narrative ethics, in other words, the travel literature of the nineteenth century reduced the bison to nothing more than a trope, what Vizenor would call a “simulation of dominance,” that remains pervasive to this day, a visualization of the prairie “only as it is in the process of disappearing.” Yet the

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107 Ibid., 11.
108 Said, Orientalism, 94 (emphasis in the original).
pervasiveness of this trope does not ensure its exclusivity. To the contrary, the work of telling “a different story” to achieve a “different ethic” that Thomas King implores in *The Truth about Stories* is already underway. The next chapter will thus look to a variety of writers who have made the bison an image of the prairie’s potential recovery. There are no coups de grâce in these texts, only scenes of the bison returning to its rightful place—as a presence, not an absence—on the ecological and cultural prairies.
CHAPTER 4

“HAVE YOU NOTICED?” RECOVERING THE BISON IN THE NARRATIVES OF SURVIVANCE

The assistants sang horse songs, owl songs, blackhorn songs, each time acting out the gestures of the animals... They prayed that the blackhorns would be thick all around them and nourish them as they had nourished the before-people.

James Welch, Fools Crow

The native animals created in the literature of survivance are the figures of transmotion, not dominance.

Gerald Vizenor, Fugitive Poses

The bison hunt that Luther Standing Bear narrates in the story “Standing Bear’s Horse,” from his collection Stories of the Sioux (1934), offers an interesting contrast to the vividly detailed hunt sequences and obligatory scenes of coup de grâce found in the travel narratives and autobiographies of Washington Irving, George Catlin, and “Buffalo Bill” Cody. For one thing, this story and many others in Stories of the Sioux are contextualized within a world of mounting pressures from Euro-American expansion: scarcity of once reliable food sources, shrinking home grounds, restrictions placed on cultural traditions, and more frequent skirmishes over limited resources with both white settlers and other native groups combine to give each of these stories a greater sense of urgency. But what most clearly separates “Standing Bear’s Horse”—a story about Luther Standing Bear’s father, also named Standing Bear—from the bison hunt narratives examined in chapter three is the portrayal of the hunt as a spiritual exercise.¹ Whereas the explorers, settlers, soldiers, and tourists in A Tour on the Prairies and My Life on the Plains partake in the hunt partly for the procurement of food but mostly for the “thrill of the hunt,” Standing Bear’s narrative reveals a more complex relationship among human, animal, and the prairie itself.

¹ Neither Luther Standing Bear nor his father, both Oglala Sioux (or Lakota), should be confused with the Ponca chief Standing Bear, best known for his testimony in the case Standing Bear v. Crook (1879).
The story begins with a Sioux war party seeking out an unnamed enemy who has been “taking their ponies and running off the buffalo,” in order to give them “punishment they were to remember for some time.” On the return trip home, however, Standing Bear’s war party finds a land ominously scorched by fire and completely devoid of life. As a result, he and his men are unsuccessful in procuring food for a number of days, until at last the war party begs to kill and eat Standing Bear’s loyal horse. To this point, Standing Bear’s story is reminiscent of early Euro-American travel narratives, the Lewis and Clark journals in particular, in which starving men were forced to eat their pack animals when more desirable game, like bison, became scarce. Yet, as the story progresses, Standing Bear’s story deviates significantly even from those accounts in which hunting functions primarily as a form of subsistence—as opposed to sport or leisure—by making religious belief and practice a primary component of the story. Unwilling to kill his beloved horse, Standing Bear’s father sets out to find food for his men, not by tracking or decoy, but by invoking a higher power: “[Standing Bear] wanted to go away alone and pray to the Great Mystery — pray for food that his companions and his pony might be spared. Slowly he and the pony went to the top of a hill. With eyes closed, Standing Bear prayed. When he opened them, the miracle had happened. There below him in a little patch of green by a seeping spring stood a lone buffalo!”

Even the hunt sequence itself, which follows closely after this scene of prayer, skips over the more conventional and dramatic details about the chase found in nineteenth-century travel narratives: “Standing Bear wasted not a shot. The first one weakened his game. The

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3 This is especially true of the return trip back from the Pacific in the spring of 1806, when the members of the expedition make several references to killing and eating horses as the only option available to them, such as Lewis’s journal entry for May 10, 1806; Lewis’s account of killing and “feasting” on a bison with a tone of near celebration after these long months is noted in chapter two.

4 Luther Standing Bear, “Standing Bear’s Horse,” 35.
second one — and his prayer was answered.” The death of the bison remains constant, but this narrative departs from its Euro-American counterparts by not reveling in the speed and violence of the hunt, making the story more about the answering of the prayer than the killing of the animal.

The narrative further departs from conventional expectations in its conclusion, when it does not return Standing Bear to his men to be greeted triumphantly for the success of his hunt, nor is the eponymous horse ever mentioned again. But this does not mean that the hunt is forgotten. The narrative has been preserved in the oral tradition, with this particular version passing from Standing Bear the First to Standing Bear the Second, the latter of whom preserves the story in the written form discussed here. Keeping with the spiritual nature of the hunt, moreover, it is also made clear that the site of the bison’s death has been preserved as a sort of sacred space, with the final sentence of the story noting, “In later years Standing Bear the First showed Standing Bear the Second the exact spot where the Great Mystery had placed the buffalo.” Again, there is no overemphasis here on Standing Bear’s hunting prowess nor the excitement of the hunt itself. Instead, Standing Bear feels a connection to this “little spot of green” on the prairie where a prayer was answered, a connection he wants to pass along to his son. In this conclusion, the narrative transforms from a story about starving men who need to hunt for food to a story about the consecration of the land—and the prairie specifically. It is a conclusion that verifies Vine Deloria, Jr.’s assertion that sacred spaces like this “properly inform us that we are not larger than nature and that we have responsibilities to the rest of the natural world that transcend our own personal desires and wishes.”

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5 Ibid., 35.
6 Ibid., 36.
Undoubtedly, then, “Standing Bear’s Horse” documents an act of place-making on the prairie that is quite different from the place-making considered in chapters two and three. The conclusion of the story fits with Keith Basso’s assertion that place-making “issues in a stream of symbolically drawn particulars—the visible particulars of local topographies, the personal particulars of biographical associations, and the notional particulars of socially given systems of thought.”\(^8\) Moreover, the final sentence also has everything to do with narrative ethics: if, as has been argued in previous chapters, the bison hunt narratives of Euro-American writers in the nineteenth century perpetuated the trope of the “vanishing prairie” by creating a textual attitude wherein the hunting and killing of bison were not only justified but expected, then Standing Bear’s narrative does just the opposite. Namely, the end result of the narrative is thanksgiving and reverence—for a place, nonetheless—rather than a demand or desire for more killing. The whole narrative sequence, from the desperation of the Sioux war party to the prayer of Standing Bear to the sanctification of the site of the hunt, is what Vizenor calls a “survivance story,” a type of narrative comprised of “renunciations of dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry.”\(^9\) In its celebration of the bison hunt as a sacred act, Luther Standing Bear’s narrative not only rejects the trope of the “vanishing prairie,” it succeeds in depicting an image of the cultural prairie as a presence, not an absence.

Juxtaposing the pathetic scenes of coup de grâce in Irving’s *A Tour on the Prairies* with the commemoration of the bison in *Stories of the Sioux* serves as a clear illustration of Vizenor’s most basic definition of survivance, namely that it “creates a sense of native presence over absence, nihility, and victimry.”\(^10\) Putting a bison “out of his misery,” as Irving does twice in his travel narrative, is indeed an “unbearable sentiment

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\(^{8}\) Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 144.

\(^{9}\) Vizenor, “Aesthetics of Survivance,” 1.

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 1.
of tragedy” and the creation of an absence in the cultural prairie. The intrusion of
hunter’s remorse that enters the narrative at the scene of each death cannot overcome the
aesthetics of disappearance that quickly reverts the narrative back to more recognizable
images of speed and violence. There is no hunter’s remorse in “Standing Bear’s Horse,”
only what Vizenor calls “transmotion,” which he links directly to “native animals created
in the literature of survivance” and sets in opposition to “dominance.”

John Gamber compares Vizenor’s use of transmotion to the idea of “indigenous motion” in the writing
of Louis Owens, calling both, “a movement, though not necessarily linear, across
imagined boundaries.” Thus transmotion forms a link among authors, their literary
animals, and the natural world. It also allows for a free range of movement among more
conventional, constricting boundaries imposed by forces of dominance. Standing Bear
therefore succeeds in taking a seemingly simple story about the killing of a bison and
uses it to create, in Vizenor’s words, a “continuance of stories,” by preserving the oral
narrative that was passed on to him from his father.

Vizenor’s theory of transmotion also enriches the scene of consecration at the end
of “Standing Bear’s Horse,” as he asserts that transmotion can be thought of as “a
reciprocal use of nature.” This theme of reciprocity is upheld at the end of the narrative
when Standing Bear celebrates the bison’s presence by taking his son to the “exact spot”
that it appeared to him. Virilio’s conception of the aesthetics of disappearance requires
a different way of thinking about motion and movement, as when he argues that, “If all is

11 Vizenor, Fugitive Poses, 135-136.

12 John Gamber, “Tactical Mobility as Survivance: Bone Game and Dark River by Louis Owens,”
Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence, ed. Gerald Vizenor (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska
Press, 2008), 222.

13 Gerald Vizenor, Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance (Lincoln, NE: University of
Nebraska Press, 2009), 1.

14 Vizenor, Fugitive Poses, 15.

15 See Vizenor, Fugitive Poses, 195: “the sovereignty of transmotion is a native presence.”
movement all is at the same time accident and our existence as metabolic vehicle can be summed up as a series of collisions, of traumatisms... Speed is a cause of death for which we’re not only responsible but of which we are also the creators and inventors—so it’s been said.”

This nihilistic way of seeing movement in the world greatly contrasts with Vizenor’s perception of movement and motion, seeing instead that “performative transmotion is an ethical presence of nature, native stories, and natural reason.”

Irving’s narratives of the prairie have no concern for “natural reason” in this sense, yet Virilio’s vision of “collisions” and “traumatisms” prevail throughout *A Tour on the Prairies* and his other western narratives. This distinction serves as the first step in articulating a different way of telling stories about the prairie.

The bison is not always a presence, a figure of transmotion, in native literature. Luther Standing Bear’s contemporary Nicholas Black Elk, for example, tells John Neihardt of the bison’s absence in *Black Elk Speaks* (1932). Speaking harshly of the Wasichu, the Oglala Sioux word referring to Euro-American settlers, Black Elk mourns the creation of boundaries separating the Sioux from the bison and other animals on which their society depends:

> Once we were happy in our own country and we were seldom hungry, for then the two-leggeds and the four-leggeds lived together like relatives, and there was plenty for them and for us. But the Wasichus came, and they have made little islands for us and other little islands for the four-leggeds, and always these islands are becoming smaller, for around them surges the gnawing flood of the Wasichu; and it is dirty with lies and greed.

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17 Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses*, 183. This invocation of “natural reason” is particularly prescient given the connection between “survivance” and “natural reason” that was explored in greater detail in chapter one.

18 *Black Elk Speaks* is a text of considerable controversy, particularly Neihardt’s role in its creation. However, it does have merit as an important work of native literature if read from an indigenous literary critical perspective. For elaboration on this point, see my essay “John Neihardt Writes: Textual Appropriations of Indigenous Storytelling.” *MidAmerica* 25 (2008): 34-43.

Black Elk’s invocation of the “four-leggeds” is a reminder of just how important the bison were to the Oglala Sioux, in addition to numerous other indigenous cultures occupying the prairies at the same time. For instance, Ken Zontek observes that “by the nineteenth century, some three dozen different ethnic groups would occupy the Great Plains, which became the last refuge for the bison in numbers capable of sustaining entire culture groups… Certainly, Native people throughout the course of prehistory and history demonstrated a desire to harvest bison and maintain a material culture imbued by the animal.”

The appearance of the term “material culture” in Zontek’s analysis is a signal that the bison served a practical, as well as cultural or religious, purpose for those Native American communities that hunted it; the bison was a consistent source of food, shelter, and clothing and allowed life to grow and thrive on the prairie in spite of its brutal winters and frequent droughts. Dan Flores helps to contextualize bison “material culture” even further, noting that “more than eight thousand years of bison hunting on the Great Plains [by Native Americans] constitutes the longest-sustained lifeway in North American history.”

For many, the fact that native cultures were able to coincide with bison for so long stands in stark contrast to the intentional over-hunting of the animals by Euro-American hunters, soldiers, and settlers. The argument I put forth in this chapter does not position Standing Bear, Black Elk, or others as “ecological Indians” who lived more “sustainably” on the prairie; rather, their narrative undertakings overtly challenge the fatalistic “vanishing prairie” motif instilled by their Euro-American counterparts.

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21 Flores, *The Natural West*, 53. So as not to risk taking Flores out of context, his comment comes as part of a larger argument about needing to consider the role that Native Americans played in the near collapse of the historic bison populations, as much as the Euro-American “hide-hunters” that pervaded in the middle and late nineteenth century; this quote acknowledges, however, that Flores is cognizant of the “special relationship” that many native cultures had with the bison prior to Euro-American contact.

22 As noted in chapter two, the strong position taken by environmental historians like Elliott West in asserting that Native Americans likely played even more of a role in the decimation of the bison, will not be contended with here; the point of view that sees a multifaceted cause for the bison’s near collapse has
Bison play a prominent role in *Black Elk Speaks*, as several of Black Elk’s earliest memories are of bison hunts conducted by the Oglala Sioux in the years leading up to the major historical events described in the text, such as the Battle of Little Bighorn and Wounded Knee, before the establishment of the reservation system and the tragic reality expressed by Black Elk in this passage. Zontek picks up on the bison’s importance in *Black Elk Speaks* as well. He responds to the same passage in the text by stating that, “Confinement of the Natives followed by transformation of the landscape was the death knell of the buffalo culture pursued by Plains people. The Indians desired to maintain a landscape capable of sustaining the great buffalo herds, in essence, the stewardship of an intact ecosystem.”

The imposition placed on the Oglala society of Black Elk and Standing Bear by growing numbers of Euro-American soldiers and settlers certainly made it much more difficult to enact historic or traditional ways of life on the prairie, including the “material culture” provided by the bison. In this regard, then, *Black Elk Speaks* honors the memory of the bison with its few descriptions of bison hunts included in the text, but the prevailing attitude toward this animal and many others is one of sadness, loss, and nostalgia.

An interesting text to compare alongside *Black Elk Speaks* is *The Seven Visions of Bull Lodge* (1980), which tells the story of the great Gros Ventre healer Bull Lodge as

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been shown to be the most likely, and is argued far more effectively in the work of Flores, Isenberg, and Zontek.

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23 Zontek, *Buffalo Nation*, 24. As with the Flores quote, this comment by Zontek is part of a larger argument, which is fairly convincing, that it is not necessarily fair to place so much blame in recent years on the native communities of the prairie for the slaughter of the bison, since they were not given the opportunity to enact “self-regulation” because of the ever-mounting pressures of Euro-American civilization.

24 Since issues of authorship are a major part of any reading of *Black Elk Speaks*, one could certainly question the role that Neihardt’s familiarity with the trope of the bison hunt played in his interpretation and/or translation of these sequences as he worked his conversations with Black Elk toward publication.
told to his daughter Garter Snake just before his death. In this text, the absence of the bison presents itself as a hindrance to the cultural and religious practices of a society under pressure from Euro-American advancement in the late nineteenth century. Like the Oglala Sioux, the Gros Ventre had a longstanding relationship with the bison on the mixed- and shortgrass prairies of the Upper Missouri River valley. Andrew Isenberg, for one, has observed that “abundant bison served as the basis of [the Gros Ventre’s] cooperative economy, and indeed, according to the tales they modeled their cooperative social ethic on the behavior of the herds.” By the time the narrative of Bull Lodge’s life picks up in this text, however, any “cooperative social ethic” based on the bison has been severely compromised, since Bull Lodge’s life coincided with the settlement of this region of the country—mostly present-day Montana—by vast numbers of Euro-Americans. Though this is not the only pressure facing the Gros Ventre in the narrative, it certainly is among the most pervasive, especially in regard to the disappearance of the bison.

For example, each of the visions experienced by Bull Lodge requires the performance of some ritual or feat in order to be successful. In some instances, however, the ecological reality of the bison’s absence prevents him from doing so, such as when he is meant to construct and paint four tipis: “Bull Lodge was unable to fulfill the command given him in his vision, because the buffalo disappeared after he finished his second tipi. He was forced to abandon his obligation to make the other two tipis, which would have completed the series of four.” A little bit later in the narrative, which is being told by

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26 Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison*, 76. Isenberg refers to the “Gros Ventre of the Prairie” in his text as the Atsinas and the “Gros Ventre of the Missouri” as the Hidatsas, a distinction beyond the scope of this study.

27 *The Seven Visions of Bull Lodge, as told by his daughter, Garter Snake*, gathered by Fred P. Gone, ed. George Horse Capture (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 86.
Bull Lodge’s daughter Garter Snake, the fate of Bull Lodge himself is sealed by the disappearance of the bison, as he would have been “granted the power of resurrection if the ceremony of Four Sweat Tents were properly performed, but that it could not be done because the buffalo were gone.”

Like Black Elk, the potential of Bull Lodge to function as a powerful healer and leader to his people is crippled, in part, by the historical and ecological circumstances in which he lived. In other words, the increasing removal of bison from the mixed- and shortgrass prairies of this region stands among the most significant cultural and spiritual limitations forced upon the Oglala Sioux and the Gros Ventre by Euro-American expansionism.

Farther south on the prairie—once again in the locale of Irving’s A Tour on the Prairies—N. Scott Momaday’s The Way to Rainy Mountain (1969), reenacts his ancestors’ migration from the Rocky Mountains to the shortgrass prairies of Kansas and Oklahoma, mainly by engaging the Kiowa oral tradition. Fittingly, the irrevocable damage done to Kiowa culture by the disappearance of the bison contextualizes much of Momaday’s own narrative. Noting that the last Kiowa Sun Dance was performed in 1887, Momaday goes on to state that, “The buffalo were gone. In order to consummate the ancient sacrifice—to impale the head of a buffalo bull upon the medicine tree—a delegation of old men journeyed to Texas, there to beg and barter for an animal from the Goodnight herd… Forbidden without cause the essential act of their faith, having seen the wild herds slaughtered and left to rot upon the ground, the Kiowas backed away forever from the medicine tree.”

As Momaday relives the end of the Sun Dance through the eyes of his grandmother, the similarity of this mortal blow to Kiowa culture and religion to that of the Oglala Sioux and Gros Ventre—not to mention the countless other indigenous societies living on the prairie at the time of Euro-American contact—is almost

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28 Ibid., 89.

uncanny. The sense of foreboding that characterizes the narratives of Black Elk and Bull Lodge is present early in Momaday’s work, as when he notes that, “There came a day like destiny; in every direction, as far as the eye could see, carrion lay out in the land. The buffalo was the animal representation of the sun, the essential and sacrificial victim of the Sun Dance. When the wild herds were destroyed, so too was the will of the Kiowa people; there was nothing to sustain them in spirit.”

While it may be reductive to lay all of the blame at the hands of Euro-American hunters, soldiers, and settlers, it cannot be denied that the common denominator in these three examples is the pressure placed on indigenous cultures by the westward momentum of American expansionism.

As it stands in the narratives of Black Elk, Bull Lodge, and Momaday, the absence of the bison transcends mere ecological reality or the inevitability of “progress.” In the words of Tim Cresswell, writing on the topic of moral geography, each of these examples demonstrates “the role of power in constituting the relationship between geography on the ground and the practices of social groups and individuals.” Likewise, David M. Smith asks: “How can we describe an absence? Not a case of nothing there, but of something gone.” Both Cresswell and Smith, in their examinations of moral geography, emphasize the importance of power distribution in the shaping of a given landscape; namely, that the actions of the powerful often work as a further means of disempowerment for the oppressed. In this case, the eradication of the bison negatively altered a native prairie landscape already compromised by the intensive land-use practices of Euro-American settlers. In his essay “Pure Power” (1990), Paul Virilio elaborates on the idea of “strategic settlement,” in which “it is no longer the army that initiates war, but rather—through the perservation of conquest—all the inhabitants of the

30 Ibid., 3.


invested area.” Applying this idea to the settlement of the prairies, it becomes irrelevant if the eradication of the bison was official state or military policy; filling up the space once occupied by bison, or any component of prairie ecology, with Euro-American settlers, row crops, railroad lines, cattle, and so on achieves the same end. More than just a trope in literature, the “vanishing prairie” is an ideological principle executed at the expense of native peoples and the prairie ecosystem, with the result—as Vizenor asserts—that, “Entire cultures have been terminated in the course of nationalism. These histories are now the simulations of dominance, and the causes of the conditions that have become manifest manners in literature.” For the Oglala Sioux, the Gros Ventre, and the Kiowa, the challenge is not to fall into the trap of “nihility and victimry” in the face of the overwhelming “simulations of dominance” with which they are confronted.

The trap of “nihility and victimry” is also expressed in what Emmanuel Levinas refers to as “‘becoming bourgeois,’ rebelling against the anxiety of transcendence, a self-complacency.” In other words, simply giving up. This attitude also defines, in part, Levinas’s notion of “totalization,” a term comparable to Vizenor’s “simulations of dominance.” As a way of elucidating this idea, Levinas writes: “Totalization is accomplished only in history—in the history of the historiographers, that is, among the survivors. It rests on the affirmation and the conviction that that the chronological order of the history of the historians outlines the plot of being in itself, analogous to nature.”

“Plot of being” is emphasized here to signal a connection to narrative ethics, as well as to insinuate that included in Levinas’s categorization of the “history of the historiographers”

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33 Paul Virilio, “Pure Power,” 47.

34 Vizenor, Manifest Manners, 4. To give further definition to the concept of “manifest manners,” Vizenor writes earlier in this text that they “court the destinies of monotheism, cultural determinism, objectivism, and the structural conceits of savagism and civilization” (vii).

35 Levinas, Entre Nous, 88.

36 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 55 (emphasis mine).
ought to be those travel narratives addressed earlier in the study that perpetuate print statist ideologies. Totalization, then, is a reductive way of representing the world and a privilege of the empowered. Virilio makes a similar observation when he argues that “pure history is only the translation of a pure strategic advance over terrain. Its power is to precede and be final, and the historian is but a ‘captain in the war of time.’” Again, this “totalization” can be accomplished in a number of ways: certainly the speed and violence of the hunt, or battle, but the simple filling of space or composition of narratives, especially “objective” histories, can be just as effective at reducing the legitimacy of narratives (and lives) that run counter to the hegemonic discourse of the empowered.

Doreen Massey points to something similar in her critique of Western, especially colonial, representations of space—such as those found in travel narratives from the so-called “Age of Exploration”—that fail to recognize anything but “the one and only narrative it is possible to tell,” a narrative that also “obliterates the multiplicities, the contemporaneous heterogeneities of space… reduce[ing] simultaneous coexistence to place in the historical queue.” The boundless trajectory of Western progress thus not only silences the threat of emergent counternarratives that might pose a challenge to the dominant narratives (or narratives of dominance), it also ensures the death of heterogeneity, diversity, and sovereignty. As Levinas asserts, “In the totality of the historiographer the death of the other is an end, the point at which the separated being is cast into the totality…”

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37 Virilio, “Pure Power,” 47.

38 Massey, For Space, 5. Massey’s emphasis on “heterogeneity” is particularly helpful in tracing her analysis back to Levinas’s notion of “alterity,” which is likewise predicated on the “heterogeneous” existence of the other in Totality and Infinity and other works.

39 “Sovereignty” is of course a loaded word to use in the context of this study and the narratives under consideration; as has been the practice throughout this study, Vizenor’s use of the word has the most bearing here, as when he writes that “native ancestral sovereignty is a sense of motion, the reciprocity of natural motion, or transmotion, a visionary sovereignty.” Gerald Vizenor, “Visionary Sovereignty: Postwar Treaty Reservations and the Occupation of Japan,” Literary Chance: Essays on Native American Survivance (València, Spain: Universitat de València, 2007), 136.
indigenous narratives of the prairie, the totality replaces what was formerly present with an increasing number of absences, creating open space, a *tabula rasa*, upon which the colonizer is able to rewrite this very history of expansion and settlement. Thinking back to chapter three, for example, the absence of the bison, through its frequent literal and literary deaths, is folded into the totality, “the one and only narrative it is possible to tell.”

Just as Vizenor, Levinas, and Massey resist the dominance of totalizing narrative discourse, I too will use this point to make a shift in focus and direction for the larger argument I am trying to make. Whereas chapters two and three presented overwhelming evidence that the Euro-American print statism of the nineteenth century perpetuated the trope of the “vanishing prairie” by plotting narratives of the prairie’s inevitable demise—fated “to live only in books,” scenes of coup de grâce and other manifestations of the aesthetics of disappearance—chapters four and five argue that a body of literature exists that is openly resistant to reductive categorizations of absence, advocating instead to what Vizenor calls an “aural sense of presence [that] is the premise of a distinctive aesthetics of survivance.”

This notion of an “aesthetics of survivance” will be crucial for understanding the ways in which counternarratives, written by both native and nonnatives alike, challenge the image of the “vanishing prairie” in the literature of the American Midwest, in part by making present what was formerly absent and by refusing to let narrative death be an end to what Massey calls “a simultaneity of stories-so-far.”

Needless to say, these counternarratives do not conform to the homogenizing, linear narrative history that would otherwise keep them silent, especially in death. But, as Levinas shows, even death itself offers an opportunity to resist the absolutism of the “historiographers” of mainstream Western discourse:

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40 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 56 (emphasis in the original).


The non-reference to the common time of history means that mortal existence unfolds in a dimension that does not run parallel to the time of history and is not situated with respect to this time as an absolute. This is why the life between birth and death is neither folly nor absurdity nor flight nor cowardice. It flows on in a dimension of its own where it has meaning, and where a triumph over death can have meaning.\textsuperscript{43}

The rigid life-death binary that Levinas shatters here is equally called into question by Vizenor’s notion of survivance, which prioritizes continuity—what Vizenor repeatedly calls “an active presence”—over all else. As one immediate example, the commemoration of the bison in “Standing Bear’s Horse” certainly stands as a “triumph over death,” as well as an act of cultural survivance that celebrates the reciprocal relationship shared between human and animal.

Before moving on to specific examples of the aesthetics of survivance, and narratives of the bison’s recovery, we should pause to consider Vizenor’s open challenge to contemporary authors, to write counternarratives resistant to ideologies of dominance, just as his Anishinaabe forbears used narrative as a means for resisting policies of removal and war. To this end, he writes: “That native storiers once encountered the heinous consequences of military and mercenary dominance with liberal irony and stories of survivance necessitates that modern storiers create narratives of resistance and denounce manifest manners, recast literary tragedy, and revoke victimry.”\textsuperscript{44} Vizenor leaves no room in this proclamation for narratives of survivance to fall into the trap of nihility, victimry, or defeat. Black Elk and Bull Lodge, though faced with profound cultural challenges because of the bison’s absence, nevertheless “revoke victimry” by crafting narratives that strive to keep other longstanding cultural practices and traditions alive. Vizenor’s words are also helpful for separating the narratives of the previous two chapters, which are full of images of “literary tragedy,” from those that follow in this chapter and the next. The rest of this chapter will engage an array of authors who pose a

\textsuperscript{41} Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity}, 56.

\textsuperscript{44} Vizenor, \textit{Native Liberty}, 2.
different way of thinking about the fate of the bison; for these writers, like Standing Bear, the bison remains a presence on the North American prairie in spite of the ecological and cultural pressures of Euro-American expansion and settlement. Like Vizenor, the aesthetics of survivance is manifested in the work of N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, and Mary Oliver—writers who have self-consciously chosen to “write to creation not closure, to the treat of trickster stories over monotheism, linear causality, and victimry.”

Writing about Momaday, Vizenor notes that he is an author “of memorable animals; the metaphors of [his] creations are characters, some with names and consciousness. The motivations are natural reason, and a native sense of presence.” The animal most often present in Momaday’s work is the bear, with whom Momaday closely associates himself. However, as seen in the opening pages of The Way to Rainy Mountain discussed above, the bison is also a presence in Momaday’s work, in part because of the importance of that animal to the history of the Kiowa, but also because Momaday clearly feels a strong connection to the mixed- and shortgrass prairies of southern Kansas and Oklahoma. Momaday’s sequence of eight prose poems, The Colors of Night (1976), shows something of this connection to the prairies, as it is filled with images of native plants (bois d’arc and sumac trees, “waves of grass”) and animals, including the bison. For example, a bison appears in the seventh prose poem entitled, “Purple”:

There was a man who killed a buffalo bull to no purpose, only he wanted its blood on his hands. It was a great, old, noble beast, and it was a long time blowing its life away. On the edge of the night the people gathered themselves up in their grief and shame. Away in the west they could see the hump

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46 Vizenor, Fugitive Poses, 139.
47 Momaday’s name in Kiowa, Tsoai-talee (“rock tree boy”) is an invocation of the Kiowa story for the creation of Devils Tower (Tsoai, “rock tree” to the Kiowa) in Wyoming; in that story a little boy chases his seven sisters and is transformed into a bear, and he is Momaday’s namesake. For Momaday’s full account of his name, see The Names: A Memoir (Tuscon, AZ: Sun Tracks, 1976), 42-57.
and spine of the huge beast which lay dying along
the edge of the world. They could see its bright
blood run into the sky, where it dried, darkening,
and was at last flecked with flakes of light. 48

On the surface this appears to be another narrative of the bison’s death at the hands of an
unnamed hunter. The key distinction in this example is the “grief and shame”
experienced by the people who witness the killing. Unlike the “hunter’s remorse” that
Irving briefly feels after performing the coup de grâce on a wounded bison, which is
ultimately more about Irving’s self-pity than actual regret for killing an animal, what
Momaday depicts in this prose poem is an experience of communal suffering over the
senseless killing of the prairie’s keystone animal species. This image of the mourners
standing over the dying body of the bison is also a means of nudging the reader toward
something beyond pathos or even empathy—instead, what Momaday seems to be
working toward is a sense of complicity. Though it was a single man that killed the
bison, the act of the people “gather[ing] themselves up” is an acknowledgement or
understanding that they too played a role in the bison’s death. Writing on the theme of
guilt, moreover, Levinas asserts that “self-criticism can be understood as a discovery of
one’s weakness or a discovery of one’s unworthiness—either as a consciousness of
failure or as a consciousness of guilt.” 49 In the move toward a more ethical response to a
situation like the one posed by Momaday in “Purple,” what one might call a sin of
omission, “guilt” certainly trumps “failure,” the latter of which has characterized the
response to the “vanishing prairie” in those narratives considered in chapters two and
three. 50 Guilt is not yet awakening, but Momaday begins working in that direction in this
prose poem.

48 N. Scott Momaday, “The Color of the Night,” in In the Presence of the Sun: Stories and Poems, 1961-

49 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 83.

50 The use of the term “sin of omission” is not intended to introduce an overtly Christian understanding of
morality to this reading of Momaday’s work; while a discussion of Christian morals is not wholly irrelevant
to the material at hand, the extent of this topic is far beyond the scope of this study.
In fact, in another work that opens with the killing of a bison, Momaday demonstrates how awakening can be achieved through the act of the hunt. To do so, Momaday reenacts a prehistoric bison hunt in the essay “A First American Views His Land” (1997), set 10,000 years ago on the southern plains, the southwestern boundary of the shortgrass prairie, the same landscape upon which Cormac McCarthy’s “old buffalo hunter” from Blood Meridian declares the bison completely eradicated by the end of the nineteenth century.51 Unlike McCarthy, Momaday envisions a person that is closely attuned to the physical place he inhabits, the grassland ecosystem, for whom “the universe is especially this landscape; for him the landscape is an element like the air. The vast, virgin wilderness is by and large his whole context. For him there is no possibility of existence elsewhere.”52 This close attention to place is a recurring theme for Momaday throughout all of his work, but is especially prevalent in this collection, The Man Made of Words (1997). In particular, this idea of place-connectedness matters here because the “First American” that Momaday presents to the reader serves many functions, including that of the original hunter, storyteller, and artist on the North American continent—all three of which Momaday, like Keith Basso, roots in the idea of place.53 This bison hunt narrative, therefore, serves as a sort of origin story for Momaday and the themes of ethics, sacredness, and indigenism that he pursues throughout his work.

51 This is also the landscape upon which many archaeologists have looked for the earliest signs of human civilization, largely through communal hunting activities, on the North American midcontinent. For example, Jack L. Hofman and Russell W. Graham, “The Paleo-Indian Cultures of the Great Plains,” in Archaeology on the Great Plains, ed. W. Raymond Wood (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1998), 87-139. Hoffman and Graham discuss the “cultural complexes” of Clovis and Folsom, of which the predominance of sites offering, among other things, “the first definitive evidence for the association between humans and … an extinct species of bison” are found on the shortgrass prairies of Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico (99).


53 cf. Basso: “As roundly ubiquitous as it is seemingly unremarkable, place-making is a universal tool of the historical imagination.” Basso, Wisdom Sits in Places, 5.
As the essay continues, Momaday’s “first American” soon witnesses “on the skyline a massive head of a long-horned bison, then the hump, then the whole beast, huge and black on the sky, standing to the height of seven feet at the hump, with horns that extend six feet across the shaggy crown.” From this description it is clear that Momaday is drawing an inextricable connection among the three entities he depicts here: the man, the bison, and the land. Briefly holding onto this narrative moment, Momaday does not simply present each entity in juxtaposition to the others, but forces the reader to consider the relationality among human, animal, and ecosystem. However, Momaday is also aware that such a scene, though imaginary, cannot remain static; indeed, the movement and motion of the man, the bison, and the land are as much a part of the scene as their seeming juxtaposition. As such, Momaday brings all three to life at once in the flurry of narration that follows:

Then the scene explodes. In one and the same instant the man springs to his feet and bolts forward, his arm cocked and the spear held high, and the huge animal lunges in panic, bellowing, its whole weight thrown violently into the bank, its hooves churning and chipping earth into the air, its eyes gone wide and wild and white. There is a moment in which its awful, frenzied motion is wasted, and it is mired and helpless in its fear, and the man hurls the spear with his whole strength, and the point is driven into the deep, vital flesh, and the bison in its agony staggers and crashes down and dies. Unlike “Purple,” there is no communal mourning that takes place upon the death of this bison. Indeed, the larger premise of this essay is that the “first American” predates a time in which shame, grief, or guilt were associated with the act of the hunt. The hunter depicted in this scene is a far cry from the stereotypical “ecological Indian,” nor is Momaday’s purpose in this opening passage to make an argument about sustainability or show that these earliest hunters were capable of restraint in the quantity and quality of the animals they killed.

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55 Ibid., 31.
Yet Momaday devotes the rest of this essay precisely to the theme of restraint, particularly as a key component for a more ethical relationship among human, animal, and ecosystem. Immediately after this dramatic hunt scene, Momaday acknowledges that his “first American” is “preeminently a predator, the most dangerous of all,” going on to assert that, “His relationship to the land has not yet become a moral equation.”56 This distinction is essential for Momaday’s conceptualization of the bison hunt narrative, because, “In some unimagined future [the first American] will understand that he has the ability to devastate and perhaps destroy his environment. That moment will be one of extreme crisis in his evolution.”57 The step that Momaday takes is that of awakening: namely, through the violence of the hunt, the hypothetical—and obviously multi-generational—“first American” comes to a realization about the potential harm he can do, not just to the bison but to the whole ecosystem. This is in keeping with Levinasian ethics as well, particularly the potentiality that Levinas envisions for “the awakening of an existence that takes charge of its own condition.”58 Whereas Irving feigns remorse after his first kill and quickly sets out again to hunt more bison, Momaday depicts the act of the hunt as evolving into a far more responsible and ethical symbiosis with the land.59

As illustration of this ethical evolution, later in the essay Momaday poses another imaginary hunt, this one a deer hunt set at the time of Euro-American contact in the woodlands of the Great Lakes, where a “latter-day man” shows restraint in what he kills, for the reason that this hunter “lives on the land; he takes his living from it; but he does not destroy it. This distinction supports the fundamental ethic that we call conservation

56 Ibid., 31.
57 Ibid., 32.
58 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 86.
59 The awakening that many hunters experience after killing an animal is a popular trope itself in environmental literature. Vizenor’s tragic squirrel hunt was covered in some detail in chapter two. Aldo Leopold and Paul Gruchow, who will be taken up in the next chapter, also write about an experience of awakening that comes after a hunt: Leopold in the “Thinking Like a Mountain” section of A Sand County Almanac and Gruchow in the “Winter” chapter of Journal of a Prairie Year.
today.” Momaday goes on to suggest that the difference between his two hypothetical
hunters, separated by thousands of years, is “in that interim, there grew up in the mind of
man an idea of the land as sacred.”

Though it takes some time to get there, Momaday envisions the act of hunting as holding the potential to become an act of sanctification, wherein the land itself is commemorated for the role it plays in the drama acted out between human and animal. Instead of a “lost landscape,” the prairie becomes sacred space. There is obvious resonance between Momaday’s final resolution in these scenes and the reading of “Standing Bear’s Horse” that opened this chapter, in which the hunt ultimately manifests itself as a spiritual endeavor.

For Momaday, the idea of sacredness flows not just through the land but through language as well. Fittingly, Momaday traces the power of language through cultural representations of the bison. For example, writing on the Sioux buffalo dance song, Momaday envisions a deep history for its transference from generation to generation, beginning with the earliest humans to settle on the prairie. Though Kiowa himself, Momaday nonetheless feels a strong connection to this song, largely because of what it represents in terms of the oral tradition. To this end, he offers this reflection: “[if] the Buffalo Dance song was sung not only by the Lakota buffalo hunters of the nineteenth century, but by the so-called Paleo Indians of the last Ice Age, we are talking not about generations but about millennia. We are talking about the life and the life span of words. We are talking about the deepest sustenance of the human race. We are talking; we are talking.”

Again, the work of Levinas is applicable to Momaday’s writing, particularly because he too sees something essential in the inter-human transference, what Vizenor might call transmotion, that language enables. Levinas’s assertion that, “To speak is to make the world common, to create commonplaces. Language does not refer to the

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60 Momaday, “A First American Views His Land,” 32.

generality of concepts, but lays the foundation for a possession in common,“62 resonates clearly with Momaday’s reflection on the Sioux buffalo dance because it too envisions language transcending barriers of time and distance. Though Levinas does not invoke the word “sacred” in his theorizing on the importance of language, his invocation of the “commonplaces” created by language nonetheless speaks to a shared bond that only words enable, such as when Standing Bear’s father tells him about the site of the bison hunt or the mourners in “Purple” come together to share in their “grief and shame.”

The historical fiction of Blackfoot writer James Welch further enriches the bison’s presence within the cultural prairie and, as seen in this chapter’s opening epigraph, elevates the animal to the realm of the sacred.63 His novel Fools Crow (1986) in particular details the centrality of this animal, referred to primarily in the text as “blackhorn,” to the everyday life of the Pikunis, the branch of the Blackfeet that Welch focuses upon most closely. For Welch, the presence of the bison on the prairie is the signal for a truly healthy ecosystem and is a goal that he insists both natives and whites should be striving toward. For example, near the end of his life Welch proclaimed his belief that “the buffalo are coming back. In spite of the hide hunters’ attempt to fulfill General Sheridan’s wish to exterminate the great beast, they are here… We must want them to stay for the sake of the many generations to come, Indian and wasichu alike. Like the grizzly, the wolf, the sandhill crane, and the condor, these buffalo are a part of us and we are a part of them. We are all of the earth.”64 Welch’s comments here are

62 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 76.
63 Welch’s novel The Heartsong of Charging Elk (2000), which will not be discussed in great detail in this chapter because it largely falls outside the scope of my study, serves as an interesting corollary to chapter two, since the title character is a Lakota Sioux who travels to France with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show.
64 James Welch, Foreword to Bison: The Monarch of the Plains, David Fitzgerald and Linda Hasselstrom (Portland, OR: Graphic Arts Center Publishing, 1998), 13. The larger context of this quote is Welch’s reflection on the Ghost Dance of the late nineteenth century, and whether or not he believes if it was effective. While he is ambivalent on the success of the Ghost Dance, his optimistic comments about the return of the bison is an indication of his empathy with those for whom the Ghost Dance was a final act of desperation. The Ghost Dance will be discussed further as part of the analysis of Oliver’s “Ghosts.”
about a return of bison to the ecological prairie, an endeavor that has seen a great deal of momentum in recent years, particularly among Native American communities. Welch’s own contribution to the bison’s recovery, however, takes place in the cultural prairie, his novel *Fools Crow* in particular. For Welch, like Momaday, language and the oral tradition have the power to overcome what a century of expansion, settlement, and overhunting has nearly undone, making his novel another example of Vizenor’s aesthetics of survivance.

Vizenor, for one, counts Welch’s fiction as among those works that constitute a “narrative deconstruction of cultural dominance.” Set in the mixed- and shortgrass prairies of the upper Missouri River—the same region documented by Catlin in much of *Letters and Notes*—*Fools Crow* follows the eponymous character as he becomes a leader of the Pikunis forced to deal with the growing pressures of Euro-American expansion and settlement. It is made abundantly clear throughout the text that one constant source of anxiety is the threat posed by the bison’s disappearance. For example, early in the novel Welch gives a long description of all the uses for this animal, before noting that, “Without the blackhorn, the Pikunis would be as sad as the little bigmouths who howled all night.” Thus arises frequent political tension among the competing factions of the Pikunis, primarily those in favor of working with the white settlers (or “Napikwans”) and

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65 There are a variety of resources to consult for more information on the return of the bison to the prairie. Two places to start are Michael Punke’s *The Last Stand* (noted in chapter two) and Juddh Hebring Wood’s article “The Origin of the Public Bison Herds in the United States,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 15, no. 1 (2000): 157-182; Zontek’s *Buffalo Nation* (noted in chapter two and above), looks specifically at Native American efforts to reintroduce bison; an archaeological perspective is offered by Kenneth P. Cannon’s article “What the Past Can Provide: Contribution of Prehistoric Bison Studies to Modern Bison Management,” *Great Plains Research* 11 (2001): 145-174; for more up-to-date coverage of this topic, see also Richard Manning’s *Rewilding the West* and the recent film *Facing the Storm: Story of the American Bison* (Missoula, MT: High Plains Films, 2010), DVD; finally, for a localized case study, The Nature Conservancy’s Broken Kettle Grassland Preserve in the Loess Hills of western Iowa has started a modest effort to reintroduce bison to native prairie ecosystems and document their work on their website, [http://www.nature.org/wherewework/northamerica/states/iowa/news/news2786.html](http://www.nature.org/wherewework/northamerica/states/iowa/news/news2786.html).

66 Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses*, 55.

those in favor of further distancing themselves from the onrush of so-called “civilization.” In addition to the pressures of overhunting that were beginning to escalate in this region, chronicled as well in Catlin’s writing, a variety of less overtly violent pressures were being imposed upon the bison herds so heavily relied upon by the Blackfeet, Cheyenne, Salish, Gros Ventre, and other indigenous cultures living around the upper Missouri River. For example, in a scene in which the Pikuni leaders confront a “seizer chief” about the growing numbers of Euro-American settlers, Three Bears complains, “Their whitehorns [cattle] threaten our blackhorn ranges,” thus addressing a main source of conflict between whites and natives. 68 There is no direct violence here carried out against the bison, only the implicit threat that they must be removed in order to make way for the more profitable and more controllable breeds of domesticated cattle. 69 Welch fittingly depicts a land and a people undergoing dramatic ecological and cultural shifts, his characters subjected to “images of ‘backward’ and ‘pristine’ space awaiting the arrival of modernity and the transformative hand of the west” that Daniel Clayton points to in his examination of “imperial geographies.” 70 Unsurprisingly, a number of Welch’s characters are resistant to these unwanted transformations.

Welch’s characterization of resistance in Fools Crow is an important component of how he engages the aesthetics of survivance and makes the bison a presence in his fiction. On the one hand are Owl Child and the small band of Pikunis who follow him, reverting to guerrilla warfare and killing innocent white settlers, before eventually becoming the target of the U.S. government and forced to flee for their lives. As they do

68 Ibid., 158.

69 For more on the environmental history of cattle’s introduction to the mixed- and shortgrass prairies of the semi-arid West, see Frieda Knoblauch’s chapter on “Grass” in The Culture of Wilderness, 79-112, as well as William Cronon’s study of the impact of the Chicago stockyards on cattle raising in the “hinterlands” of the tallgrass prairie surrounding Chicago in Nature’s Metropolis.

so, they bring many additional hardships and difficult decisions upon those Pikunis who resist open warfare. Welch clearly does not see much benefit or reward into this style of resistance. An alternative to the violent confrontations of Owl Child and his followers is Fools Crow, who, though awkward in his youth, develops into a competent leader and relies primarily on the longstanding cultural traditions of the Blackfeet to do the best for his people. This is not to suggest that Fools Crow is exclusively a practitioner of nonviolence, however. For one, early in the novel his name is changed from White Man’s Dog to Fools Crow after he kills the Crow chief Bull Shield during a horse raid on a nearby Crow camp. Moreover, one of the more compelling scenes in the book is his confrontation and killing of a Napikwan hunter that comes in search of Fools Crow’s wife. This scene comes about midway through the novel; fittingly the white hunter is described as “the biggest man Fools Crow had ever seen. In his fringed jacket and leggings, with his wolf headdress, his bushy beard and hair, he looked like a molting blackhorn bull, half in and half out of his winter coat.”71 “Blackhorn,” of course, is the word used to describe bison throughout most of the novel. Thus there is a certain poetic justice to the death scene of this “hunter [who] kills animals until they become scarce.”72 Indeed, Welch’s description of the Napikwan’s death at the hands of Fools Crow is not unlike the scenes of coup de grâce in Irving, Catlin, and Cody: “[Fools Crow] watched the greased shooter leave his rifle… and he saw it enter the Napikwan’s forehead above the startled eyes, below the wolfskin headdress, and he squatted and watched the head jerk back, then the body, until it landed with a quivering shudder in the bear grass, the lupine, the windflowers.”73 The death of this white hunter who is always “leaving his kill” does not avenge the death of all the bison and other animals he has left to rot on the prairie and in the hills, but Welch clearly intends some retribution for the senseless

71 Fools Crow, 169.

72 Ibid, 164.

73 Ibid., 171.
killing that has left Fools Crow and the Pikunis with a scarcity of their main source of food.

Yet most of Fools Crow’s power comes to him in the form of dreams and visions. In the novel’s climactic scene, for example, Fools Crow is presented with a “yellow skin” painted by Feather Woman that reveals a series of visions depicting “the end of the blackhorns and the starvation of the Pikunis.”74 The latter is presented to him in a variety of scenes that foretell the destruction of Heavy Runner’s camp by invading “seizers,” the loss of Pikuni children to Euro-American schools, and the spread of smallpox among the Blackfeet. The vision that reveals the “end of the blackhorns” is the most dire of all, and also the most vividly recounted in Welch’s prose:

Fools Crow began to look for those places which the blackhorn herds favored this time of the year. He searched around the Sweet Grass Hills, the Yellow River, the Shield-floated-away River, Snake Butte and Round Butte. But he did not find the blackhorns. He looked along the breaks of the north of the Big River, and he looked to the country of the Hard Gooseneck and the White Grass Butte, the Meat Strings. But there were no blackhorns… It was as if the earth had swallowed up the animals. Where once there were rivers of dark blackhorns, now there were none. To see such a vast, empty prairie made Fools Crow uneasy. Perhaps the magic of the yellow skin had chosen to hide the blackhorns from him.75

Reminiscent of the lifeless landscape in which the kid encounters the “old buffalo hunter” at the end of McCarthy’s Blood Meridian—published just a year before Fools Crow—the image of the world conveyed in Feather Woman’s vision is one of absence, the fate of the Blackfeet sealed in the disappearance of the animal upon which so much of their society and culture relies. Had the novel ended with this vision, one could certainly make the case that Welch’s novel, like McCarthy’s, gives into the aesthetics of disappearance, able to see the world “only as it is in the process of disappearing.”76 Fools Crow’s initial

74 Ibid., 358. For more on Feather Woman’s place in Blackfoot cosmogony, see Karl Kroeber, Native American Storytelling: A Reader of Myths and Legends (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004).

75 Ibid., 356.

76 Phillip Snyder, “Disappearance in Cormac McCarthy’s Blood Meridian,” 129.
reaction to witnessing this vision is in fact one of great desperation and despair, certain that he will not be able to overcome the tragic events that have been placed before him. Unlike the scene in which he kills the evil Napikwan to save his wife, the circumstances he faces in this scene appear initially to be far too overwhelming.

Nevertheless, Feather Woman assures him that, “There is much good you can do for your people,” in particular future generations of Pikunis, because Fools Crow will ensure “they will know the way it was. The stories will be handed down, and they will see that their people were proud and lived in accordance with the Below Ones, the Underwater People—and the Above Ones.” Thus, it is not with war and violence that Fools Crow will be charged with preserving Pikuni life and culture on the mixed- and shortgrass prairies; instead, Welch depicts the perpetuation of stories through the oral tradition as a key to cultural survivance in *Fools Crow*. This scene stands as the clearest example yet of this chapter’s fundamental argument: namely, that just as the publication of the print statisit narratives of the nineteenth century perpetuated the trope of the “vanishing prairie,” so too can a different sort of narrative, defined by the aesthetics of survivance, offer hope for the bison’s—and the prairie’s—recovery. Again, this is in keeping with Vizenor’s conception of the aesthetics of survivance, as when he writes that “natives by communal stories, memory, and potentiality create a sense of presence not an inscribed absence.” Similarly, Levinas writes of the power of language to enact “the rupture with the totality.” Earlier in this study I argued that the concept of the “totality” is comparable to Massey’s critique of Western conceptions of space, particularly the belief in “the one and only narrative it is possible to tell.” As Levinas shows, language enables a “rupture with the totality,” and so a break from the constricting narratives of

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78 Vizenor, *Native Liberty*, 3.

Western expansion and settlement. Moreover, as Linda Bolton asserts, for Levinas “language itself presumes the existence of a plurality, a relationship between interlocutors.”

Looking back to the vision that Feather Women presents to Fools Crow, it is clear that the images that appear before him on the “yellow skin” are but one possibility for the future; they just happen to correspond with the narrative that most closely resembles the Euro-American history of the colonization of the North American prairie. The passing on of stories, however, is Fools Crow’s opportunity to break from this narrative, to engage in what Vizenor calls a “continuance of stories.”

In her discussion of the Cherokee writer Thomas King, Jenny Kerber observes that his work, Green Grass, Running Water (1993) in particular, often “challenges the idea of fixed endings, choosing instead to envision narrative ends as eschatological sites of hope.” Much the same could be said about Welch’s conclusion to Fools Crow, which likewise eschews the ending of a conventionally “plotted” narrative and looks instead to the former blackhorn hunting grounds of the Pikunis as potential “sites of hope.” In this way, Welch’s novel becomes a clear manifestation of the aesthetics of survivance. Though ambivalent at times about the prospects of the Blackfeet and the prairie ecosystem upon which they rely, the closing lines of the novel nevertheless reaffirm the hopefulness conveyed by Feather Woman as she parted with Fools Crow, that other stories or narratives are open to him and the Pikunis. Indeed, the very last words of the text offer a direct contrast to the earlier vision presented to Fools Crow, depicting instead an image of the prairie as a vibrant, thriving ecosystem:

Far from the fires of the camps, out on the rain-dark prairies, in the swales and washes, on the rolling hills, the rivers of great animals moved. Their backs were dark with rain and the rain gathered and trickled down their

80 Linda Bolton, Facing the Other: Ethical Disruption and the American Mind (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 46.

81 Vizenor, Survivance, 1.

82 Kerber, Writing in Dust, 164. Though of Cherokee and Greek descent himself, King’s novel Green Grass, Running Water (1993) is actually centered upon the Blackfeet of southwestern Canada.
shaggy heads. Some grazed, some slept. Some had begun to molt. Their dark horns glistened in the rain as they stood guard over the sleeping calves. The blackhorns had returned and, all around, it was as it should be.  

As it is presented in the text, the location of this scene in space and time is uncertain. That it is typographically separated from the rest of the text by additional spacing suggests a break from the mostly linear trajectory of the novel’s narrative. The present perfect verb tense implies that this is not necessarily some future occurrence, but one that has been taking place continuously over an indefinite stretch of time. This closing scene is a further example of Vizenor’s proclamation, quoted in the epigraph, that “native animals created in the literature of survivance are the figures of transmotion,” as the movement of the animals openly resists more conventional narratives of their disappearance. Furthermore, this passage makes a truism out of Helmbrecht Breinig’s proclamation that “it is language, the spoken and written word, through which survivance becomes real.” In choosing to conclude his novel in this way, Welch consciously makes the bison a presence on the cultural prairie, an act of survivance that overturns the fatalistic images of the “vanishing prairie.”

As a final example, I will turn to a work of poetry, a genre yet to be considered in my study. Moreover, to this point the literary texts under consideration in this chapter have come from Native American writers. This is fitting, since Vizenor’s theoretical inquiry into the aesthetics of survivance primarily pertains to native literature, along with a healthy dose of critique directed at Euro-American usurpation of native themes, symbols, and images. Yet the aesthetics of survivance, and the notion of “prairie survivance” more broadly, will be most effective if an extension is made to the work of nonnative writers as well. Previous chapters have shown the hand that Euro-American print statism has had in the ideologies of removal, exclusion, and homogeneity that have

83 Welch, Fools Crow, 390-391.

84 Breinig, “Native Survivance in the Americas,” 57.
shaped prairie ecology and culture over the last two hundred years. With this in mind, it is worth considering a voice of dissent that has emerged from a similar geographical and cultural background. One writer certainly worth consideration in this regard is poet Mary Oliver, who has been writing about the natural world—occasionally tying in relevant native themes—for the better part of half a century. Oliver fits perfectly into this study because her take on modern-day environmental issues strongly resonates with Vizenor’s notion of survivance, as well as with the narrative and Levinasian ethics informing this study’s literary critique.

In her poem “Ghosts” from *American Primitive* (1978), Oliver briefly turns her poetic gaze away from the coastal, riparian, and forest ecosystems of New England and the Ohio River Valley, looking instead to the prairies of the American Midwest and the bison in particular. By turning the death and subsequent absence of the bison into a moment of potential redemption and presence, Oliver’s poem reinforces the work of Standing Bear, Momaday, and Welch, in part reiterating the message of the bison’s survivance in those narratives with a single question: “*have you noticed?*”  

This is the question, set in italics, with which the poem opens; its repetition as a refrain three more times shows Oliver’s desire to challenge the reader as the poem progresses. The question overtly deals with the slaughter of the bison, indicated by the poem’s second stanza, which immediately follows its first asking:

Where so many millions of powerful bawling beasts
lay down on the earth and died
it’s hard to tell now
what’s bone, and what merely
was once.  

This is a powerful image with which to open the poem, though it is an image of the bison’s absence. The bison’s presence is instantly recalled, however, by the very asking

86 Ibid., 28.
of the question “have you noticed?”, since this is also a question about the ethical role of narrative in preserving the image or memory of what has disappeared. Oliver directly confronts her reader with this question, asking if the bison’s disappearance is a matter of any consequence, if it has even been noticed, and if the stories about it have been forgotten. Oliver’s authorial stance throughout most of American Primitive is that of careful distance or neutrality, but her face-to-face turn toward the reader in “Ghosts” is a gesture, similar to what Momaday does in “The Colors of the Night,” of complicity. Perhaps not complicit in the actual killing of the bison, accomplished long ago and well documented in the travel narratives of Irving and Custer, but no less complicit in the bison’s absence through forgetting, or by failing to notice “what…was once.” Asking this question throughout the poem redirects the reader’s attention back to the bison’s presence, a simple act of narrative ethics that, echoing Jill Robbins, “alters—or interrupts—the very economy of the same that the other interrupts.”

Following this opening image, the poem moves lightning fast through several more images of the bison’s absence. Moving into the poem’s third section, Oliver takes the reader back to the early nineteenth century, the symbolic starting point for the narratives of expansion and settlement in the trans-Mississippi West, focusing in on “a man named Lewis,” whom she depicts on the prairie “watching / a sparrow’s nest cleverly concealed in the wild hyssop / and lined with buffalo hair.” Inserting Meriwether Lewis into the poem at this moment demarcates a starting point for the slaughter of the bison that will follow, though Lewis’s actions are relatively benign. Her allusion to the “perils” of this world, however, implies that Lewis’s presence on the prairie foretells the drastic changes brought by Euro-American civilization. The full force of this change comes in the poem’s next section, as Oliver alludes to the Sioux

87 Robbins, Altered Reading, xxiv.

88 Oliver, “Ghosts,” 28.
Ghost Dance, an act of desperation meant, in part, to bring the bison back to the prairie: “In the book of the Sioux it is written: / they have gone away into the earth to hide. / Nothing will coax them out again / but the people dancing.”\(^{89}\) Though the Ghost Dance was a controversial act carried out by a people with few options left to them, it nonetheless ought to be considered an act of survivance, because of its belief in continuity and presence. Vizenor himself lends credence to this interpretation of the Ghost Dance, as he writes of Wovoka, the Northern Paiute also known as Jack Wilson who is typically regarded to be the initiator of this short-lived phenomenon: “His concise narrative envisioned the resurrection of native reason and a sense of presence. He revealed new, crucial ceremonies that would exalt the ancestors to return, revive the bison to the prairie, and restore a native continental liberty.”\(^{90}\) Given Vizenor’s penchant for courting the controversial, it is not surprising that he sees in Wovoka a “Messiah of Survivance.” It is a bit riskier for Oliver, a nonnative, to invoke the Ghost Dance in her poem, yet she skirts the more divisive connotations of the phenomenon, including the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee, focusing instead on what Vizenor refers to as its “transcendence and survivance.”\(^{91}\)

Nowhere is this more evident in “Ghosts” than the lines, “In the book of the earth it is written: / nothing can die,” which Oliver uses to introduce the Sioux and the Ghost Dance both to her poem.\(^{92}\) The insertion of this more hopeful image shows that Oliver is

\(^{89}\) Ibid., 29 (italics in the original).

\(^{90}\) Vizenor, *Native Liberty*, 69. A number of other writers discussed in this study have written about the Ghost Dance. In addition to Mary Oliver, another Euro-American author of the prairie who has taken up this subject is Hamlin Garland, whose sequence of stories “The Silent Eaters” in *The Book of the American Indian* (1923) fictionalizes the introduction of the Ghost Dance to the Sioux. Among those native writers that have taken up the subject are Black Elk and Luther Standing, who includes a chapter on “The Ghost Dance Troubles” in his autobiography *My People the Sioux* (1928). More contemporary perspectives, in addition to Vizenor, are offered by Welch (see n. 64 above) and Momaday, whose essay “The American West and the Burden of Belief” addresses what he calls “the mirage of the Ghost Dance” (91).

\(^{91}\) Vizenor, *Native Liberty*, 73.

\(^{92}\) Oliver, “Ghosts,” 29.
not entirely fixated on the bison’s absence, though the continuation of her narrative requires a return to reality. To do so, the hopefulness of the Sioux Ghost Dance is juxtaposed, in the next section, with the most violent imagery included in the entire poem:

   Passengers shooting from train windows
      could hardly miss, they were
      that many.

   Afterward the carcasses
      stank unbelievably, and sang with flies,ibboned
      with slopes of white fat,
      black ropes of blood — hellhunks
      in the prairie heat.  

Of course, these lines call to mind some of the more notorious images of the bison’s slaughter on the prairie, particularly those instances in which the animal was shot from trains and left to rot on the prairie. How much of these stories is sheer hyperbole does not lessen the narrative effect in Oliver’s poem. Indeed, the suddenness with which Oliver moves—from the appearance of Lewis to the Sioux Ghost Dance to the rotting “hellhunks” of the slaughtered bison—works to enhance the sense of tragedy that comprises the poem’s middle sections. Oliver intentionally leaves the reader with a feeling of the world slipping away and manages to capture something of the speed and violence that characterize nineteenth-century bison hunt narratives.

   Scenes of such unnatural violence are uncharacteristic in Oliver’s poetry. Though much of her poetry reflects upon the often one-sided violence of the natural world, rarely does manmade degradation intrude so forcefully upon her work. Indeed, Oliver seems much more interested in redemption, a quality that Jeffery Thompson makes note of in her work as well, writing, “grief exists [in Oliver’s poetry] not to torment or so that rapture can transpire; loss exists so gain can follow.”  

93 Ibid., 29.

conclusion, one can see very much the same process taking place. In the poem’s
penultimate stanza Oliver marks a dramatic shift in tone by again asking, three times in
just twelve lines, “have you noticed?”. Though still fixated on images of the bison’s
disappearance, by repeating that question throughout this stanza, Oliver looks for an
acknowledgement from the reader that at least the “ghost” of the bison, some memory of
its former prominence on the prairie, has been recovered through the progression of the
poem’s narrative. Doing so allows Oliver to move into the poem’s concluding lines,
where she finally makes contact with the bison, however fleeting it may be:

Once only, and then in a dream,
I watched while, secretly
and with the tenderness of any caring woman,
a cow gave birth
to a red calf, tongued him dry and nursed him
in a warm corner
of the clear night
in the fragrant grass
in the wild domains
of the prairie spring, and I asked them,
in my dream I knelt down and asked them
to make room for me.95

No longer asking anything of the reader, Oliver concludes “Ghosts” instead by asking to
be included as a part of this anthropomorphized bison family, a striking contrast from the
vision of “hellhunks” depicted only a few lines before. Reminiscent of the final lines of
Welch’s Fools Crow, the dreamlike quality of this vision feels far removed from the grim
reality of the bison’s slaughter earlier in the poem. Like Welch’s concluding lines,
Oliver’s closing image is impossible to pin down in space and time, once again invoking
a sense of continuity or potentiality, central not only to Vizenor’s concept of survivance,
but transmotion as well: “transmotion is an original natural union in the stories of
emergence and migration that relate humans to an environment and to the spiritual and

95 Oliver, “Ghosts,” 30. “Cow,” of course, should not be read as a synonym for “cattle,” but as the word
used to describe the mature female of any number of animals, including bison, elephants, and moose.
political significance of animals and other creations."\(^\text{96}\) Above all else, the presence of transmotion at the end of “Ghosts” is a moment of both transcendence and awakening.

In Levinasian terms, it is in Oliver’s poem that the reader comes closest to a face-to-face encounter with the Other, in this case the bison. Oliver’s choice to turn to the first person in the final stanza of the poem lends further weight to a Levinasian reading, as Robbins states that, “The ‘I' (le moi) in Levinas is characterized as identification. This means that the I consists in ‘recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it’, and this includes losing itself, ennui, repugnance, self-aversion, and all the seeming extremes of self-alienation. All these are recuperable by the I."\(^\text{97}\) Recuperation, which happens for the bison in all of the narratives considered in this chapter, lends yet another layer to the aesthetics of survivance—along with continuity, reciprocity, complicity, and so on—and further distinguishes these texts from the bison hunt narratives considered in the previous chapter, particularly from the perspective of narrative ethics. The speed and violence of print statist narratives is ultimately self-defeating, a principle championed by Levinas and illustrated most clearly in Oliver’s “Ghosts.” Writing of violence and killing in the context of the face-to-face encounter with the Other, Levinas asserts:

> The triumph of this power [killing] is its defeat as power. At the very moment when my power to kill is realized, the other has escaped. In killing, I can certainly attain a goal, I can kill the way I hunt, or cut down trees, or slaughter animals—but then I have grasped the other in the opening of being in general, as an element of the world in which I stand. I have seen him on the horizon. I have not looked straight at him. I have not looked him in the face.\(^\text{98}\)

In other words, though violence may seem to be an effective way of gaining possession over the Other, it achieves precisely the opposite by destroying that relationship, thus

\(^\text{96}\) Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses*, 183.

\(^\text{97}\) Robbins, *Altered Reading*, 3.

\(^\text{98}\) Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 9-10. This passage from Levinas quoted above is a rare instance in which he considers violence toward the natural world alongside violence toward human beings. In this way it is particularly relevant here, as it shows that ethical considerations ought to be broadened to include plants, animals, and the land itself, an idea echoed in Aldo Leopold’s “land ethic” that will play an important role in the final chapter of this study.
eliminating any opportunity for power and control, in part by denying the alterity of the Other. In many ways this seems to be what Oliver is working at in her representations of violence toward the bison. Her desire to join the bison family at the end of the poem is a revocation of violence and a nearly literal effort to look the animal “in the face.” More importantly, the repetition of the question “*have you noticed?*” goes a long way toward getting the reader to make a similar turn toward the face of the Other, by not ignoring the plight of the bison—itself a form of violence—but instead giving the animal, and really the whole ecology and culture of the prairie, its due attention. As Oliver states so deftly in another work, “Attention is the beginning of devotion,” an idea that resonates throughout the entirety of “Ghosts,” in the commemoration of the bison at the end of “Standing Bear’s Horse,” in the ethical evolution of Momaday’s “First American,” and in the closing scenes of *Fools Crow.*

To conclude, there should be little doubt of the powerful contrast between the aesthetics of disappearance employed in the work of Irving, Catlin, and Custer and the aesthetics of survivance practiced by Momaday, Welch, and Oliver. From the perspective of narrative ethics, it is not inaccurate to suggest that the slaughter of the bison—symbolic of the wholesale decimation of prairie ecosystems throughout North America—narrated in texts like *A Tour on the Prairies* and *My Life on the Plains* is to some degree mitigated by the bison’s recuperation in works like *Fools Crow* and “Ghosts.” This is why the aesthetics of survivance is such an important literary project to utilize in reading narratives written from and about the prairie. On the one hand, as Karl Kroeber writes, “*survivance* subtly reduces the power of the destroyer… [it has] connotations not toward loss but renewal and continuity in the future rather than

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100 Mary Oliver, “Upstream,” *Blue Iris* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 56.
memorializing the past."¹¹¹ Unlike the aesthetics of disappearance, the aesthetics of survivance thus challenges the trope of the “vanishing prairie” and invalidates the common perception that any hope for the prairie’s existence was lost long before writers like Momaday, Welch, and Oliver came along. On the other hand, and moving forward, the aesthetics of survivance offers a helpful vocabulary for addressing those texts that do not see the prairie as a “lost landscape,” but instead make a case for its continued preservation and recovery. Certainly the writers considered in this chapter fall into this category; so too do a number of writers who have for too long been understudied and underappreciated, despite lending a convincing voice to the necessity of restoring the ecological and cultural prairie. Building on the work of this chapter, the final chapter of this study will turn its attention to a concept I call the “aesthetics of restoration” and the effort to recuperate the ecological and cultural prairie throughout the American Midwest.

CHAPTER 5
“FOREVER IN THE BOOK”: CONTEMPORARY PRAIRIE LITERATURE AND THE AESTHETICS OF RESTORATION

That the prairie is rich is known to the humblest deermouse; why the prairie is rich is a question seldom asked in all the still lapse of the ages.

Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac

We need new stories, new terms and conditions that are relevant to the love of land, a new narrative that would imagine another way, to learn the infinite mystery and movement at work in the world.

Linda Hogan, Dwellings

One of the images of the prairie that my argument hopes to challenge or overturn is that of a “lost landscape,” a fatalistic view of the prairie as an ecosystem all but forgotten and long past any hope for recovery. Along with the notion of the “vanishing prairie,” these reductive images of the cultural prairie are a manifestation of what Paul Virilio terms the aesthetics of disappearance, that “vulgarized violence of movement” epitomized on the North American prairies by the forward march of Western expansion and settlement beginning in the early nineteenth century. In the previous chapter, I offered Gerald Vizenor’s aesthetics of survivance as one remedy to the portrayal of the prairie as a “lost landscape,” particularly in narratives of the bison’s recovery by Standing Bear, Momaday, Welch, and Oliver. In this, the closing chapter, I will pose another rectification to images of “absence, nihility, and victimry”; in doing so, I will argue that certain contemporary narratives written about the prairie embody an “aesthetics of restoration,” a term coined here not only to address those narratives in which the prairie is an “active presence,” but also to emphasize the role that the cultural prairie can have in helping to recover the ecological prairie.1 In other words, this chapter will explore what Linda Hogan describes as a “new narrative that would imagine another way”—as it

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1 In keeping with Vizenor’s notion of “survivance,” the word “restorance” was considered in place of “aesthetics of restoration,” in order to emphasize the sense of action and continuity that Vizenor finds in the suffix “ance.” However, survivance is employed so successfully and powerfully by Vizenor that the effort to coin a similar word ultimately feels more like a cheap modification than an equally effective critical tool.
concerns this study, “another way” being an image of the prairie as a thriving, vibrant ecosystem—beginning with the work of Aldo Leopold, then tracing a similar sentiment through the memoiristic nonfiction of Paul Gruchow, the fiction of Annie Proulx, and the poetry of Linda Hogan. Aside from Leopold, whose prominence in American environmental discourse is well established, these are not the writers usually discussed in analyses of prairie literature. Much of the literary criticism devoted to the prairie focuses on regionalist fiction, in the work of writers like Willa Cather, Hamlin Garland, and O.E. Rolvaag. Yet, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, the image of the prairie offered by writers like Leopold, Gruchow, Proulx, and Hogan allows the discussion of prairie literature to move beyond regionalism and to include a more concentrated focus on restoration.

At the heart of the aesthetics of restoration is the work of restoration ecology. Though the writers examined later in the chapter do not necessarily engage in the hands-on work of restoration, the cultural restoration that their work advocates nonetheless embodies the spirit of prairie restoration. For example, Leopold biographer Curt Meine offers a definition of prairie restoration that is inspired by both Leopold’s writing and his own hands-on fieldwork: “Prairie restoration…was, and remains, an act of defiance, of cultural evolution, and of commitment, aiming to reconnect people and landscape and to establish continuity among the past, present, and future… the reimagination of the North.

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2 In general, the Midwestern regionalist fiction of the early twentieth century has not been included in this study, in part because it has been covered so extensively in past scholarship and in part because texts like Main-Travelled Roads (1891), My Antonia (1918), and Giants in the Earth (1927) largely fall outside the discussion of the aesthetics of disappearance or the aesthetics of survivance; however, their importance to the larger study of prairie literature is not to be diminished by their absence from this study. For two interesting takes on Midwestern regionalism as it pertains to the prairie, see Tom Lutz, “Cosmopolitan Vistas: Willa Cather, Hamlin Garland, and the Literary Value of Regionalism,” in Recovering the Prairie, ed. Robert F. Sayre (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 86-106 and Edward Watts, “The Midwest as Colony: Transnational Regionalism” in Regionalism and the Humanities, eds. Timothy R. Mahoney and Wendy J. Katz (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 167-189.

3 Mutel defines restoration ecology as “the art and science of healing nature by reinstating the native biodiversity and ecological processes that once defined a given region,” The Emerald Horizon, 190.
American prairie has been both a prelude to and product of restoration—not only of the land, but of ourselves within it.”4 As this study has emphasized throughout the arc of its argument, Meine’s statement offers a clear articulation of the connection that exists between the ecological and the cultural prairie, that it is impossible to successfully restore one component of the prairie without the other. Building on this idea, the aesthetics of restoration is predicated upon a type of narrative that enacts a new sort of place-making in the American Midwest, one that likewise aims to “reconnect people and landscape.”

In doing the work of cultural restoration, these narratives make an equally important contribution to the “reimagination of the North American prairie,” particularly in giving the prairie a more prominent place in local, national, and global environmental debates. Finally, as a way of further emphasizing the importance of the cultural component of prairie restoration, the title of this chapter takes the phrase “forever in the book” from Vizenor’s long poem *Bear Island: The War at Sugar Point* (2006), which is a narrative retelling of a forgotten battle of the so-called “Indian Wars,” a victory for the Anishinaabe.5 This title thus sets my work in direct opposition to Catlin’s belief that certain elements of the prairie are fated “to live only in books,” an unmistakable expression of the prairie as a “lost landscape.”

The word “landscape,” like the words “nature” or “environment,” is so ubiquitous in studies of nature writing and ecocriticism that it is virtually meaningless. Yet the word carries important implications and significations that are worth elucidating, since discussions about the state of the prairie—and particularly its future—typically involve

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5 Gerald Vizenor, *Bear Island: The War at Sugar Point* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). This work will be discussed in greater detail near the end of the chapter. For now, it is worth noting that the line “forever in the book” is a repudiation of the fact, as Jace Weaver notes in the introduction, that “The incident [at Bear Island] was erased from conscious memory” shortly after it occurred, xii. See also Alan Velie, “The War Cry of the Trickster: The Concept of Survivance in Gerald Vizenor’s *Bear Island: The War at Sugar Point,*” in *Survivance: Narrative of Native Presence*, ed. Gerald Vizenor (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 147-162.
some manifestation of this word, from agrarian landscapes to suburban landscapes to landscape restoration. Don Mitchell, whose emphasis on the “social relations” that shape landscapes was noted in the introduction, argues that “as a representation, landscape is also ideology. It is a specific way of seeing; that is, while landscape signifies the look of the land, it also signifies a specific way of looking at the land.”\(^6\) The more benign uses of the word in mainstream environmental or geographical discourse do not necessarily take full account of landscape’s ideological underpinnings. For example, a work like Barry Lopez’s *Home Ground*, which explicitly claims to be an exploration of “Language for an American landscape,” does not always encapsulate a more critical understanding that “landscape is a mode of controlling a view;” including “the power to define what a landscape is, what it means, who belongs to it and who belongs in it.”\(^7\) Similarly, Tim Cresswell writes of the ideological component of landscape through an analogy with texts and reading, noting that, “Like a book, the landscape is created by authors, and the end product attempts to create certain meanings… The text is subject to multiple readings despite the fact that some readings are encouraged more than others. We can thus talk of a hierarchy of readings, with favored, normal, accepted readings and discouraged, heretical, abnormal readings—dominant readings and subordinate readings.”\(^8\) Cresswell’s observations are of a mind with Edward Said’s examination of textual attitudes, covered extensively in chapter two, as both envision a connection between reading and place, especially the influence that a given reading—either literally, of a text,

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\(^7\) Ibid., 53. As with the discussion of *Home Ground* in the introduction, this critique is not meant to devalue the usefulness of that text in exploring the connections between language and landscape, in any sense of that word; instead, like the definition for “Prairie,” the work as a whole occasionally misses an opportunity to touch on the ideological, political, or ethical ramifications of the words it seeks to define or describe.

or figuratively, of a landscape—can have on the way a place is experienced. Thus when Said notes that although “one cannot ontologically obliterate [a place]… one does have the means to capture it, treat it, describe it, improve it, radically alter it,” he is speaking to an equally powerful ideological force at work in the negotiation of unknown or unfamiliar landscapes, such as the Euro-American encounter with the prairie beginning in the nineteenth-century.⁹

Extending this discussion to the expressly cultural realm of artistic creation, John Berger echoes Said in Ways of Seeing (1972), his interrogation of visual interpretation and subjectivity. Speaking to the personal biases that commonly influence perception and interpretation, Berger argues: “The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe,” going on to add, “although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing.”¹⁰ Berger’s conceptualization of the subjectivity of different “ways of seeing” is worth pairing with this analysis of the ideology of the prairie as a “lost landscape” because the cultural landscapes under consideration in this chapter, and really the whole study, are image based—in the sense that they appear as images in literature, painting, photography, and so on. As Berger sees it, then, these cultural landscapes are subject to the same ideological influences as their “real world” counterparts. Berger touches on this idea in Ways of Seeing when he writes:

When we ‘see’ a landscape, we situate ourselves in it. If we ‘saw’ the art of the past, we would situate ourselves in history. When we are prevented from seeing it, we are being deprived of the history which belongs to us. Who benefits from this deprivation? In the end, the art of the past is being mystified because a privileged minority is striving to invent a history which can retrospectively justify the role of the ruling classes, and such a justification can no longer make sense in modern terms. And so,

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⁹ Said, Orientalism, 95. Said’s word “Orient” has been replaced by “place” above in order to highlight the universality of this particular component of his theory of Orientalism; doing so is not meant to reduce the singularity of the European colonial project in the countries Said focuses upon in Orientalism, but more to show that similar colonial undertakings, exercising similar colonial practices, were occurring worldwide.

¹⁰ Ibid., 9.
inevitably, it mystifies.\textsuperscript{11}

Though not dwelling long on the issue of “landscape” in this passage, Berger’s language nonetheless invokes the writing of Levinas discussed at length in chapter four, wherein history manifests itself as the power of the totality in order to obfuscate the claims of the disempowered.\textsuperscript{12} Berger’s assertion in \textit{Ways of Seeing} that a “deprivation” occurs when the “art of the past” is withheld from view is analogous to the above discussion of ideology and landscape, since a comparable argument could be made that certain landscapes, such as the prairie, have been intentionally “mystified”—such as in the trope of the “vanishing prairie” discussed in chapters two and three—in order to make way for landscapes more suitable to the dominant ideology. When Berger makes the observation that, “We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice,” he rightly articulates the aesthetic and ethical consequences in certain “ways of seeing”; however, the main point of his argument is that the “choice” to look is often limited, controlled, or denied by those who would prefer a person’s attention be directed elsewhere.\textsuperscript{13} For a variety of reasons, certain landscapes—such as the prairie—have been all but obscured from view over the last two centuries to the degree that few native Midwesterners today would know a healthy prairie by sight, much less be able to appreciate it on an aesthetic (cultural) level.

Turning our attention back to the landscapes of the American Midwest, we may now consider this ideological understanding of landscape alongside a literary case study, specifically James Heart’s poem “Landscape—Iowa” (1973). Since this is a poem not well known by a larger audience, it is worth quoting in full:

\begin{flushright}
\textit{Landscape—Iowa} (1973)
\end{flushright}

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., 11.

\textsuperscript{12}cf. Levinas, \textit{Totality and Infinity}: “Historiography recounts the way the survivors appropriate the works of the dead wills to themselves; it rests on the usurpation carried out by the conquerors, that is, by the survivors; it recounts enslavement, forgetting the life that struggles against slavery,” 228.

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid, 8. For example, in a propagandist cultural document like \textit{Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Iowa} (1875) the viewer does not have the choice to see the prairie because it is withheld from view by the mapmaker, who has made a choice to leave it off the map entirely and replaced it with roadways, railroads, farmhouses, churches, and school buildings, thereby making a choice, as Denis Wood asserts, to serve the mapmakers own interests.
no one who lives here
knows how to tell the stranger
what it’s like, the land I mean,
farms all gently rolling,
squared off by roads and fences,
creased by streams, stubbled with groves,
a land not known by mountain’s height
or tides of either ocean,
a land in its working clothes,
sweaty with dew, thick-skinned loam,
a match for the men who work it,
breathes dust and pollen, wears furrows
and meadows, endures drought and flood.
Muscles bulge and swell in horizons
of corn, lakes of purple alfalfa,
a land drunk on spring promises,
half-crazed with growth—I can no more
tell the secrets of its dark depths
than I can count the banners in a
farmer’s eye at spring planting.  

First, this is a poem by a native Iowan whose reading of a specific Iowa landscape both
legitimizes its uniqueness in the larger North American landscape and affirms its appeal
for anyone “who lives here.” However, the landscape that Hearst describes is primarily
agricultural and thus is directly at odds with many of the claims that this study has made
about the detrimental effects large-scale agriculture has had on native prairie ecosystems.
In particular, the image of “horizons / of corn, lakes of purple alfalfa, / a land drunk on
spring promises, / half-crazed with growth,” depicts the presence of intensive,
monocultural farming practices and thereby implies the absence of what has been
replaced: bluestem, compass plant, larkspur, and wild rose. The Iowa landscape depicted
in Hearst’s poem thus puts faith in a colonial ideology in which the fruits of Euro-
American expansion and settlement are included and the native ecology is excluded,
aside perhaps from a cursory allusion to “meadows” in line thirteen. This reading is
further supported by Hearst’s description of the land “in its working clothes,” since it so
closely parallels Mitchell’s assertion that, “Actually to see the power at work in the
landscape requires attention not just to the landscape (as form, representation or set of

14 James Hearst, “Landscape-Iowa,” in The Good Earth: Three Poets of the Prairie, eds. Robert Dana,
meanings) in and of itself, but to the social relations that give rise to and make possible the landscape’s ability to do work—to function as a reification and a fetishisation—in capitalist societies.” The Marxist overtones of Mitchell’s analysis are of less interest here than his basic point that “working” landscapes are often given greater value than those that do not provide discernable benefit to human society. This is certainly true in Hearst’s poem, as the “secrets” of the land are embodied more in the fact that it is “a match for the men who work it” than in its past as a self-sustaining ecosystem.

Despite these critiques—and Hearst’s own insistence early in the poem that “No one who lives here / knows how to tell the stranger / what it’s like”—the depiction of a “working” Iowa landscape with high aesthetic value is firmly entrenched in the American consciousness, particularly as it relates to ideas and images of pastoralism. Leo Marx has written most famously on this subject, noting that the most “attractive” feature of the pastoral landscape is “the felicity represented by an image of a natural landscape, a terrain either unspoiled or, if cultivated, rural.” Roderick Frazier Nash, moreover, traces the notion of the pastoral in America back to the earliest settlers, stating that “the rural, controlled state of nature was the object of [the pioneer’s] affection and the goal of his labor,” as opposed to the “untamed” wilderness that surrounded him or her. The

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15 Mitchell, “Landscape,” 54 (emphasis on “see” in the original; my emphasis on “do work”).

16 To be fair, some writers and critics have attempted to defend the aesthetic qualities of the “functional landscapes” found in agricultural settings, such as Allen Carlson, who argues that, “In the aesthetic appreciation of any functional landscape it is essential to take into account the degree to which it is designed and is necessary, for these factors are relevant to the determination of what qualities such landscapes have and express.” Allen Carlson, “On Appreciating Agricultural Landscapes,” The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 43, no. 3 (1985), 308.

17 Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (1964; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 9. The full extent of Marx’s argument is beyond the scope of this study; however, his work on the topic needs to be acknowledged here, both for the way it revolutionized the larger concept of American “pastoralism” and for its central importance to the emergence of environmental analysis and theory in the humanities, including the fields of ecocriticism and place studies.

18 Nash, Wilderness and the American Mind, 30. Like The Machine in the Garden, Nash’s work is far more substantial than can be adequately addressed in the space allowed; his influence on environmental analysis and theory in the humanities is of similar significance.
pastoral image of the rural farmscape is not unique to the American Midwest, though it is in the nation’s midsection where it becomes most pervasive. Hearst’s poem, therefore, epitomizes an idea that has been perpetuated for as long as Euro-American inhabitants began reshaping the ecosystems of the North American midcontinent to better suit ideologies of uniformity, homogeneity, and monoculturalism. The proliferation of textual production and print culture has been undeniably instrumental in firmly rooting the pastoral in American culture, as William David Barrillas argues in his study *The Midwestern Pastoral* (2006): “Not only books but paintings, films, and other media have reinforced this image of farms, bucolic woods and streams, and small towns populated by plain-speaking, upright citizens. The Midwest, according to pastoral myth, is what America thinks itself to be.” More than just an aesthetic category, pastoralism has thus become part and parcel of the very ideologies influencing land use throughout the region.

One consequence of pastoralism’s seamless absorption into the consciousness of native Midwesterners is its tendency to normalize the “lost landscape” image of the prairie, particularly by overshadowing any memory of the prairie as a valuable and legitimate ecosystem. In other words, whatever blow might be felt by the degradation or disappearance of native plants and animals is softened by the assurance that a “working” landscape of farm houses, barns, crops, pastures, and irrigation ditches is the appropriate, or even morally “right,” landscape for the American Midwest. Hearst’s poem is one example of how ideology works to shape aesthetic attitudes in favor of benign pastoral images. Another example can be found in the work of Iowa artist Grant Wood, whose paintings of farmscapes—such as *Stone City, Iowa* (1930) or *Spring Turning* (1936)—are

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20 The notion of moral “rightness” is even more fitting if one considers agriculture to be a mainstay for sedentary cultures, whereas mobility is viewed skeptically; Cresswell addresses the “binary of place and mobility” when he writes that, “While place has been painted as a location of rooted morality (alongside identity and authenticity), a centre of meaning and field of care… mobility has often been seen as disruptive and furtive—morally suspicious.” Cresswell, “Moral Geographies,” 130.
among the most representative of pastoral art to emerge from the region; not incidentally, they are also among the most popular.\footnote{For a more complete discussion of Wood’s influence as a Midwestern artist, see Joni Kinsey, \textit{Plain Pictures}, including her analysis of \textit{Spring Turning} and a more general discussion of the role that he played in shaping a particular image of the region in the first half of the twentieth century.} Hearst and Wood are thus indicative of the pervasiveness of the pastoral in shaping the aesthetic standards of the American Midwest.

Yet the ideological implications of pastoralism, particularly its impact on the treatment (or mistreatment) of Midwestern environments, is worth examining in greater detail. For example, Sally Schauman contends that “our attitudes toward and subsequent environmental management of this landscape grow from our perceptions of and our pleasures in the countryside. Today it is clear that this popular pastoral aesthetic is at work in our everyday perception of much of the American landscape. Since our environmental record in countryside landscapes is poor but largely goes unnoticed, it is timely to re-examine the pastoral theme in the context of contemporary agricultural landscapes.”\footnote{Sally Schauman, “The Garden and the Red Barn: The Pervasive Pastoral and its Environmental Consequences,” \textit{The Aesthetics of Human Environments}, eds. Arnold Berleant and Allen Carlson (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2007), 219. The text in which Schauman’s essay appears—and its companion text \textit{The Aesthetics of Natural Environments}, eds. Arnold Berleant and Allen Carlson (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2004)—both offer interesting perspectives on the issues of pastoralism and agricultural landscapes, along with a number of topics related to natural aesthetics.} While Schauman’s critique is broadly applicable to virtually any locale predominated by rural and agricultural landscapes, her analysis is most relevant to this study as it frames the discussion of pastoralism (and “agricultural landscapes” more generally) in the context of both aesthetics and environmental health. Moving forward, the rest of this chapter will make the case that the cultural prairie’s unique aesthetic qualities are stifled by oversimplified images of the American Midwest, characterized best by pastoralism, in the same way that homogenous agricultural land use degrades the health of prairie ecology by ignoring the benefits of a diverse, “unworked” ecosystem.\footnote{My argument ultimately is not an outright attack on agriculture. Writers like Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson, for whom farming is as much a way of life as it is a topic to write about, are among the most influential writers in framing this discussion of the aesthetics of restoration. \textit{See The Art of the Common Place: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry}, ed. Norman Wirzba (Berkley, CA: Counterpoint, 2002).}
Traditional Western aesthetic principles have made it difficult to appreciate the prairie. As Robert Thacker has written, “[the prairie] is an overarching presence, seemingly understood… yet, because it remains strange and daunting—it is a landscape ever at odds with conventional aesthetics.” These “conventional aesthetics” can be thought of and defined in a number of ways, but in the realm of natural (or landscape) aesthetics they tend to be divided into three categories: the beautiful, the sublime, and the picturesque. Joni Kinsey has briefly explored the relationship between these aesthetic standards and artistic portrayals of the prairie, writing that, “The prairies were sometimes referred to as beautiful or more frequently sublime; rarely were they called picturesque.” Yet she goes on to note that none of these categories ever adequately fit with the prairie, as they were too commonly seen as “featureless” to meet the criteria of the beautiful (because of the perceived lack of ornamentation), the sublime (because of the perceived lack of dramatic features), or the picturesque (because of the perceived lack of orderliness). As a result, Kinsey notes with irony, prairies were often compared, in regard to the number of aesthetic features present and the “embellished” nature of those features, to the agricultural landscapes that would soon replace them. The main point to take away from Kinsey’s analysis is that, unlike Niagara Falls or Half Dome or the Grand Canyon, the terminology imported from eighteenth-century European discourses of natural aesthetics has never been employed successfully to describe the prairie.


In other words, the ability to articulate the aesthetic qualities of a one-acre remnant prairie—like Strub Prairie in Johnson County, IA—sandwiched between major roadways and boundless fields of row crops cannot take place without significantly revising some longstanding aesthetic ideals, not to mention a broadened vocabulary. Kinsey touches on this particular problem as well, writing that “[prairies] are one of the few landforms that in their virgin state are considered featureless and monotonous by all but the most knowledgeable, but are in fact highly complex ecosystems. The cultivated prairie, by contrast, appears natural, but is actually a virtual monoculture, reduced to a few basic crops where hundreds of species had grown before.”

Elsewhere Kinsey describes the problems faced by the “most knowledgeable” in trying to describe what makes a prairie a uniquely appealing ecosystem, noting that, “Even the most superficial attempts to discuss [the prairies] requires labyrinthian negotiation of shifting locations, grassland types, and varying species of plants, annual rainfall, and longitudinal orientation, not to mention the maze of associations that have shaped our cultural understanding of this most perplexing of regions.”

As an example of the “labyrinthian negotiations” that Kinsey describes, it is worth looking at a recent blog post by Chris Helzer, ecologist and program director for the Nature Conservancy in eastern Nebraska. In a posting on December 29, 2010 Helzer’s blog *The Prairie Ecologist* raises a concern with “calendar prairies,” which he defines as an idealistic image of prairies that “comes from seeing photographs of grasslands full of big showy flowers in books, posters, and calendars.” The problem that Helzer raises is


29 Chris Helzer, “The Problem with ‘Calendar Prairies’,” *The Prairie Ecologist* (blog), Dec. 29, 2010, http://prairieecologist.com/2010/12/29/the-problem-with-calendar-prairies/. Though it is beyond the scope of my argument in this chapter, a great deal more could be said of the new dimension in prairie ecology and aesthetics offered by the weblog medium; the usefulness of Helzer’s blog in particular cannot be overstated.
consistent with Thacker’s and Kinsey’s observations on the inconsistency or incongruity that frustrates efforts to articulate the prairie’s aesthetic qualities. On the one hand, a so-called “calendar prairie” fits better with mainstream aesthetic ideals, because the “showy flowers” give it distinctive color, texture, and differentiation. On the other hand, Helzer argues that “calendar prairies” can establish unrealistic expectations of what a prairie should look like, noting that “I worry that someone whose only vision of a prairie comes from a ‘calendar prairie’ image will be disappointed when they first see a prairie in person. Regardless of how wonderful that real-life prairie is, it’s unlikely to live up to the photograph(s) that person has seen. If that happens, it’s possible that a possible prairie enthusiast might instead feel duped and decide that prairies aren’t their thing after all.”

In other words, what to one person is an image of a picturesque prairie landscape will, to another, suggest an attempt at “selling the public and ourselves on the idea that prairies should consistently look like showy flower gardens.”

The basic premise of Helzer’s observations in this blog post is that the beauty of the prairie resides not in its simplicity, but in its complexity. Like anything complex, it is a challenge to fully wrap one’s mind around the prairie: its hundreds of plant, animal, and insect species, its heavy reliance on wind and fire, its miles of root systems and the enormity of life teeming below its surface, its ability to withstand both drought and flood, its role in sequestering carbon, preventing soil erosion and run off, and deterring invasive species. Efforts to reduce this complexity, as a “calendar prairie” tends to do, only detracts from the most enduring aesthetic quality of a prairie. This does not mean, however, that prairie aesthetics is out of reach for anyone. Instead, as Berger suggests about artistic interpretation and perception in Ways of Seeing, what is required is a

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30 Ibid.
31 Ibid. Helzer’s blog includes a number of posts on the importance of tempering expectations for successful restoration projects, including the posts “When Is a Prairie Restoration (Reconstruction) Project Successful?” (Feb. 8, 2011) and “Why Are there Stripes in My Prairie Restoration” (Feb. 16, 2011); see also Helzer’s book The Ecology and Management of Prairies in the Central United States, which is addressed briefly in the introduction.
reevaluation of established “ways of seeing” the prairie. One way to go about seeing the prairie differently is to invoke what David Orr has called “ecological literacy,” in essence the capacity to “read” and understand the intricacies of the natural world, or “the ability to think broadly, to know something of what is hitched to what.”

Because so much of the prairie’s aesthetic appeal is predicated upon its subtleties, nuances, and interconnections, a fairly high degree of ecological literacy is required to be able to “read” it effectively. As Orr continues, moreover, ecological literacy can serve as a remedy to what he sees as a “decline in the capacity for aesthetic appreciation,” going on to argue: “We have become comfortable with all kinds of ugliness and seem incapable of effective protest against its purveyors… Ugliness signifies a more fundamental disharmony between people and between people and the land.”

Whereas Helzer sees in the “calendar prairie” a mere illusion of what prairie health should look like, Orr’s more general observation about “ugliness” in the landscape reconceptualizes the problem in a different way, by asserting that ecological health is no longer in the list of criteria used for defining aesthetic appeal.

Linking ecological health with cultural aesthetics has been one of the main goals of this study; fittingly, this has become a recurring theme in contemporary prairie literature as well. Take, for example, the introduction to Stephen R. Jones’s The Last Prairie (2000), in which he bemoans the drastic alteration of the natural world in and around Boulder, Colorado, in part because of the commodification of the “front range” region of the Rocky Mountains. Sensing something of the “disharmony” addressed by


33 A relevant corollary from the humanities might be Structuralist critic Jonathan Culler’s concept of “literary competence,” about which he asserts that, “To read a text as literature is not to make one’s mind a tabula rasa and approach it without preconceptions; one must bring to it an implicit understanding of the operations of literary discourse which tells one what to look for,” Jonathan Culler, Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature (London: Routledge, 1975), 132.

34 Orr, Ecological Literacy, 87-88.
Orr, Jones writes that “the more I learned about nature, the more painful it became to live in Boulder as our local population exploded and the burgeoning Denver suburbs closed in… I felt my stomach tighten as prairie dog colonies and farm-land vanished under a relentless tide of subdivisions and shopping malls… Then I discovered the prairie, and a slow healing began.” Jones’s text is just one example of how looking to the prairie as a source of healing can be a remedy to the image of the prairie as a “lost landscape,” as well as a respite from the “ugliness” of industrialized agriculture and suburban sprawl. Key to the analysis of contemporary prairie literature that follows will be an emphasis on narratives of healing, particularly a healing of the land but also a concomitant healing within the human body and even spirit—a theme that emerges in a variety of prairie literature, including the work of Aldo Leopold, Paul Gruchow, Annie Proulx, and Linda Hogan. In coming to a definition of the aesthetics of restoration, therefore, the narratives that will be most useful are those that are “radicalizing” because they “[force] us to reckon with the roots of our ailments, not just with their symptoms.”

No writer of the prairie was more invested in the idea of healing than Aldo Leopold, who writes passionately of the “health of the land” as a revolutionary concept with the potential to overturn longstanding, and abusive, land-use policy and practice.

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36 Three examples that will not be discussed in great detail here but are immediately relevant to the intersection of ecological, bodily, and spiritual health are Kathleen Norris’s Dakota: A Spiritual Geography (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993), Mary Swander’s Out of this World: A Journey of Healing (New York: Viking, 1995), and Steven I. Apfelbaum’s Nature’s Second Chance: Restoring the Ecology of Stone Prairie Farm (Boston: Beacon Press 2009).

37 Orr, Ecological Literacy, 88. The context of Orr’s quote is specific to ecological literacy itself, but is generally applicable to the narratives in question throughout this chapter. See also Cresswell’s discussion of disease “as a metaphor for perceived transgressions of moral geographies.” Cresswell, “Moral Geographies,” 129.
Leopold’s proclamation that, “Health is the capacity of the land for self-renewal. Conservation is our effort to understand and preserve this capacity,” is a central tenet of his signature contribution to ecology and conservation, the “land ethic.” Thus, Aldo Leopold serves as an important touchstone for this exploration of the aesthetics of restoration for a number of reasons. For one, he was among the first to act, then write, seriously upon the need for restoring damaged ecosystems throughout North America. This included, but was not limited to, the prairie. Curt Meine has captured some of the urgency with which Leopold approached the prairie, noting that “the prairie landscape that Leopold observed was one of deterioration. It was a time and place that demanded reconsideration of one’s natural and cultural inheritance.” Leopold’s ability to convey this urgency to his colleagues, his family, and, eventually, his readers is yet another indication of why his placement at this point in the study is so essential.

Though Leopold is commonly elevated to saintly status in most environmental discourse—Roderick Frazier Nash refers to him as a “prophet”—the path that he took to achieve so prominent a place in this field reveals that he was no miracle worker; his successes and failures both were wrought by the work of his own hands and mind. To contextualize Leopold is also to gain a better understanding of how ecology as a field, and eventually restoration ecology, gained in prominence during the latter half of the twentieth century. Any contextualizing of Leopold, moreover, must begin with his background in science, since the bulk of his writing was rooted in biology, botany (forestry in particular), and the burgeoning field of ecology, from articles published in

38 Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 221; his essay “The Land Ethic” will be taken up in greater detail in the pages that follow.

39 Curt Meine, “Reimagining the Prairie,” 145.

scientific journals to his first-of-its-kind wildlife manual *Game Management* (1933).\(^{41}\)

The work for which he is best known, the posthumously published *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), departs slightly from the “hard science” that dominated his early work, but even that text invests a great deal of value in traditional scientific field work. Wes Jackson, a successor to Leopold in the sense that he too is a prolific writer with a strong background in the sciences, refers to Leopold as a “field naturalist,” though one who “was also a student of history, society, and culture… His was an integrated life, one in which the insights of his expansive scholarship made him a prominent member of a select ecological academy.”\(^{42}\) Leopold’s development as a “field naturalist” with diverse interests and strong writing abilities can actually be traced back to his high school education and the letters he sent home to his parents from Lawrenceville High School in New Jersey and later Yale University, where he enrolled in the newly developed Forestry School.\(^{43}\)

Julianne Lutz Newton’s study *Aldo Leopold’s Odyssey: Rediscovering the Author of A Sand County Almanac* (2006) helpfully frames Leopold’s life during an era in which the concerns about the environment began to experience increased credibility and caché.\(^{44}\) What especially comes to light in Newton’s “rediscovery” of Leopold is the

\(^{41}\) Curt Meine describes the project of *Game Management* as “explain[ing] how the natural world could be manipulated and controlled to produce more game,” with the end result that “he was seeing far beyond the utilitarian conservation philosophy.” Meine, *Aldo Leopold: His Life and Work*, 294.

\(^{42}\) Wes Jackson, *Consulting the Genius of the Place: An Ecological Approach to a New Agriculture* (Berkley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010), 30. This section of Jackson’s work is a biographical reflection on his own development as a biologist and ecologist; Jackson strongly emphasizes the prominent role that Leopold plays in shaping his ecological, and agrarian, worldview.

\(^{43}\) Little scholarly work has been done on Leopold’s early correspondence home from the East. For his time at Yale, Meine’s biography is probably the best source; for analysis of his high school correspondence, see my essay, “The Lawrenceville Letters: Tracking the Origins of Leopold’s Environmental Education,” *ISLE* 18, no. 4 (2011).

degree to which he willingly inserted himself into political debates over issues of land-use policy and practice. One example that Newton elaborates upon in a subsection entitled “Land Pathology” is Leopold’s response to the dust storms that struck the North American midcontinent in the early 1930s. Speaking to a specific opportunity that Leopold had to address a group of “scientist-colleagues” the day after “Black Sunday”—April 14, 1935, “the day that one of the greatest dust blizzards arose suddenly and spread across the plains”—Newton shows how Leopold took advantage of this public platform and used the context of the dust storms to put a number of ideas he had long been working on at the forefront of land-use policy:

Now heavily equipped with machines, Americans had accelerated ‘the velocity of [land] destructive interactions’ in ways ‘unmistakable and probably unprecedented.’ Conservation, he explained, was a ‘protest’ against this type of ‘destructive land use.’ To remedy existing harms and prevent future ones, Americans needed to better adjust their land uses, bringing them into alignment with the realities of nature. This crisis, too, emphasized the pressing conservation need, Leopold explained, to formulate ‘mechanisms for protecting the public interest in private land.’

Of most importance to Newton’s narration of this scene is Leopold’s insistence that the “realities of nature” needed to be prioritized over the exploitative policies and practices currently in place, in particular agricultural activities that exposed the American Midwest to drought, erosion, and dust storms. The ecocritic Lawrence Buell has made a similar observation based upon the same circumstance of the Dust Bowl, noting that “Leopold knew full well the enormous problem commercial exploitation of nature continued to pose—meaning for him most especially the shortsighted farming practices that had deforested, monocropped, and desertified the midcontinent and still remained orthodox

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**Footnotes:**

45 This is also the subject of William Cronon’s essay “A Place for Stories” discussed in some detail in chapter one; though Cronon does not address Leopold’s response to or writing on the Dust Bowl era, the conclusions drawn by Cronon concerning the consequences of telling stories about the natural world are nonetheless applicable to Leopold’s work on this topic and many others.

despite the horrendous example of the Dust Bowl years just passed.”\textsuperscript{47} Both Newton and Buell are commenting on Leopold’s “ecological literacy,” as he is correctly able to trace the dust storms back to their root problems. What makes Leopold unique is his penchant for bringing such critiques before the public sphere, rather than polemicizing from the comfort and safety of his home.

Newton’s work also makes clear that Leopold’s life coincided with the categorization of ecology as a unique field of study, and predated the popularization of restoration ecology—and even environmentalism more broadly—as mainstream endeavors in the United States.\textsuperscript{48} Nevertheless, in his work at the University of Wisconsin Arboretum and on the degraded farmland he purchased with his family (the now mythologized “shack”), Leopold’s work “doctoring” the land serves as one of the earliest examples of an individual in the American Midwest undertaking the work of prairie restoration. As Joy B. Zedler has written, “[Leopold] did not employ detailed plans, experimental designs, or systematic treatments. He did not have at hand a restoration guidebook… What he accomplished at the family’s ‘shack’ and what he helped to begin at the University of Wisconsin Arboretum rested upon firsthand knowledge and insight, and was marked by a personal and lifelong commitment to the task.”\textsuperscript{49} Leopold, perhaps better than anyone in his time, understood that the prairies of his home ground were all but lost to the forces of industrial agriculture and urbanization. A life’s worth of hands-on fieldwork had also taught Leopold that no cause was hopeless


\textsuperscript{48} Though Leopold is rightfully acknowledged as one of the earliest writers, thinkers, and activists for the environment, the emergence and rise of “environmentalism” as we know it today is generally attributed to the publication of Rachel Carson’s \textit{Silent Spring} in 1962. Some even question whether Leopold fits the mold of contemporary environmentalism, though there can be no doubt that he has influenced and inspired many of the most successful advocates for the many different offshoots of environmental activism.

and that the prairie could be restored, on a variety of levels, with the right combination of smart agricultural and conservationist practice, judicious land-use policy on public and private lands, and the integration of sound academic theory into real-world restoration endeavors. These are the most consistent themes that emerge in the small, but forceful, body of writings that Leopold left behind. Thus, even though Leopold might not be a “prairie writer” in the truest sense of the term, he stands as the strongest example of an individual committed to using the written word—texts, stories, and narratives—as a way of reinforcing the fieldwork of those already involved in restoration efforts and, perhaps more importantly, creating converts to a way of thinking best defined by his “land ethic.”

The major theme of “The Land Ethic,” the chapter in *A Sand County Almanac* for which Leopold is best known, is Leopold’s imperative to, “Examine each question [of land use] in terms of what is ethically and esthetically right, as well as what is economically expedient. A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.” Building on this theme, Leopold scholar J. Baird Callicott has coined the term “land aesthetic” to account for the fact that “an appropriate aesthetic response to nature seems quite as important to [Leopold] as an appropriate ethical attitude.” Though the term is an obvious play on “The Land Ethic,” Callicott argues that Leopold’s “land aesthetic” can actually be found throughout the whole text and is the true organizing principle of the many “sketches here and there” that Leopold works into *A Sand County Almanac.*

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Similar to the discussion of prairie aesthetics above, Callicott goes to great lengths to show that the defining feature of Leopold’s “land aesthetic” is its unconventionality, breaking as it does from traditional aesthetic standards. One example that Callicott gives, which is immediately relevant to this study, is Leopold’s preference for native plants (including prairie species), as opposed to the exotic (and nonnative) species traditionally used to enhance the “scenery” of a place:

From the point of view of the land aesthetic, the attractive purple flower of centaurea or the vivid orange of hawkweed might actually spoil rather than enhance a field of (otherwise) native grasses and forbs. Leopold writes lovingly of draba, pasque-flowers, silphium, and many other pretty and not-so-pretty native plants, but with undisguised contempt for peonies, downy chess or cheat grass, foxtail, and other European cultigens and stowaways.\(^53\)

In other words, Leopold undermines the “calendar” images of the pastoral and the picturesque that have long dominated Midwestern aesthetic standards. A “land aesthetic” based first and foremost on the native ecology of a region—and not on the prevailing tastes and trends of the time—is revolutionary because it resists the tendency toward homogeneity that characterizes the well-manicured lawns and interchangeable garden plots that are ubiquitous throughout North America.

Moreover, Callicott notes how Leopold’s “land aesthetic” moves away from treating “precious cultural resources” as “‘museums’ (the national parks) or private ‘collections’ (the landscaped estates of the wealthy),” giving greater precedence to “representative nonscenic, nonpicturesque nonlandscapes—swamps and bogs, dunes, scrub, prairie, bottoms, flats, deserts,” with the goal of “awaken[ing] our response to the potential of these aesthetically neglected communities.”\(^54\) Whether or not Callicott has

\(^{53}\) Ibid, 163.

\(^{54}\) Ibid, 160 (my emphasis). This is a common argument among those who advocate for greater environmental attention and protection for the North American prairie; For example, Richard Manning asserts that “Our first national parks… were preserved as scenery, and the grasslands were not considered scenery by the descendents of the European tree culture that ruled the nineteenth century. Parks were… simulacrums of nature roped off like a rich man sequesters his art collection.” Manning, *Grassland*, 5-6.
the ideological implications of the word “landscape” in mind when he uses the term “nonlandscapes,” he nonetheless uncovers the subversive nature of the “land aesthetic” by setting Leopold in opposition to the “cultural imperatives of those who make and represent the [ideological] landscape.” He also makes an argument here for the inclusivity of Leopold’s aesthetic formulations in *A Sand County Almanac*, as this catalog of “nonscenic… nonlandscapes” is expressly interested in the types of ecosystems commonly neglected by traditional aesthetic evaluations. Overall, what Callicott describes as Leopold’s “land aesthetic” bolsters my argument about reading Leopold as a progenitor for the aesthetics of restoration. In particular, Leopold forces a reevaluation of longstanding aesthetic standards, including the pastoral and the picturesque, in order to see that the prairie demands a more complex and unconventional set of criteria for judging aesthetic appeal, giving much needed attention to the importance of ecological health, species diversity, and what Callicott describes as a “subtle interplay between conceptual schemata and sensuous experience.”

Turning now to examples from Leopold’s writing, it is easy to see the qualities that Callicott and others have identified at work in his prose. Aside from “The Land Ethic,” the “Odyssey” section of *A Sand County Almanac* best articulates Leopold’s sense of the inextricable connection between ecological health and the “land aesthetic.” In these pages Leopold follows the journey of two atoms, known simply as “X” and “Y.” “X” begins its narrative life in a limestone ledge during the Paleozoic era, a time when Leopold’s native Iowa and adoptive Wisconsin would have been part of an ocean. Following a big jump in time (nearly 400 million years), Leopold dislodges this atom from the limestone with the root of a bur oak, one of the few hardwood trees native to the

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57 Evidence of this ocean can still be found at sites like Fossil Prairie in north-central Iowa (maintained by Floyd County Conservation), a palimpsest of remnant and restored prairie, early twentieth-century quarry and tile production, and bivalve fossils left over from the Paleozoic ocean.
prairie, and introduces it into a prairie ecosystem. Once introduced into this ecosystem, the atom moves frequently and becomes the constituent of a wide range of organisms: flower, acorn, deer, human being, bluestem, deermouse, and fungus, before “enter[ing] a tuft of side-oats grama, a buffalo, a buffalo chip, and again the soil. Next a spiderwort, a rabbit, and an owl. Thence a tuft of sporobolus.”\textsuperscript{58} Though mentioned only in passing, it seems significant that the bison is accounted for here, as Leopold includes this animal—seen in so many places as the object of hunts and mass slaughter—as one more integral part of an intricate system. The constant movement of atom “X” through this ecosystem is a sign of health, not disappearance. That is because the narrative trajectory of Leopold’s “Odyssey” is cyclical, not linear, and demonstrates for the reader a life on the prairie that is very much alive and thriving, down to its smallest parts. The “way of seeing” that Leopold advocates for here envisions a prairie of many working parts, none featured more prominently than another. Neither hierarchical or monocultural, this is a landscape comprised of what spatial theorist Doreen Massey calls the “geography of that simultaneity of stories-so-far.”\textsuperscript{59}

What leads Leopold to his thoughts on the richness of the prairie, included in this chapter’s opening epigraph, is a reflection on the next stage of the odyssey of atom “X,” a prairie fire. Challenging the notion that the fire must necessarily “bring an early end of the biotic drama” that had been unfolding in the atom’s journey, Leopold offers this counterargument:

But the prairie had two strings to its bow. Fires thinned its grasses, but they thickened its stand of leguminous herbs: prairie clover, bush clover, wild bean, vetch, lead-plant, trefoil, and Baptisia, each carrying its own bacteria housed in nodules on its rootlets. Each nodule pumped nitrogen out of the air and into the plant, and then ultimately into the soil. Thus the

\textsuperscript{58} Leopold, \textit{A Sand County Almanac}, 105.

\textsuperscript{59} Massey, \textit{For Space}, 95-96.
prairie savings bank took in more nitrogen from its legumes than it paid out to its fires. 60

And it is this “prairie savings bank” that the deermouse knows is rich, but which goes unknown and unexplored by the humans with whom it shares the prairie ecosystem. Though the atom is eventually washed out to “his ancient prison, the sea,” Leopold nonetheless succeeds in documenting its journey through millennia, focusing in especially on several centuries’ worth of life on the prairie, concluding with the open-ended observation that “For every atom lost to the sea, the prairie pulls another out of the decaying rocks.”61 It is this cycle, if allowed to continue unabated, that ensures the richness of the prairie and fortifies its own healthy existence. This passage is quite possibly the clearest illustration of the aesthetics of restoration in A Sand County Almanac, because its depiction of the prairie ecosystem is both an “active presence” and a “continuance of stories,” to use Vizenor’s language. Moreover, it provides a model for restoring healthy prairie ecosystems beyond the scope of Leopold’s own narrative by reasserting the importance of species diversity, soil health, and especially routine fire.

Yet Leopold is also a realist, and understands that most narratives of prairie life do not end the same way as atom “X.” Thus the second half of “Odyssey” follows the narrative of an atom named “Y,” which lives out a very different sort of existence than its counterpart. Its narrative is by now all too familiar, which Leopold begins by introducing a “new animal” to the prairie who used the land to “fit his own notions of law and order.” This new animal, the wheat farmer, was unable to see the old order of the land and thus introduced his own: “The old prairie lived by the diversity of its plants and animals, all of which were useful because the sum total of their co-operations and competitions achieved continuity. But the wheat farmer was a builder of categories; to him only wheat and oxen

60 Leopold, A Sand County Almanac, 105-106. Most of the texts on prairie ecology, including the work of Helzer, Mutel, Savage, and Shirley, all discuss the importance of fire in preserving and/or restoring prairie health by limiting the spread of invasive species and encouraging the growth of native plants tolerant to, and having evolved with, prairie fire.

were useful.”62 As Leopold tells it, the “empire of wheat” built by the farmer soon collapsed, replaced by the raising of alfalfa for the feeding of livestock and then eventually corn. Sixty-plus years after Leopold wrote this section, the American Midwest is still dealing with the consequences of this new land-use practice and the consequences that Leopold soon works into his own narrative: the introduction of a regime of soil depletion, erosion, and polluted waterways. Thus ends the narrative of atom “Y” as well, which gets washed out of the once-thriving prairie ecosystem into the Army Corps of Engineers’ flood mitigation pools, “his trip from rock to river completed in one short century.”63 Unlike atom “X,” which traverses through a wide variety of prairie plants, animals, and people over the course of several centuries, the implementation of large-scale industrialized agriculture on the prairie drastically shortens the life of atom “Y” and its contemporaries, with Leopold concluding that, “The atoms that once grew pasque-flowers to greet the returning plovers now lie inert, confused, imprisoned in oily sludge.”64

Leopold’s juxtaposition of the hopeful narrative of atom “X” with the “inert” narrative of atom “Y” offers a cut-and-dry distinction between the native ecology of the American Midwest and its current land-use policy and practices. While it is easy to see which of the two narratives Leopold deems to be an indication of a healthy ecosystem, an ethical and aesthetic reflection of the “health of the land,” he does not openly pass judgment. Instead, Leopold presents the reader with two distinct “ways of seeing,” echoing Berger’s sentiment that, “To look is an act of choice.” Making the choice to see

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63 Ibid, 108. Leopold took issue with the work of the Army Corps of Engineers on more than one occasion. For example, Donald Snow offers this anecdote: “When the Army Corps of Engineers came up with a plan to dam the Flambeau River for flood control, Leopold pointed out the hypocrisy in the ‘semi-honest doctrine that conservation is only good economics’… The quantity argument is a trap set by obedience to convention, Leopold seemed to be saying.” Donald Snow, “Economics: Do Economists Know About Lupines,” in The Essential Aldo Leopold, 191.

64 Leopold, A Sand County Almanac, 108.
the narrative of atom “X” in the landscape is a simple step to take in the direction of land health and essential to both the ecological and cultural restoration of the North American prairie. Unfortunately, far too often the choice is made to see the narrative of atom “Y,” and so continue with the status quo of unhealthy land use policy and practice and the further degradation of prairie ecosystems. At the heart of the “Odyssey” section of *A Sand County Almanac*, then, is the issue of narrative ethics. Writing on the role of narrative ethics in Leopold’s writing, James Jacob Liszka asserts: “The narrator [Leopold] is moving naïve readers from a view they probably initially had—a lack of awareness of the integument, the infrastructure which connects the disparate individuals, and observations they see in their own part of the natural world, to a full understanding of its import.”65 Leopold may also be undertaking in “Odyssey” what Levinas calls “unsaying the said, in attempting to restate without ceremonies what has already been ill understood in the inevitable ceremonial in which the said delights.”66 In this case, what Leopold “restates” for the reader is a vision of a healthy prairie ecosystem—through the narrative of atom “X”—one that is allowed to thrive unabated for millennia. And the “unsaying” that takes place is the revocation of the prairie as a “lost landscape,” which has been absorbed into the totality in the form of the “said,” including the trope of the “vanishing prairie” embodied in Leopold’s narrative of atom “Y,” as well as the generally accepted narrative of Euro-American expansion and settlement of the prairies.

Moving beyond *A Sand County Almanac*, one of Leopold’s most compelling testaments to the prairie is his short essay “Roadside Prairies,” unpublished in his lifetime but all the more relevant today.67 In this essay Leopold literally resorts to scanning the

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67 The concept of “roadside prairies” has caught on in a number of unlikely places. See, for example, the current effort by the Iowa Department of Transportation to promote the Iowa Living Roadway Trust Fund, which aims to establish “prairie plants in roadside rights-of-way”; more information can be found at http://www.iowalivingroadway.com/index.aspx.
side of the road for the last vestiges of a uniquely American landscape. He also makes one of his most passionate pleas for keeping around some remnant of the native ecology of the American Midwest, in part because he understood the benefits of native plants on the soil and water in their immediate vicinity, but also because of the cultural appeal of the native prairie. For example, at one point in the essay Leopold writes that “Pasque flower and blazing star are also prairie symbols. They symbolize the greatest mass effort in evolutionary history to create a rich soil for man to live on.”68 Leopold continues with the cultural importance of remnant prairies by comparing their destruction to the “barbarians [that] burned the libraries which explained the origins of human culture,” and goes on to solidify this analogy between library and prairie by asserting that

Any prairie farm can have a library of prairie plants, for they are drouth-proof and fire-proof, and are content with any roadside, rocky knoll, or sand knoll not needed for cow or plow. Unlike books, which divulge their meaning only when you dig for it, the prairie plants yearly repeat their story, in technicolor, from the first pale blooms of pasque in April to the wine-red plumes of bluestem in the fall. All but the blind may read, and gather from the reading new lessons in the meaning of America.69

As with the “Odyssey” section of A Sand County Almanac, Leopold here clearly sees a worthwhile connection between the written narratives of Western history and culture and the potential for even deeper, more substantial narratives found in the native ecology that has been all too readily destroyed. The story of monoculture in the American Midwest is going to be a short one, as Leopold sees it, since the degradation it has brought to the landscape will surely be its own ruin. Being attentive to the stories from the pre-settlement land, on the other hand, will allow for a far more ethical narrative to emerge on the North American midcontinent. The aesthetics of restoration must therefore be

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68 Aldo Leopold, “Roadside Prairies,” For the Health of the Land, 138. One critique that could be leveled at this particularly phrasing, that the soil was made rich “for man to live on,” is Leopold’s critique in A Sand County Almanac of the “Abrahamic concept of land,” which he defines as the “abuse [of the] land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us.” Leopold, A Sand County Almanac, viii.

69 Ibid, 138.
defined by images like Leopold’s roadside prairie, since it is an image of a living prairie, however elusive.

Leopold never wrote a unified, book-length study of prairie ecology. But the issues facing the prairie come up often enough in his writing—throughout chapters, essays, notes, and unpublished reflections and letters, such as the “Odyssey” section of *A Sand County Almanac*, the short essays “What is a Weed?” (1943) and “Roadside Prairies,” a letter to his father in the spring of 1905—to make a legitimate case that Leopold is among the first American authors to write about the prairie seriously.

Leopold is also one of the first to see that the preservation of the prairie has benefits that transcend ethics or aesthetics as singular enterprises. Instead, Leopold uses the prairie as an image and symbol for the possibility of an American landscape that benefits from human interaction as much as humans benefited from it. He does not buy into the trope of the “vanishing prairie,” nor the idea that the prairie is a “lost landscape.” The inevitability of the prairie’s decline is never a given for Leopold, who sees in the living prairie possibility and potentiality, arguing that someday the country “may need this prairie flora not only to look at but to rebuild the wasting soil of prairie farms.”

It is in this image of the living prairie that writers like Paul Gruchow, Annie Proulx, and Linda Hogan share an ethical and aesthetic foundation with Leopold, even invoking him by name at times in their work. Looking to these more contemporary examples, finally, continues to validate the work of Leopold by illustrating his longstanding influence on narratives that double as advocacy for the health of the land.

Paul Gruchow, whose memoiristic reflections of the prairie are reminiscent of works by canonical nature writers like Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, and Barry Lopez, continues the Leopoldian tradition of making the prairie a presence, not an absence, in his

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essays, travel writing, and journals.\textsuperscript{71} Jenny Kerber’s characterization of the genre she terms “nature memoir” in her study of Canadian literature is applicable to the work of Gruchow, as his writing likewise exhibits a “shared concern with environmental change on the prairies and [a] tendency to connect ecological knowledge to the knowledge of the self.” Kerber continues by noting that “most of these texts also view encounters with particular geographical locales as opportunities to wrestle with larger historical legacies of colonization, settlement, and their accompanying environmental effects and to seek some form of reconciliation with both human and non-human others.”\textsuperscript{72} Gruchow’s work is not widely read, yet in works like \textit{Journal of a Prairie Year} (1985), \textit{The Necessity of Empty Places} (1988), and \textit{Grass Roots: The Universe of Home} (1995), he exhibits a concern for the prairies of the North American midcontinent—particularly the tallgrass prairie regions of his native Minnesota—that is resonant with the description of the “nature memoir” given by Kerber.

Gruchow is very much aware of the same incongruities between the prairie ecosystem and conventional Euro-American “ways of seeing” that Leopold highlights in the “Odyssey” section of \textit{A Sand County Almanac}. For example, in \textit{Journal of a Prairie Year}, his most widely read work, Gruchow writes that “the natural order stands at direct odds with the kind of order we ourselves impose. The nature of our own vision consists in seeing things, as in the cornfield that comes down to the edge of the community of cottonwoods and plums, in categories. In the natural order, the tendency is toward interdependence, whereas in the human imagination, it is toward distinctions.”\textsuperscript{73} In moments like this, Gruchow’s work takes on the characteristics of other great

\textsuperscript{71} These three authors are invoked because \textit{Desert Solitaire} (1968), \textit{Pilgrim at Tinker Creek} (1974) and \textit{Arctic Dreams} (1986), respectively, are generally considered the three works at the pinnacle of canonical nonfiction “nature” writing.

\textsuperscript{72} Kerber, \textit{Writing in Dust}, 78.

\textsuperscript{73} Paul Gruchow, \textit{Journal of a Prairie Year} (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2009), 21.
environmental writers, including even Thoreau. But the writer with whom he has the most in common, especially as it concern’s this chapter’s exploration of the aesthetics of restoration, is Aldo Leopold. Not only does their writing share a number of common themes and ideas, just as Leopold’s life was cut tragically short—he died of a heart attack while helping a neighbor battle a grass fire—so too did Gruchow’s life end suddenly, by his own hand, leaving a paucity of published works and a great deal of unfulfilled potential. In this way Gruchow’s writing on the prairie is particularly relevant to the intersection of ecological health with the health of the human body, mind, or spirit. Indeed, Gruchow’s texts often express deep anxiety over the prairie’s ecological health at moments in which his own mental health was failing. Rather than reading this as the prairie’s failure as a site of potential healing, however, it is more productive to see in Gruchow’s writing an effort to utilize the prairie as a sort of sanctuary offering some brief respite, however temporary. There are moments in Gruchow’s writing, for example, in which the prairie offers greater solace and sanctuary than any manmade structure or convenience, as when he writes that, “The prairie can’t be appreciated any more. It is too subtle, too vast, to intimate. It isn’t accessible by automobile. You’ve got to get down

74 The connection between Gruchow and Thoreau is interesting for a number of reasons. First, Gruchow writes about Thoreau at length in his essay “The Meaning of Natural History,” included in The Grace of Grass and Water: Writing in Honor of Paul Gruchow, ed. Thomas K. Dean (North Liberty, IA: Ice Cube Press, 2007); second, Thoreau’s only foray to the prairie regions of North America came near the end of his life, a trip to Minnesota in late spring/early summer of 1861; though Thoreau’s only writing about this expedition appear in his journals, he fittingly visited the part of the prairie from which Gruchow would begin writing a little over a century after Thoreau’s visit.

75 Fittingly, Leopold shows up from time to time in Gruchow’s writing, such as to serve as an authority on goose calls in Journal of a Prairie Year, or when Gruchow refers to A Sand County Almanac as an “indispensable…passionate plea for an environmental conscience” (140). And Scott Russell Sanders has noted that the seasonal organization of Journal of a Prairie Year models Leopold’s A Sand County Almanac, as well as his use of the form as “a way of situating human experience within greater-than-human patterns.” Scott Russell Sanders, Foreword to Journal of a Prairie Year, viii.

76 Thomas K. Dean’s introductory essay, “Remembering Paul,” to the collection The Grace of Grass and Water, ed. Thomas K. Dean (North Liberty, IA: Ice Cube Press, 2007) helpfully contextualizes a number of the personal and mental health problems facing Gruchow in the years before his death; the essay also characterizes Gruchow as committed and optimistic about the healing potential of the prairie.
on your knees to see some of its best features, and even in churches people don’t get
down on their knees anymore.”

Despite the struggle with depression that defined the end of Gruchow’s life, his
writing about the prairie is, like Leopold’s, simultaneously realistic about the state of the
modern-day prairie throughout the American Midwest and hopeful about the prairie’s
potential for recovery. Near the end of *Journal of a Prairie Year*, for example,
Gruchow’s observation of a herd of bison initiates a long reflection on the fate of the
bison on the North American prairie. Much of the material that Gruchow includes is
reminiscent of those texts explored in chapter three of this study, as he unfolds the
decimation of the historic bison herds. Before getting to this point, however, Gruchow
poetically reflects on the interaction between bison and Native American societies on the
prairie, giving a long catalog—each paragraph beginning “From the bison”—of the ways
in which the bison played an essential role in pre-contact prairie life, and was fittingly
revered for it. Midway through this section Gruchow reflects that, “If you were born on
the plains, you started life swaddled in the soft skin of an infant bison calf and you ended
it in the bison-hide coffin that transported you to your grave. The bison was quite
literally the beginning and ending of your existence.” In a similar passage in his essay
“Corn Is Not Eternal” (1995), Gruchow takes his reflection a step further by proclaiming,
“You would have believed that the buffalo was eternal.” Gruchow’s reflection on the
bison is worth noting because it rearranges the traditional mode of looking at human-
animal interactions; in this instance, Gruchow notes how the life and death of the human

77 Paul Gruchow, “This Prairie, this Terrible Space,” in *The North Country Reader: Classic Stories by

78 Summarizing this reflection on the bison, Gruchow writes, “Food, shelter, clothing, drink: Every physical
necessity of life came from the sacred bison. But this was only the beginning of its bounties,” *Journal of a
Prairie Year*, 126.

79 Ibid, 127.

80 Paul Gruchow, “Corn is Not Eternal,” in *Grass Roots: The Universe of Home* (Minneapolis, MN:
was defined in no small way by this animal and how early life on the prairie may not have been possible without it. The tone in this passage is not romantic, nor nostalgic, but realistic. Like Leopold in “Odyssey,” Gruchow recognizes that countless narratives were played out daily on the prairie in the centuries prior to Euro-American advancement and dominance. Also like Leopold, Gruchow presents the reader with a choice in this section, between a vision of life on the prairies defined by give and take—what might be called symbiosis—or a vision of life defined simply by humans taking from the prairie.

Elsewhere in *Journal of a Prairie Year* Gruchow writes in a way that unmistakably advocates for changing traditional perceptions of the prairie. In the “Summer” section of *Journal of a Prairie Year* Gruchow visits Compass Prairie in southwest Minnesota. Speaking directly to the aesthetic misperceptions of a place like Compass Prairie and challenging pastoral or picturesque images of the American Midwest, Gruchow writes: “There was no tended garden anywhere in the region that was the equal of it: no amount of weeding and watering and fertilizing, no amount of nurturing could create again the equal of the beauty that has been fashioned on the Compass Prairie through a hundred centuries of undistracted experiment.”81 Echoing Leopold’s “land aesthetic,” what Gruchow admires most about this place is its function as a stronghold of southwest Minnesota’s native tallgrass ecosystem, “a tiny island of diversity in a vast sea of uniformity.”82 Gruchow also offers a catalog of some of the native grasses and forbs in bloom at Compass Prairie during the mid-July day that he has visited. Ordinarily such a catalog would be unremarkable, but thought of as the manifestation of a unique “way of seeing” this stretch of remnant prairie, the catalog takes on the look and feel of a found poem:

spring stragglers: a rose or two, Canada anemones, water hemlock, downy phlox;

81 Gruchow, *Journal of a Prairie Year*, 83.
82 Ibid, 83.
the first goldenrods, each with its aphid-induced gall;
early grasses: big bluestem, cordgrass (the grass that the pioneers twisted into firewood);
herbs: wild mint, prairie sage, wild bergamot, also called horsemint;
clovers: purple prairie, white prairie, sweet, yellow;
Canada milk vetch, daisy fleabane, boltonia, yarrow;
the compass plant, for which the prairie was named, and another yellow flower, the ox-eye;
plants with beautiful names: evening primrose, silver-leaved psoralea.83

Rather than reading this passage as a list of plants, it can more appropriately be described as the narrative of a healthy prairie. In addition to the sheer diversity of plant life that Gruchow unfolds in this narrative, the presence of rare and uncommon forbs like boltonian, compass plant, and evening primrose is an indication of prairie resilience and fortitude—as is Gruchow’s sighting of leadplant at Compass Prairie a couple of paragraphs before this catalog.84 Finally, this catalog can be distinguished from what Helzer calls a “calendar prairie” because the image is not given solely to highlight a particularly “showy” flower, but to emphasize the vibrant mosaic of overall prairie health that can still be found in a remnant like Compass Prairie.

After completing his catalog, Gruchow refers to the scene of Compass Prairie as a “living canvas,” distinct from paintings or photographs—including those of “calendar prairies”—that can only depict the prairie in stasis. The idea of the prairie as constantly

83 Ibid, 84.

84 The inclusion of compass plant on this list is perhaps the most significant, not just because it is the plant for which Compass Prairie is named, but for serving as another link between Gruchow and Leopold. The compass plant (Silphium laciniatum) is at the center of the “Prairie Birthday” section of A Sand County Almanac, in which Leopold writes of a pioneer cemetery in Wisconsin that he passes every day and that “gives birth, each July to a man-high stalk of compass plant or cutleaf Silphium, spangled with saucer sized yellow blooms resembling sunflowers. It is the sole remnant of this plant along this highway, and perhaps the sole remnant in the western half of our county.” Leopold, A Sand County Almanac, 93.
in motion, echoing Vizenor’s concept of transmotion so central to the aesthetics of
survivance, is of great importance to Gruchow’s conceptualization of the prairie. Instead
of defining the place as “empty,” predicated upon misperceived absences, there is much
greater value in acknowledging what remains present, even ever-present, in the life of the
cultural prairie. In giving definition to the aesthetics of restoration, therefore, it is
worthwhile to keep in mind Gruchow’s observation that, “It is an odd irony that the
places we call empty should retain some memory of the diversity of life, while the places
we have filled up grow emptier and emptier. If we knew what we were getting rid of, we
might have some premonition of the things we are going to miss.”

Perhaps what Gruchow contributes most to this examination of contemporary prairie literature is the
ability to see clearly in the prairie what others cannot. For instance, elsewhere Gruchow
observes that the prairie “is one of the few plainly visible things you can’t photograph.
No camera lens can take in a big enough piece of it. The prairie landscape embraces the
whole of the sky… Any undistorted image is too flat to represent the impression of
immersion, which is central to the experience of being on the prairie. It is a kind of
baptism.”

This invocation of a religious sacrament to describe the prairie is not out of
place in Gruchow’s writing; to the contrary, he is one of the few contributors to Western
environmental discourse to understand the implications of taking the healing potential of
a healthy environment for granted. To suggest that Gruchow was some sort of martyr to
the prairie would trivialize the moments in his writing where the prairie, as a “kind of
baptism,” does bring some respite. Such thinking also runs counter to the belief in
Levinas that, “Suicide is tragic, for death does not bring a resolution to all the problems
to which birth gave rise, and is powerless to humiliate the values of the earth,” a
sentiment echoed more than once in Gruchow’s reflections on the native ecosystem of his


86 Gruchow, “This Prairie, this Terrible Space,” 49.
home ground in southwest Minnesota. For example, Gruchow’s belief that, “The prairie turns adversity to advantage,” is an indication that even in the direst of circumstances—either for the prairie or for himself—the prairie always provides an opportunity for healing, a true “value of the earth.”

In looking for an example from contemporary American fiction to explore in the context of the aesthetics of restoration, Annie Proulx—best known for her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Shipping News* (1993) and the short story “Brokeback Mountain” from *Close Range* (1999)—may not be the first writer that comes to mind. Her family roots trace back to the northeastern United States and eastern Canada, both of which serve as the setting for *The Shipping News*, but the prairie has had a place in her writing since *Postcards* (1992), her first novel, which includes one of the more dramatic scenes of a prairie fire to be found in twentieth-century American fiction. Furthermore, Proulx’s novel *Accordion Crimes* (1996) offers a compelling image of the late nineteenth-century Iowa tallgrass prairie, which she describes as a trio of German immigrants moves onto the land to settle it: “they waded through grasses, bluestem and Indian grass, needle grass and foxtail barely studded with bird-foot violets, wild strawberry blossom and multiflora rosebuds, prairie clover, whitetop and larkspur... They veered around a huge swale of slough grass, for the saw-toothed blades cut like knives.” Similar to Gruchow’s catalog of Compass Prairie in *Journal of a Prairie Year*, there is more to Proulx’s naming of a variety of prairie plants than simple description of the environment. Instead, given the

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87 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 146.


90 As with Gruchow, a number of interesting connections exist between the work of Leopold and Proulx. For one, Proulx cites Leopold directly in her recent memoir *Bird Cloud* (2011), as he lends insights to her observations of the deadly consequences of extreme winds on chickadees. Furthermore, her protagonist in *Postcards* is a trapper who has an experience not unlike Leopold’s famous “fierce green fire” scene in *A Sand County Almanac*, in which the killing of a wolf makes him reevaluate his place in the natural order. Likewise, Loyal Blood in *Postcards* traps a female coyote whose “yellow eyes fixed his,” causing him to
context of Euro-American expansion and settlement found in this part of *Accordion Crimes*, this scene hearkens back to the pre-settlement prairie and sheds light on an ecosystem that thrived before large-scale agriculture. That the German immigrants of the novel eventually raze the prairie to make way for their settlement can be read as an early critique in Proulx’s writing of the intensive land-use practices employed in this region.

Beginning with *Close Range*, Proulx’s short fiction in particular has shifted to more western locales, primarily the mixed- and shortgrass prairie regions of eastern and central Wyoming, where Proulx herself has since relocated and documents extensively in her memoir *Bird Cloud* (2011). Indeed, Proulx’s choice to move onto and write extensively about the prairie highlights her interest in using the region as more than mere setting for her stories—a charge often made against regionalist writers—as Proulx herself has acknowledged that “place… is a major part of my writing life.”

Reading a form of critical regionalism in Proulx’s fiction, Alex Hunt makes the case that, “Through Proulx’s narrative manipulations, we come to understand the complex, inextricable nature of abstract and physical space, narrative and landscape: our stories have material effects, and we must find ourselves a home within them, disjointed as they—and the land—may be.”

Hunt rightly observes the connection between place, or landscape, and narrative in Proulx’s work—however, greater emphasis deserves to be given to the fact that it is the let the coyote go, in many ways mirroring Leopold in *A Sand County Almanac*. E. Annie Proulx, *Postcards* (New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1992), 267.

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91 Annie Proulx, *Bird Cloud* (New York: Scribner, 2011), 50. Though beyond the scope of this study, it is useful to think of Proulx in the context of the regionalist fiction popularized in the early twentieth century and to which her prose styling is often indebted. Tom Lutz, for one, makes the case that Willa Cather—the most commonly studied Midwestern regionalist writer—is representative of a type of regionalist fiction that demonstrates how “literary language can be even slipperier than that of realtors, as when she describes the prairies, sometimes within the same paragraph, as both barren and fecund, bitter and sweet, wilderness and paradise.” Tom Lutz, “Cosmopolitan Vistas” in *Recovering the Prairie*, 86. The absence of regionalist fiction in this study is addressed in note 4 at the opening of this chapter.

prairie more than any other place in Proulx’s work that complicates human, and especially Euro-American, interactions with the natural world.

A common feature of nearly all of Proulx’s fiction, regardless of location, is the intrusion of environmental rhetoric, most often voiced by one of her characters. While this trope appears in a number of her works, including The Shipping News, it is in her fiction set on the mixed- and short grass prairies of Wyoming and the Texas panhandle that it emerges most prominently. One of the first instances of a character engaging in environmental rhetoric related to the prairie is in her story “The Governors of Wyoming” (1999), which features a couple of characters that dabble in small-time ecoterrorism against Wyoming ranchers. Early in the story the person instigating the assaults against the ranchers, Wade Walls, voices his reasons for undertaking these illegal activities:

I want it to be like it was, all the fences and cows gone. I want native grasses to come back, the wild-flowers. I want dried-up streams to run clear, the springs to flow again and the big rivers to run hard. I want the water table restored. I want the antelope and the elk and the bison and the mountain sheep and the wolves to reclaim the country. I want the ranchers and feedlot operators and processors of meat distributors to go down the greased pole straight to hell. If I ran the west I’d sweep them all away, leave the wind and the grasses to the hands of the gods. Let it be the empty place.

Such a passionate plea for so many of the environmental and ecological concerns of the prairie is a rare occurrence in a fictional text. Of course, that Walls has to resort to

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93 Environmental rhetoric, loosely defined, involves making arguments on the side of numerous positions—climate change, soil depletion, endangered species, and so on—pertaining to the preservation or recovery of the natural world. See Green Culture: Environmental Rhetoric in Contemporary America, eds. Carl G. Herndl and Stuart C. Brown (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996). As noted earlier, Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring (1962) is commonly regarded as the originator of this sort of American environmental discourse.

94 An example from The Shipping News is the character Billy Pretty, whose forbears fished the Newfoundland coast for multiple generations, proclaiming: “I seen the cod and caplin go from millions of tons taken to two or three bucketsful. Seen fishing go from seasonal, inshore, small boats to the deep water year-round factory ships and draggers. Now the fish is all gone and the forests cut down. Ruined and wrecked! It’s the dead pried out of their ground by bulldozers!” Annie Proulx, The Shipping News (New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1993), 199-200.

cutting fences and shooting cattle as a means of achieving his goals makes these claims far more problematic; so too does his cowardly abandonment of Shy Hamp, his partner who is shot in the leg at the end of the story. But there is something to be said about Proulx’s inclusion of these concerns in her fiction to begin with, as they are so commonly overlooked even in serious environmental discourse in the American Midwest and West, not to mention our national environmental debates. As Elizabeth Abele notes, the story at least contains “a debate about whether cattle ranching has to be an environmental disaster, or whether it is more prudent to reform rather than abolish ranching.”\textsuperscript{96} The manifestation of these concerns of the prairie—the return of native plant and animal species, clean water, firm soils, and so on—in “The Governors of Wyoming” is imperfect, but Proulx has made them a presence in this story, leaving the reader to decide if Wade Walls’s means justify his ends in an effort to recover the prairie.

Proulx’s long fiction gives her even more room to elaborate on the complex relationship between the prairie and its human residents, including the often desperate attempts some take to restore it. Her novel \textit{That Old Ace in the Hole} (2002), for example, opens with a startlingly lucid description of the prairie environment in which it is set, as protagonist Bob Dollar crosses into the mixed- and shortgrass prairies of the Texas Panhandle:

He knew he was on prairie, what had once been part of the enormous North American grassland extending from Canada to Mexico, showing its thousand faces to successions of travelers who described it in contradictory ways: under gritty spring wind the grass blew sidewise, figured with bluets and anemones, pussytoes and Johnny-jump-ups, alive with birds and antelope; in midsummer, away from the overgrazed trail margins, they traveled through groin-high grass rolling in waves; those on the trail in late summer saw dry, useless desert studded with horse-crippling cactus… Bob Dollar had no idea he was driving into a region of immeasurable natural complexity that some believe abused beyond saving.\textsuperscript{97}


In addition to being yet another accurate depiction of a prairie landscape in Proulx’s fiction, her description of Bob Dollar serves as an introduction to a character as yet unawakened to the concerns of the prairie. Dollar, who is just beginning his first job as a site hunter for the multi-national hog conglomerate Global Pork Rind, simultaneously “knew he was on the prairie” and yet “had no idea he was driving into a region of immeasurable natural complexity.” Rather than a contradiction, this description adequately addresses the problem facing most who visit the prairie, not to mention those who have lived in the region their whole lives. Thus, the course of the novel will be spent documenting Dollar’s awakening to the prairie. That a concomitant awakening might occur in Proulx’s readers opens up her work to the concerns of narrative, in addition to environmental, ethics by using her fiction as a place to show this sort of awakening as it happens.

As is true of her other fiction, Proulx’s description of Dollar’s awakening mostly comes through conversations with those who live and work in the Texas panhandle. Among other unique characters, the novel features an old windmill man with an interest in converting large stretches of the panhandle back to native prairie, and he is assisted by a bison-raising monk who lectures the local citizens on “moral geography.” In fact, the topic of moral geography is introduced in the novel in another instance of environmental rhetoric, this time voiced by Ace Crouch, who argues against the free-enterprise rights of the hog farms by stating that, “It is a matter of what Brother Mesquite calls ‘moral geography.’ In the old days you had no hog factory farms. Maybe fifty, sixty farmers and ranchers raisin a few pigs the traditional way. Each one a them families bought local. The kids went to school local. People got together for dances and dinners, they banked local and the money enriched the region.”

The appearance of the term moral geography in a novel populated by rough-speaking ranchers, cowhands, and windmill men is part of

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98 Ibid, 114 (emphasis in the original).
Proulx’s ability to make the uncanny seem natural; it also holds true to her use of environmental rhetoric as a medium for conveying very real issues facing the prairie.

This is especially true of Brother Mesquite, described by Proulx as a “monk-cowboy,” who raises bison in addition to his religious duties. As with her Wyoming fiction, Proulx uses the voice of Brother Mesquite to convey tidbits of environmental rhetoric, usually directed at Bob Dollar, such as when he expounds on the importance of bison to the Texas panhandle: “Now the buffïs, they evolved on the plains with the plants—the two grew up together, the belong together in this place, this landscape. The bison and the native plant species have a relationship. Your cow is out of place here and that’s why they are so much work… The bison is self-reliant and belongs in this country. The cow, bred to be placid and sluggish and easy to handle, is a interloper.”

Not only is Brother Mesquite ecologically accurate in this proclamation, he is also persuasive. Which is why, at the end of the novel, when he and Ace Crouch have joined forces to buy up old cattle ranch land and open Prairie Restoration Homesteads—a sort of utopian community of exurban living mixed with hands-on restoration fieldwork—and start a larger bison range, Dollar loses the “placelessness” that has plagued him throughout the novel and decides to settle in the Panhandle. Proulx’s is a unique vision in contemporary Midwestern and Western American literature, one that Hunt describes as, “Christians and capitalists, rather than agents of conquest and dominion, are now partners for wildlife ecology, environmental justice, and rural sustainable development.”

Though no such place as Prairie Restoration Homesteads actually exists in the Texas Panhandle, the image of it, coinciding with the environmental rhetoric of Proulx’s most convincing characters, is a manifestation of the aesthetics of restoration, in large part because Proulx’s prairie fiction shows that “the imagination—literature and the arts—can help

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99 Ibid., 274-275 (emphasis in the original).

This description of Proulx’s “ecological narratives” echoes the epigraph from Linda Hogan that opens this chapter, as Hogan similarly makes a direct call for “new stories” and a “new narrative,” especially those that tell of human interactions with the natural world. In both cases, the move is toward an ethical imperative in the telling of stories, such as Jenny Kerber describes: “paying renewed attention to the old stories and the kinds of human-nature relations they inscribe, and finally telling and retelling these stories until one gets it right.” This chapter has explored the practice of narrative ethics in the form of nonfiction and fiction through the work of Leopold, Gruchow, and Proulx. The writing of Linda Hogan—encompassing the genres of poetry, prose poetry, and “spiritual history”—will thus serve as the concluding section of this chapter on the aesthetics of restoration. These authors have been chosen because of what they contribute to the aesthetics of restoration, most importantly the move away from fatalistic images of the prairie as a “lost landscape.” Hogan reinforces this idea when she writes: “Without deep reflection we have taken on the story of endings, assumed the story of extinction, and have believed that it is the certain outcome of our presence here. From this position, fear, bereavement, and denial keep us in the state of estrangement from our natural connection with land.” Much like Vizenor’s theorizing on survivance, Hogan takes issue with narratives of “absence, nihility, and victimry,” what she calls “the story of endings.” Hogan sees in language, and poetry in particular, the power to remedy or overturn the “story of extinction,” that inevitable and inexorable march of the prairie towards disappearance, as Catlin says “to live only in books.” Instead, the “new

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101 Ibid., 194.

102 Kerber, Writing in Dust, 177.

narrative” that Hogan envisions will help “to be certain that we do not create the absence of life.”

Most critical receptions of Hogan’s work focus on her Chickasaw heritage, as opposed to reading her as a poet concerned with the environmental issues facing the mixed- and shortgrass prairies of her native Oklahoma—though the presence of the Oklahoma prairie in her work is inextricable from her native heritage. The prairie initially was a foreign environment for the Chickasaws, who were removed to “Indian Territory” from their home grounds in the southeast by Jacksonian policies of removal. Thus a common theme in Hogan’s writing—including her text Dwellings (1995), a work she labels “A Spiritual History of the Living World”—is a reflection upon how one “dwells,” or makes a home, in an often violent, toxic, and unwelcoming world. Of course, Hogan is not the only poet who struggles with place-making (to use Basso’s term again) on the prairie. For example, in her study of Canadian prairie writing, Kerber devotes a chapter to three writers who use poetry to imagine different ways that prairie can become one’s home ground. In particular, Kerber sees these writers using poetry to negotiate the terms of what it means “to be a citizen of the prairie.” Moreover, the poetry Kerber analyzes leads her to the conclusion that authentic prairie citizenship “means taking responsibility for acts done to place and in place and using one’s creativity to imagine an alternative future in which varied forms of prairie life might flourish.”

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104 Ibid., 95.
106 Kerber, Writing in Dust, 148. The three poets discussed by Kerber are Tim Lilburn, Louise Halfe, and Madeline Coopsammy. In addition to the above statement, Kerber also asserts that, based on the work of these three poets, “writing the prairie poetically today is less about forging an explicit or ‘authentic’ connection between particular landscapes and certain modes of expression than it is about making an ethical commitment to place in a self-conscious manner.”
This idea of “taking responsibility,” in addition to “using one’s creativity,” as the most effective means for making a home on the prairie is yet another way of framing narrative ethics; in other words, the way one tells stories about a place, such as the prairie, goes a long way toward defining that person’s relationship to it. For Kerber—and Hogan, as I will argue—those who make “responsibility” an integral part of the stories they tell are those most likely to achieve what Wes Jackson calls “becoming native” to a place.107

In Hogan’s early poetry, her struggle to become a “citizen” of the prairie is made painfully evident on the page. For example, in the poem “Oil” (1983), Hogan twice articulates a belief that the land has been irrevocably damaged by men who “smile like they know everything,” as she proclaims: “The earth is wounded / and bleeds,” repeating again, “The earth is wounded / and will not heal.”108 These lines are not unlike the observation she makes in a later essay, asserting: “Humans colonizing and conquering others have a propensity for [a war against the land], for burning behind them what they cannot possess or control, as if their conflicts are not with themselves and their own way of being, but with the land itself.”109 In these examples, Hogan’s efforts to reconcile the violent history of prairie settlement and exploitation with her own “prairie citizenship” go against the notion of home as a place of ease and comfort. Instead, as Kerber observes about the poetry of Tim Lilburn, Hogan is becoming “autochthonous to the prairie,” a process that involves “less about achieving an idyllic form of earthly communion than… a call to bear witness to the chemical burdens that are as much a part of the material

107 See Wes Jackson, Becoming Native to This Place (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky). Jackson’s use of the term “native” is not directly linked to the indigenous cultures that resided on the prairie prior to Euro-American civilization; however, Jackson’s notion of “becoming native” is nonetheless comparable to the type of “dwelling” or “prairie citizenship” at the heart of Hogan’s and Kerber’s writing.


109 Linda Hogan, “What Holds the Water, What Holds the Light,” in Dwellings, 44. The specific context of these lines is the looting of the Spiro burial mounds in Oklahoma in the 1930s.
legacy of prairie history as beaver pelts and bison bones.”\textsuperscript{110} In other words, before truly finding her place on the prairie, Hogan must first come to terms with its violent, often toxic, past of colonization and industrialization, not to mention the unjust policies of removal that forced the Chickasaw onto the Oklahoma prairie in the first place.

Hogan’s poem “Houses” (1983) opens in a similar vein, with the eponymous dwellings working against her desire to find a sense of home on the prairie, as when she observes a new development of houses

\begin{quote}
being worked up from the soil,  
the great expansion of houses.  
The tearing apart of land.\textsuperscript{111}
\end{quote}

As in “Oil,” the presence of human development initially inhibits Hogan’s ability to come to terms with her own presence on the prairie. These same houses give a false sense of security to those “who have lived in poverty… / all of their lives,” the same false logic that leads to “owning the water but not the banks, / the roots but not the trees.”\textsuperscript{112} However, this poem ends on a much different note than “Oil,” as Hogan shifts her attention away from the manmade structures and toward the natural world, even going so far as to see in the latter the opportunity for both resistance and homemaking:

\begin{quote}
This land our feet touch is ours  
against the attack of metal,  
the cement roots of houses.  
This road we travel is no longer a place to go.  
The houses, behind our eyes  
they disappear  
and a tree fills  
a house of birds  
birds singing  
birds  
that remind us we are in this life,  
we are this world.\textsuperscript{113}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{110} Kerber, \textit{Writing in Dust}, 126. The context of Lilburn’s poetry that Kerber addresses is the extraction of crude from the oil sands of northern Alberta, yet another connection between Hogan and Kerber’s analysis.


\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 38.

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 38-39.
The conclusion of “Houses” marks an important step for Hogan, as she begins to use her poetry as a means for overturning the narratives of “progress” and “development” that have been so damaging to the Oklahoma prairie of which she writes. In doing so, she begins to take responsibility for her own “prairie citizenship,” moving away from a sense of fatalism or hopelessness, no longer assuming the “story of extinction” she mentions in her essay “Creation,” instead moving toward a “new narrative” of coexistence with the native ecology of the prairie.

Of course, this is not to suggest that taking responsibility for the human presence on the prairie gets any easier for Hogan, or any less chaotic. Her poem “Return: Buffalo” (1993) is a fitting work with which to close my argument for a number of reasons. Bison have obviously played an important role in this study, and Hogan’s poem can be read as something of a companion piece to Oliver’s “Ghosts.” “Return: Buffalo,” as the title implies, resists the trope of the “vanishing prairie” by making the bison a presence once again on the prairie. Finally, Hogan’s poem serves as a reminder that the aesthetics of restoration is not always neat and tidy—that extracting life from death is not for the faint hearted. As with other contemporary writing about the bison, Hogan opens her poem with an image of death:

One man made a ladder
of stacked-up yellow bones
to climb the dead
toward his own salvation.114

Unsurprisingly, the man does not find salvation, but achieves only “the scar of mortal climbing,” a scar that Hogan fittingly notes “lives in the house with me” and serves as a constant reminder of “the straight, unhealed / line of history.”115 Similar to her earlier poems, “Return: Buffalo” opens with a series of images establishing the wounded state of the prairie, leaving some doubt as to Hogan’s faith in its ability to heal. Moreover, her

115 Ibid., 20.
invocation of the linear narrative of Western history, a narrative she does not extricate
herself from, further implicates the human presence on the prairie as the instigator of
these wounds.

Also like other writing about the bison, Hogan invokes images of the Ghost
Dance, though she too fails to exhibit much faith in its success:

  It was what the ghost dancers heard
  in their dream
  of bringing buffalo down from the sky
  as if song and prayer
  were paths life would follow back
to land.\textsuperscript{116}

Instead, what does seem to succeed in bringing about a return of the bison is a pathetic
image of “old women” picking through discarded bison bones, looking for “anything that
could be used / or eaten.”\textsuperscript{117} Yet, quite unlike Oliver’s dream of kneeling to join a bison
and her calf in a gesture of humility, the image that Hogan offers is not one of piety or
forgiveness, but of recompense:

  Once they heard a terrible moan
  and stood back,
  and one was not dead
  or it had come back from there,
  walked out of the mountains
  of rotted flesh and bony fur,
  like a prophet
  coming out from the hills
  with a vision
  too unholy to tell.\textsuperscript{118}

Whereas Oliver looked on scenes of the bison’s death and envisioned “hellhunks in the
prairie heat,” in Hogan’s poem the “hellhunks” come to life and revisit the horrors of
their death back on the people who imagine that “how life came together / was a casual
matter,” who believe that “war [is] a righteous sin,” and who never thought that their

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 20. Note 90 of chapter four elaborates more fully on the historical, cultural, and political
significance of the Ghost Dance.

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 20-21.

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid, 21.
“betrayal… / would come back to them / one day.”

Hogan seems to be suggesting that overcoming the “story of extinction” at times demands a reanimation of what was extinct, or at least threatened with extinction. In overcoming its own extinction, the returning bison in Hogan’s poem serves notice that we “can wish to kill only an existent absolutely independent, which exceeds [our] powers infinitely, and therefore does not oppose them but paralyzes the very power of power.”

Ultimately, then, Hogan’s contribution to the aesthetics of restoration is taking all “prairie citizens” to task for their contribution to its damaged and degraded state and offering reminders, quite forcefully at times, that “what happens to people and what happens to land is the same thing.”

Muriel Rukeyser’s The Life of Poetry (1949) was published the same year as Leopold’s A Sand County Almanac. Both texts touch upon a number of the same themes: crisis, fear, wasted resources, compartmentalized knowledge, and resistance to change. Moreover, just as Vizenor believes that the language, or narratives, of survivance can withstand the assaults of the “simulations of dominance,” so too does Rukeyser believe: “In subjugated peoples, the poet emerges as prophet.”

Above all else, Rukeyser’s insistence that poetry—or literature more broadly—is the greatest response to times of crisis parallels the aesthetics of restoration, since the writers I have covered in this chapter are responding to the environmental crises facing the prairie. For Leopold, it is the inability of American citizens to understand the consequences of squandering natural resources; for Gruchow it is seeing in degraded prairie landscapes a mirror to the

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119 Ibid., 21.
120 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 198.
121 Hogan, “Creations,” 89.
122 Muriel Rukeyser, The Life of Poetry (New York: Current Books, Inc., 1949), 96. Rukeyser’s reflections, and her connection to European fascism, are also immediately relevant to the writing of Emmanuel Levinas, whose argument that, “Language, which does not touch the other, even tangentially, reaches the other by calling upon him or commanding him or by obeying him, with all the straightforwardness of these relations,” echoes Rukeyser’s belief in the importance of poetry in serving as a bridge between interpersonal human relations. Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 62.
degraded human psyche; for Proulx it is the frustration of persuasive environmental rhetoric falling on deaf ears; and for Hogan it is struggling to find one’s home in a landscape so fraught with human and environmental injustice. Yet none of these writers succumbs to the fatalistic point-of-view that the prairie is a “lost landscape.” Instead, these writers and those discussed in chapter four embody “great hope in return. Not just in returned time or history… but in returned land and animal species. Return is what we are banking on as we attempt to put back what has disappeared, the songs of wolves in Yellowstone, the pale-edged wings of condors in California sky, the dark, thundering herds of buffalo to Indian country, the flamingos along the River of Hope.”\(^{123}\) The healing, recovery, and restoration of which these writers attempt to put into words gives the prairie the opportunity not just “to live only in books” but “forever in the book,” as Vizenor writes of the Anishinaabe warriors in *Bear Island*. For those doing the hands-on work of ecological restoration, the recovery of the cultural prairie in texts like *A Sand County Almanac* and *That Old Ace in the Hole* ought to be a hopeful affirmation that there are those working equally hard to reassert the importance of the prairie in the American imagination and reprioritize its place in our national environmental discourse. Finally, speaking to the potential for those working in the humanities to act upon human and environmental injustice, Elizabeth Ammons optimistically believes that within the right kind of narratives, “Each story says that transformation—tentative, very fragile, but a beginning—is possible.”\(^{124}\) By making the prairie a presence in this or any book, its absence from the land cannot be entirely mitigated. My hope is that the transformative power of language and narrative can overtake the “lost landscape” image of the prairie and replace it with an image of the prairie’s potentiality, continuity, and survivance.

\(^{123}\) Hogan, “Creations,” 90. This passage from Hogan also echoes Kerber’s sentiment that, “To see the prairies as a set of places profoundly interconnected with the presents and futures of other places has implications not only for how prairie poetry will be defined in the future but also for the kinds of environmental solidarities that might be formed in the here and now.” Kerber, *Writing in Dust*, 150.

\(^{124}\) Ammons, *Brave New Words*, 138.
EPILOGUE

SACRED SPACE ON THE PRAIRIE

If I were to tell a preacher of the adjoining church that the road crew has been burning history books in his cemetery, under the guise of mowing weeds, he would be amazed and uncomprehending. How could a weed be a book?

Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*

I am interested in the way that a man looks at a given landscape and takes possession of it in his blood and brain. For this happens, I am certain, in the ordinary motion of life. None of us lives apart from the land entirely; such an isolation is unimaginable.

N. Scott Momaday, *The Man Made of Words*

In the short time that I have been working out my own answer to Aldo Leopold’s question, “What is prairie?”, I have made a concerted effort not to take my encounters with either the ecological or the cultural prairie for granted. Coming across a scene in Ted Kooser’s *Local Wonders* (2002), for example, in which he decries the application of herbicides to Nebraska roadsides, killing whatever native plants might be living there just as thoroughly as the invasive species that are the ostensible target, now reads to me as a brief, but no less important, instance of prairie advocacy.\(^1\) Likewise, I am far more attentive to the remnant and restored prairies I come across, and seek out, as I travel throughout the American Midwest. Alwine Prairie in west Omaha, Fossil Prairie in Floyd County, IA, the sand prairies maintained by The Nature Conservancy in Wood River, NE, Neil Smith National Wildlife Refuge outside of Des Moines—these are all places easily passed by at seventy miles per hour, yet worthy of so much more attention than they currently receive. Given the rarity and fragility of many of these places, as well as the urge that I now have to defend them, it is not just hyperbole for me to say that certain prairie sites, remnants in particular, have become a sort of sacred space. Looking at one example in particular will illustrate why calling the prairie sacred means

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\(^1\) The opening pages of the “Summer” chapter of Kooser’s text are devoted to the use of herbicides and pesticides throughout Nebraska more generally. See Ted Kooser, *Local Wonders: Seasons in the Bohemian Alps* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 39-41.
something more than feeling a “New Agey” connection to the planet or using the natural world to fill some void left by conventional religious practice.

Rochester Cemetery in Cedar County, IA is sacred space. It is also contested space. On the one hand, it is a pioneer cemetery that contains gravesites of early Iowa settlers dating back to the 1830s and continues to function as the local cemetery for residents of Rochester Township; on the other, it is also a remnant prairie and oak savanna that contains over 350 native plant species, one of the richest remaining prairie sites in the state of Iowa, if not the entire Midwest. The gravestones and prairie plants generally live side-by-side peaceably, as they have for nearly two centuries. Visiting Rochester Cemetery in the afternoon of an early fall day, when the goldenrod and smooth blue aster are in bloom, the bluestem is just beginning to get an amber tint, and the white oaks have not yet started to turn, one does not get the sense that this place is the site of conflict. Yet, as Sam Hooper Samuels has observed, “It would be hard to find 14 acres of Iowa land that mean as many different things to different people as the Rochester Cemetery.”

This is because the cemetery is used and visited by two very different groups of people and sustains two (at least) competing narratives. There are those who want Rochester Cemetery to be a working cemetery first and foremost, some of whom see the native prairie plants only as weeds that inhibit its use as a place to bury and honor the dead. Then there are those who want Rochester Cemetery to be preserved as a thriving prairie remnant, some of whom see efforts to manage the cemetery’s “weed problem” as a threat to native prairie plants—many of which are extremely rare—and an invitation to further invasion by nonnative plant species. Those who hold the cemetery as sacred space see the ecologists, naturalists, students, and prairie enthusiasts who visit Rochester Cemetery as invaders in their own right. Those who hold the remnant prairie as sacred space see the citizens of Rochester Township as squandering a precious

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ecological resource and a national treasure, not fully aware of what it means to have such a diversified prairie and savanna remnant so close at hand.

There is a certain irony to the fact that one of the best examples of a healthy, thriving prairie ecosystem is located in a working cemetery. My entire argument in the previous pages has been a revocation of narratives that can only envision the prairie’s inevitable demise, and here in the most literal reminder of death is the prairie not as a “lost landscape” but in a condition that far surpasses what any restoration or reconstruction could ever hope to attain. Moreover, unlike a remnant such as Strub Prairie, which is situated in the midst of the very things that threaten it—fields of corn and beans, a major state highway, exurban sprawl—the prairie at Rochester Cemetery is tucked away down a narrow gravel road, under no real external threat. To an outsider, the solution at Rochester cemetery seems fairly clear: the combination of the pioneer cemetery with the remnant prairie, and vice versa, enhances the sacredness of each. As Lakota scholar Vine Deloria, Jr. contends: “Every society needs these kind of sacred places because they help to instill a sense of social cohesion in the people and remind them of the passage of generations that have brought them to the present. A society that cannot remember and honor its past is in peril of losing its soul.” In the case of Rochester Cemetery, the grave markers dating back as many as 150 years are an obvious reminder of “the passage of generations.” The presence of the remnant prairie must be thought of in the same way—not just as a relic of the past that needs to be honored but also as a functioning ecosystem worth perpetuating long into the future.

Of course, invoking a Lakota scholar to support the idea that a pioneer cemetery is sacred space is rife with its own sort of irony. Irony aside, Deloria’s presence facilitates further discussion on the contested nature of Rochester Cemetery. For, digging deeper than the debate over whether or not the remnant prairie should be mowed, one

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could easily make the case that the land upon which this pioneer cemetery now sits, in such close proximity to the Cedar River, may well have been a place of great meaning and significance long before any Euro-Americans settlers claimed the land for themselves. Speaking to the layers of meaning that are an integral part of almost every sacred (and contested) place, Adrian J. Ivakhiv draws attention to the inevitable “interpretive moment in [the] production [of sacred space]: their cultural construction through stories and place-myths, symbols, and representations, images and tropes, all of which emerge out of and, in turn, shape the practical and repeated encounters of residents and visitors with the features of the given landscapes.” Echoing Basso’s notion of place-making, Ivakhiv is acutely aware of the fluidity of interpretations often found at these sites, and that it is the dominant culture whose narrative takes precedence in the end, often silencing the narratives of the disempowered. In the case of Rochester Cemetery, the ideological debate is predicated largely on class—the citizens of a rural community clashing with the urban intellectuals of an academic community—with neither side giving much thought to the fact that the land they are fighting over is undoubtedly home to “interpretive moments”—what Doreen Massey calls the “simultaneity of stories-so-far”—that stretch well beyond the Euro-American occupation of it.

Sacred spaces are by their very nature prone to these sorts of political and ideological debates. N. Scott Momaday articulates better than anyone why sacred places are so important, regardless of a person’s cultural, political, or religious affiliation, but also hotly contested at times. In his essay “Sacred Places” (1997), Momaday makes it

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4 For example, the 1837 map drawn by Nasjeninga (No Heart of Fear) to verify the Ioway’s claim that much of Iowa was part of their ancestral home grounds includes the Cedar River and a dotted line denoting a migration route that passes close to where Rochester Cemetery would eventually be located. For more on this map and its composition, see Lance M. Foster, “Tanij na Che: Recovering the Landscape of the Ioway,” in Recovering the Prairie (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 178-190.

5 Adrian J. Ivakhiv, Claiming Sacred Ground: Pilgrims and Politics at Glastonbury and Sedona (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 5 (emphasis in the original). Though Ivakhiv’s analysis is focused primarily on a site in the Scotland and the American Southwest, his general observations about the contested nature of sacred space are nonetheless applicable to the prairie sites of most interest to my argument.
clear why these sites matter so much to so many different people: “To encounter the sacred is to be alive at the deepest center of human existence. Sacred places are the truest definitions of the earth; they stand for the earth immediately and forever; they are its flags and its shields. If you would know the earth for what it really is, learn through its sacred places.”6 One example from the North American midcontinent that Momaday frequently cites for the presence of the sacred is Devils Tower in northeastern Wyoming. Though much more prominently known than Rochester Cemetery, Devils Tower has a similar history of competing narratives claiming it as a site of great meaning and sacredness: for Momaday and his Kiowa forbears, Devils Tower (or tsoai, “rock-tree”) is an important landmark along the route of their migration from the mountains of Montana to the mixed- and shortgrass prairies of Kansas and Oklahoma; for the Lakota, Devils Tower (or Mato Tipila, “bear lodge”) is likewise an important part of their cosmogony and remains an integral component of their religious practice to this day; for fans of science fiction, Devils Tower is the site of a climactic scene in the film Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977); and for rock climbers, Devils Tower, which juts out of the shortgrass prairies of northeastern Wyoming, is among the most popular climbing destinations in the United States. As contested space, the current debates over the rightful use or interpretation of Devils Tower is mainly between the Lakota and the rock climbers, a debate well chronicled in the recent film In the Light of Reverence (2001).7 Like Rochester Cemetery, no satisfactory conclusion has yet been reached at Devils Tower. Yet neither has one narrative succeeded in silencing any of the others: though the rock climbers seem to have the upper hand, mainly through the backing of the National Park Service, the Lakota continue to hold ceremonies there—with the park service


7 Fittingly, one of the most prominent voices for the Lakota in this film is Vine Deloria, Jr. See also Peter Nabokov, Where Lightning Strikes: The Lives of American Indian Sacred Places (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 215-218, in which he chronicles many of the same issues and debates over the interpretation of Devils Tower, particularly from the perspective of the Lakota.
instituting a “voluntary” ban on climbing during the month of June—while Momaday has included the Kiowa story of its creation in almost every major work that he has published.\(^8\) This is not a perfect balance, but it is a balance in which the competing narratives work to deepen the significance of Devils Tower as sacred space.

With the example of Devils Tower in mind, it seems much more productive to think of a smaller, less known place like Rochester Cemetery—or even a place like the Effigy Mounds in northeastern Iowa, where prairie restoration coincides with the preservation of the burial mounds of a Woodland-era indigenous community—as what Michel Foucault calls a “heterotopia.” Foucault defines heterotopias in part as the “space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time, and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us… a heterogeneous space.”\(^9\) Though Foucault himself does not pair heterotopias with sacred space, Ivakhiv’s interpretation of the term is particularly useful in regard to places like Rochester Cemetery, as he believes that “heterotopic ‘counterspaces’ can be defined as those spaces and spatial practices which resist or disrupt the nexus of commodification, resourcification, and privatization,” in part because they function as “spaces of discontinuity and heterogeneity,” as well as “spaces of resistance.”\(^10\) In other words, Rochester Cemetery fulfills its potential as heterotopic space \textit{because} it holds multiple competing narratives in one place. The potential for these heterotopic sites to function as “spaces of resistance” is key to Edward Casey’s interpretation of them as well, particularly in their existence as “peripheral entities.” The fact that a place like Rochester


\(^9\) Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” \textit{Diacritics} 16 no. 1 (1986): 24. It is worth noting that a major part of Foucault’s argument regarding heterotopias is setting these sites in direct contrast to the notion of utopias or utopic space, which he fittingly describes as “placeless,” and in addition to being unrealistic, tend to promote homogeneity and uniformity.

\(^10\) Ivakhiv, \textit{Claiming Sacred Ground}, 11.
Cemetery is located outside of the traditional boundaries of academic (or even civic) discourse “is not a matter of simple, but of effective, location,” Casey asserts, going on to argue: “To make a difference in the social fabric, a heterotopia must possess a focus for the application of force. This focus is found in the marginal location of the heterotopia itself: from this location, force can be exerted more effectively than if it stemmed from the center of the circumstance.”11 Though of in this way, Rochester Cemetery’s seeming isolation is not an indicator of “absence, nihility, and victimry”; instead, it is the ideal location to stage a resistance to the “simulations of dominance” and ensure the “continuance of stories”—even if those stories happen to come into conflict once in awhile.

Keeping with the idea of public scholarship that has informed my argument throughout *Prairie Survivance*, Rochester Cemetery offers a perfect opportunity for the competing “storytellers”—the rural community, the academic community, and the native community—to work together to facilitate a site of resistance to the forces of desanctification and monoculturalism that increasingly define the land use of the American Midwest. The old adage that “nothing is sacred” does not hold up in a place like Rochester Cemetery, in part because the centuries-old white oaks, the illegible pioneer gravestones, and the chest-high bluestem prohibit “the nexus of commodification, resourcification, and privatization,” but mainly because simply being in this place awakens the mind and the spirit to its richness, its complexity, and its potentiality. If those competing over the proper interpretation of Rochester Cemetery are able to experience a similar awakening, this place can become a site of prairie survivance.

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