

Women's Response to the Great Plains: Landscape as Spiritual Domain in Kathleen Norris and Sharon Butala

Diane D. Quantic
Wichita State University

I

In O. E. Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth* (1927), the apparently endless Great Plains horizon sends Beret into deep depression. In the opening pages, her family is separated from the rest of the immigrant train, and although her husband, Per Hansa, does not admit they are lost, she senses their perilous isolation. On their homestead, Per builds a sod structure big enough to be both house and barn, but the warmth and closeness of the animals does not alleviate Beret's fear that her family has become like burrowing animals, living in the ground. After Per whitewashes the walls, Beret feels some relief, but when winter snows blanket the outside world, enveloping whiteness overwhelms her. She finds no relief from the threatening space of the open plains even as their tiny settlement grows and plowed fields transform the unmarked landscape into an ordered grid. For her, the landscape harbors a malevolent force, its weather obvious evidence of its determination to rid itself of human inhabitants.

Rølvaag's reluctant immigrant has become the quintessential woman in Great Plains iconography. Isolated, depressed, and sometimes suicidal, she embodies the barrenness that characterized life on

the sparse landscape of the central plains in early twentieth-century fiction. Although Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913) more than a decade before Rølvaag's novel featured the determined and successful Alexandra Bergson, much of the fiction written during the first half of the twentieth century and set on the Great Plains reinforces Rølvaag's pessimistic outlook. However, in the last two decades of the twentieth century, due to growing interest in the environment and a better understanding of the Great Plains ecology, very different accounts of women's encounters with the open spaces of the prairies and high plains indicate a shift in the paradigm from fearful resistance to a deep appreciation of the regenerative power of nature.

Like Rølvaag's Beret, Kathleen Norris and Sharon Butala came onto the Great Plains not of their own accord but because of family circumstances. Norris moved to Lemmon, South Dakota, in 1974 to assume management of her family's farms after the death of her maternal grandparents, and Butala found herself on a thirteen-thousand-acre ranch in southwestern Saskatchewan after she married rancher Peter Butala in 1976. Like Beret, they came from cultures very different from what they would encounter on the Great Plains, Norris from New York City and Butala from urbanized Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Although both women had some experience with living in isolated places—Butala as a child in northern Canada and Norris during her summer visits to South Dakota—neither would have considered such a move under less pressing circumstances. Both are college-educated women who were part of the academic and artistic scene in their respective cities, and both had successful careers, Norris as a poet and Butala as a teacher and visual artist. The open landscape of the Great Plains held no particular allure for them. Neither of them came to the plains as part of an urge to live off the land, get back to Nature, or elect an alternative lifestyle.

Nevertheless, the Great Plains landscape had a profound effect on both women. Like Beret, they discovered the need to redefine themselves in relation to a space that threatened to engulf them physically and psychologically. Like Beret, these contemporary women are acutely aware of their liminal status as newcomers in close and sometimes closed communities where they are insiders by reason of mar-

riage or family heritage but outsiders because of both the lives they lived before they arrived and their subsequent careers as writers. Unlike Beret, however, Norris and Butala have found language that enables them to recount their deeply felt—and unexpected—responses to the land. Although most of their writing reflects their experiences on the High Plains, Norris and Butala most thoroughly examine in their respective works, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (1993) and *The Perfection of the Morning* (1994), the processes by which they came to terms with the unanticipated spiritual dimensions of place. The resulting spiritual domain on which these writers focus is implicit in a great many Great Plains works. Conversely, the reader often notices it by its ironic absence: accounts of madness, abuse, and cruelty, of egotism, greed, and failure are critiques of characters' inability to respond to the land itself. Some writers create a personified malevolent domain, like Rølvaag's plain, bent on the settler's destruction and manifested in locust plagues, drought, and blizzards. Wright Morris, in his Great Plains novels, expresses this quality in metaphors of seeing, both opaquely and clearly, distantly and immediately.¹ Larry Woiwode in *Beyond the Bedroom Wall* (1973) stretches the spiritual connection to the land until it is broken as the Neumiller family strays farther and farther from its Dakota Homestead.

II

Ralph Waldo Emerson points out in *Nature* (1836) that “the beauty of nature reforms itself in the mind,” that is, landscape is not mere space, but a defined place arranged by a viewer's conscious act (12). How one orients oneself to this landscape determines one's ability to establish and maintain an identifiable place one can claim as one's own. In most Great Plains works, the landscape is the constant against which authors measure their characters' abilities to adapt to radically new conditions. In some works, this process is a deeply felt spiritual quest, an effort to define both a physical and a spiritual dimension, a place one can respond to not only in terms of physical comfort or social

¹See especially Morris's *The Home Place* (1948), *The World in the Attic* (1949), *Ceremony in Lone Tree* (1960), and *Plains Song* (1980).

interaction but also as an emotional connection. Beret, for example, desperately needs to establish walls that signify definable boundaries so that she can protect herself and her children from the featureless void of a landscape that threatens her with physical isolation and psychological erasure. Cut off from the insular mountains and fjords of Norway and the Norwegian language that defined her spiritual life, she can find no corresponding physical or spiritual domains on the open prairies.

Emerson's essay is especially relevant to this discussion. His interpretation of Nature as a source of renewal has been the touchstone for the American intellectual approach to wilderness and landscape for well over a century. Unlike Rølvaag's gloomy Norwegians, Emerson focuses on the regenerative power of Nature unrefined. Sharon Butala and Kathleen Norris, like Emerson, see Nature not as a merely physical landscape: it is not mere scenery. Their spiritual growth takes place within Nature and in a particular Great Plains landscape. For them, as for Emerson, Nature represents the universal constant that embodies spiritual potential, but with an important difference: the land itself, the Great Plains, is not quite like Emerson's romantic, idyllic woods where there is "nothing . . . which Nature cannot repair" (6); the plains landscape is a place of sudden violent storms and potential destruction. To identify such an expansive and threatening landscape as a spiritual domain takes time and careful observation.

Both Norris and Butala describe their experiences on the land in terms that echo Emerson's essay. To define her relationship to the land, Butala uses the term "geopiety," meaning "loving land as home in a religious way, with deference and respect" (Hillis 43), and, as David W. Landrum observes, Norris uses the term "spiritual geography" to explain what "roots us, . . . embeds us in the world" (346). Both women are saying that the spiritual forces in their lives originate in their connection of self to place, a connection to a specific landscape. For both women, their first response to the Great Plains was not entirely positive, and barriers still persist, especially in their relations with small-town residents and ranchers whose expectations and perceptions differ from theirs in significant ways. Nevertheless, their works are accounts of their growing realization that homes are not merely

wives' prerogatives or a family's inheritance but places of profound spiritual mysteries.

III

Butala and Norris approach the plains from the perspective of similar backgrounds. Butala grew up in northern Canada. Her father had a sawmill, not a farm or ranch, so although she was familiar with primitive living conditions (she admits to having moments of "deja vu" when she first arrived at the ranch), she was not accustomed to the close relationship with the land central to a ranching routine. Norris's father was in the Navy. Her summers with her maternal grandparents in Lemmon provided a place with which she could identify amid her family's frequent moves, but these summer sojourns did not prepare her for the task of living through all the seasons in a closely-knit community on the High Plains. She calls the Great Plains the Capadocia of North America, a "school for humility" ("Beautiful" 40). Their years of experience as city dwellers make Norris and Butala aware of the tension between truth and myth in prairie communities and of the "garrison" mentality that causes small-town people to resist change, whether good or bad. Both feel marginalized socially and psychologically, even though by birth or marriage both are committed to their communities' well-being. Both are aware of the dangers posed by a depressed farm economy, an aging population, and the inevitable population decline in small farming communities and on farms and ranches in the surrounding countryside.

Both are also aware of the tolls exacted in the spiritual health of people who lose contact with or grow indifferent to Nature. The result that both fear is an empty landscape with no place for people still committed to the land. For Butala, this decline is a threat to all, not just to Great Plains residents: "we abandon our best hope for re-

²Butala's novel *Gates of the Sun* (1986) develops this theme. In it she tells the story of rancher Andrew Samson who resists the modern technology that lures his children away from his ranch; he wills his land to the "wild-life people," knowing that his children would plow up the last pastures of native

defining ourselves as children of nature, and for reclaiming our lost souls" (203).² Norris, in her chapter on Hope, a small rural church, asks the rhetorical question, "Does America need people on the land?" (*Dakota* 168). Places like Hope, Norris asserts, "demand that you give up any notion of dominance or control. In these places, you wait and the places mold you" (170). Thus both women reaffirm America's need to learn Nature's lessons, a necessity articulated so well by Emerson.

In addition to their similar biographies and social and cultural outlooks, Butala and Norris describe strikingly similar spiritual awakenings on the Great Plains. Both have a sense of the past as an integral part of the land and the community. Norris is reawakened to the spiritual power of place through her growing role in the small Presbyterian church that had been an important part of her grandmother's life. She declares that her move to South Dakota was part of a religious quest to find "the pious Protestant grandmother at my core" (93). Butala's experience arises from her long walks alone over their ranch, from her discovery of sacred Indian sites, and from the dreams that she recognizes as symbolic indicators of the intricate relationship among her psyche, the land, and the spirit world. However, neither woman views the prairie as idyllic or Utopian: fierce storms and drought are too frequent reminders of the precarious nature of existence to allow either to harbor Edenic, Emersonian visions of Nature, but neither are these natural phenomena interpreted as malevolent forces, bent on destruction, as they are for Rølvaag's Beret. Both women point out that isolation forces one to pay attention to the unseen psychological forces that they sense instinctively in the land, but their responses take quite different forms.

Butala shares with Beret periods of profound depression, but she balances these with a growing sense of the spirituality that is a numinous, benevolent presence in the land itself. On one of her solitary walks, she discovers a deer skull, "bleached to a pristine whiteness, small, delicate," and when she glances up from admiring its "grace and pure loveliness," she sees a herd of mule deer staring quietly down at her:

At moments like that . . . I feel that every sacrifice, every second of pain that has been the direct result of coming here to live has

been worth it and more. Here I feel myself constantly moving close to a level of understanding about the nature of existence that I can't imagine coming in any other way, in any other place. (165-66)

Butala benefits from her husband Peter's respected place in the ranching community, but she feels isolated by the nature of ranch work and by Peter's long life as a bachelor used to living and working alone. As a result, Butala has no easy access to the ranching community. In her first few years on the ranch, she felt useless because she could not adopt the traditional ranch-wife role (69). Her ambivalence toward other ranch women, whose lives revolve around household skills and their husbands' work, persisted even after she found her own literary voice. There are no family members or neighbors, no confidantes to provide friendship or intellectual companionship.

Norris, on the other hand, assumed her grandmother's role in the community, and her inheritance gained her entrance into the tightly knit small-town society. Norris and her husband, David Dwyer, also a poet, take various roles in the community. They start a cable-TV company, and Norris travels through western North and South Dakota as a participant in the poet-in-the-schools program. Norris's considerations of the sacred, although linked to the land and to communal life in Lemmon, arise from the sense of community and spiritual renewal she finds both among Lemmon's Presbyterians and in the structure and ritual of the Benedictine abbeys of the northern central plains where the monks invite oblates (lay persons) to share their monastic routine. Taking her cue from a fourth-century monk, Norris states her approach to the land's spirituality as a principle of desert survival: not only to know where one is but to learn to love what one finds there: "I live in an American desert . . . because I am trying to know where on earth I am. Dakota discipline, like monastic discipline, requires me to know. In a blizzard . . . not knowing can kill you" (23). In this and similar comments, the land becomes a metaphor for religious experi-

³Here, the term "religious" denotes an experience centered in a sacred context that has social as well as personal dimensions. The term "spiritual" as used in this essay, connotes a more contemplative, personal experience.

ence.³ In her discussion of conversion, Norris reiterates the need to start with who one is and where one came from (131). Assuming her grandmother's place in the church community is both a signal of her link to the community's past and a source of her own spiritual grounding:

Conversion doesn't offer a form of knowledge that can be bought and sold, quantified, or neatly packaged. It is best learned slowly and in community. . . . not by book learning or weekend workshops but by being present at the ceremonies. Truly present, with a quiet heart that allows you to become a good listener, an observer of those—plants, animals, cloud formations, people, and words—who know and define the territory. (131–32)

Butala's spiritual guides are dreams, not grandmothers, and they are linked directly to the land itself with no social or cultural medium. Early in *The Perfection of the Morning*, she recounts her dream of a white coyote, explaining that she knew nothing about white coyotes but that “[i]t was clear I was out of the . . . realm of everyday life; I was in an archetypal realm, a limitless, timeless world of pure wilderness.” She acknowledges an “unnameable thing,” noting that she “felt a stirring inside” (19). In another instance, she dreams everything is woven of one fabric—a vision of the world as a unified whole. For years, Butala has contemplated these dreams and, since she is an academic, gathered books on dreams in an attempt to fathom their meaning. She observes, “I began to have the first intimations that there was in Nature much more than met the eye, something that existed in *back of it*” (23, emphasis added). Butala strains to see this hidden “something” and despairs of articulating it. What she wants is akin to Native American beliefs but cannot be acquired from an appropriation of them. Rather, she believes these “understandings of the spirit world come with Nature . . . come out of Nature itself; come with the land and are taught by it” (128). This echoes Emerson's comment that “every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact” (13). Butala clearly senses the close congruence of natural and human experience

that Emerson and so many others have also identified. Butala's account of her spiritual awakening parallels her account of the midlife crisis that complicated her adjustment to her life in nature on the ranch. Her depression manifested itself in vivid and disturbing dreams: "I was frightened by the almost unbearable depth of the sorrow and loneliness that had been brought to the surface by [a dream dominated by the word *anomie*], so that I could no longer deny it" (84-85). But her deepening sense of the spiritual nature of the ranch roused her from her depression and enabled her to begin restructuring both her intellectual and her spiritual life. Unlike Norris, Butala does not take the step of associating her spiritual quest with a formal belief system. Although this might seem to be a significant obstacle to any comparison of their spiritual journeys, both their quests are ultimately rooted in their growing appreciation of the physical and emotional power of the land itself. These points of comparison between Butala and Norris afford a clearer focus on the connection between the physical landscape and the deeply personal response that allows each to define the Great Plains landscape as a spiritual domain. Each explores the elements in the land itself that elicit this response.

IV

Norris's *Dakota* begins with a physical description of the High Plains:

The so-called emptiness of the Plains is full of such miraculous "little things." The way native grasses spring back from a drought, greening before your eyes; the way a snowy owl sits on a fencepost, or a golden eagle hunts, wings outstretched over grassland that seems to go on forever. Pelicans rise noisily from a lake; an antelope stands stock-still, its tattooed neck like a message in unbreakable code; columbines, their long stems beaten down by hail, bloom in the mud, their whimsical and delicate flowers intact. . . . And above all, one notices the quiet, the near-absence of human noise. (10)

Significantly, this response to the “miraculous ‘little things’” that she found in the prairie landscape provided Norris the geography for her spiritual awakening. She later says that almost all the other places she knew as a child are gone. When friends cautioned her about returning to South Dakota, Norris declared that it was in Lemmon, even before she arrived, that “I suspected I would find my stories. As it turns out, the Plains have been essential not only for my growth as a writer, they have formed me spiritually. I would even say they have made me a human being” (11). In the chapter entitled “Sea Change,” Norris identifies her response to the plains landscape as a *conversion* in its particular connotation of a change of perspective: “I almost think that to be a good citizen of the Plains one must choose the life consciously, as one chooses the monastery. One must make an informed rejection of any other way of life and also undergo a period of formation” (147). In other words, the place demands certain choices. How the inhabitants of the ranches and small towns on the high plains will live is determined by “the harsh climate and the vast expanse of the land [which have] forced people, through a painful process of attrition, to adjust to this country on its own terms and live accordingly . . . the reality of the land asserts itself and you begin to understand how the dreams of early settlers were worn away” (148–49). The plains, in other words, instruct the inhabitants on the dangers of transgressing human limitations. Living in a harsh climate demands the conservation of certain human habits and attitudes in order to survive.

In a subsequent chapter, “Dakota, Or Gambling, Garbage and the New Ghost Dance,” Norris gives her reaction to the region’s negative image in the popular press. The indifference of the rest of the country, the casual interests of tourists, and the threats of exploitation are indicators of outsiders’ inability to appreciate the “little miracles” of the land. The anxious residents themselves are very aware that they are forgotten people in a mass-market society (26). These attitudes provide an important element in Norris’s connection to the land itself. She writes, “I prize the hoedowns of Dakota, and have grown protective of the silence here—the places that have become sacred to me, that in all likelihood few humans have ever

walked” (34). Ironically, Norris acknowledges, the silent isolation she values is an important factor in outsiders’ curiosity: are the Great Plains, in fact, civilized, or are they still the last great frontier? The closing paragraph of this chapter echoes the sentiments of Willa Cather, Wright Morris, and other Great Plains residents who have recognized the challenge of living in such a place: “The Plains are not forgiving. Anything that is shallow—the easy optimism of a homesteader; the false hope that denies geography, climate, history; the tree whose roots don’t reach ground water—will dry up and blow away” (38). For Norris, then, the Great Plains landscape is a crucible, a “painful reminder of human limits” (2). Her spiritual geography originates in her effort to “wrestle my story” out of the circumstances of landscape and inheritance. She sums up a familiar mix of emotions that many Great Plains residents would recognize: “It’s hard to say why we stayed. A growing love of the prairie landscape and the quiet of a small town, inertia, and because as freelance writers, we found we had the survival skills suitable for a frontier” (4). Despite challenges, climate, and economic depression, people persist in finding ways to live on the Great Plains, even if their main impetus is a kind of perverse optimism that leads them to believe that the year ahead will be *the* (singular) good year.

The empty quality of the land is reflected in Norris’s governing theme: the comparison of small town, High Plains life to monastic life, especially as it is lived by Benedictines and recorded by fourth-century desert monks.⁴ The apparent emptiness of the plains makes the contemplative life possible and, for her, necessary. Norris’s icon for her way of seeing the Great Plains is the desert, specifically the desert of monks whose writings on spare life form a theological and emotional foundation for her spiritual awakening. “Where the human fabric is worn thin,” she says, some residents—and she includes herself—have “come to prefer such a place that breeds realism, not despair” (110). The appeal of the desert as a spiritual map is aesthetic as well as reli-

⁴Norris develops her response to the physical land itself most thoroughly in her chapter “Where I Am.” She acknowledges the region’s physical marginal-

gious: she regards loneliness and isolation as necessary components of her spiritual and literary development. In the desert or on the High Plains, there is a need for hospitality, a need for other people in order to survive (113). Fewer people mean that individual gifts become apparent: each person must be able to do a variety of tasks (118). The land itself, Norris asserts, demonstrates the need to use it lightly in order to preserve its productivity (12). Summing up her own spiritual journey into the High Plains and the Lemmon, South Dakota, community, Norris points out that such a place can teach one to love what is dying.

Her role as a lay preacher in the small Presbyterian churches in Lemmon and Hope provide Norris with the medium to express her developing spiritual domain. One can imagine the sectarian challenge of making her monastic pilgrimage on the High Plains meaningful for the members of the Presbyterian churches, but these two aspects of her spiritual existence prove to be compatible with each other and her private exploration. In this sense, the churches in Lemmon and in the rural community of Hope provide a kind of apposite for the monastic community she finds essential to her spiritual awakening. They are all places where people have come together for years to create a common presence, and where she can find a place in that continuum. In the Benedictine monastery and the Hope church, people are keenly aware of a sense of place; as Norris explains, “maybe that’s our gift to the world” (169). At the rural church, Norris finds this sense of place most clearly defined. The church consists of a small fellowship of people who are rooted in the land: “they know that the spirits of a place cannot be transported or replaced. . . . [They] have lived on the land for many years, apart from the mainstream of American culture. . . . Hope’s people have become one with their place: this is not romanticism, but truth. You can hear it in the way people speak, referring to their land in the first person” (169). It is here that Norris observes the relationship between the spiritual and physical and realizes that such a sense of place is also essential to her: “You’re still in America in the monastery, and in Hope Church—these absurd and holy places—you’re still in the modern world. But these places demand that you give up

any notion of dominance or control. . . . I find in Hope many of the graces of a monastery, with stability of place and a surprisingly wide generosity in its hospitality” (170). It is this calm confidence in *place* that allows Norris to make the connections between place and spirituality that constitute her central theme in *Dakota*.

Norris’s conversion, her change of perspective, is initiated by her response to the Great Plains. Like Emerson’s Transcendentalist in *Nature*, Norris empties her consciousness of the cultural and intellectual detritus of the urban East in order to “return to reason and faith” (*Nature* 6). Like the monks who deliberately make entry into the monastery a difficult process, Norris had to negotiate this unfamiliar borderland. She rejected the impulse of some white Americans to adopt Native American spirituality, although she agrees with Paula Gunn Allen, who states that Native Americans and long-time white residents eventually become “one with the spirit of the land” (qtd. in Norris, *Dakota* 128). Unlike Butala, Norris does not search for spirituality in the land itself; rather, she seeks a community that provides a way to create a spiritual domain that includes situating the self in a physical place. For her, that domain is not directly related to the physical landscape but to the isolation of the plains’ desert nature. Here, residents confront two realities: the modern world which is accessible by modern communication, and the unchanging fact that the land itself can be deadly.

V

The preface to Butala’s *The Perfection of the Morning* is a fairly straightforward description of the history of the Cypress Hills of southwestern Saskatchewan and of the Butala ranch land where the author came to live when she was thirty-six. Butala approached the High Plains without Norris’s familiar childhood images. “I hadn’t even known [such a landscape] existed,” she explains (ix). She found the landscape “daunting,” but at the same time, she felt “freed into the elements . . . the one true landscape, the place where sun, moon and stars could shine free, lending their light to the pale grasses,

painting them gleaming apricot, gold, mauve, or rose. I had never seen such beauty” (xiv). At first transported by the beauty of the rangeland, Butala was soon overwhelmed by loneliness and purposelessness that lead to what she later names a midlife crisis. By naming and coming to *know* the landscape, Butala gradually creates a spiritual domain within it at their isolated ranch.

Part of the challenge for Butala was to find a way to fit into this strange place. Her husband Peter and his fellow ranchers are a part of the landscape, “at ease in their work,” a talent she quickly realized she will probably never master. The slower pace of life on the ranch, the seemingly unchanging landscape combined with her first impression of a “slower world, and a timeless one that resonated with a sense that it must always have been there in just this way and always would be” (5). The process of situating herself in this landscape is not the intellectual “conversion” that Norris experienced. Butala’s life as a rancher’s wife thrusts her immediately into the physical reality of making a living on the land. On the twice-yearly cattle drives, she absorbs “the atmosphere and the feel of Nature” as she drives the truck or rides astride her horse among the cattle. Over the years that they work together, Butala learns from Peter to read the sky for weather and anticipate the habits of range cattle, and she pays attention, for the first time in her life, to the phases of the moon. “I was gaining a hint of what it was that made Peter so secure and calm,” she records. On cattle drives, “the prairie slowly seeps into you” (91). Butala finds the remedy for her inevitable loneliness as a rancher’s wife and an outsider, not in the separateness of monasticism or the social routine of a small town, but in the “extraordinary beauty of the land itself.” Where Norris focuses on the harsh contrasts of the plains “desert,” Butala describes her growing appreciation of the unplowed prairie “sage and grasses mixed with sunlight, carried on the light fresh air as it swept freely across miles of unbroken grass” (60). The landscape, she soon realizes, is the best part of her new life.

Only after she has recounted the stages of her growing knowledge of their own ranch and the surrounding community does Butala address the Great Plains from a broader perspective. Like Emerson—and

Norris—she notes the elemental quality of the Great Plains. Her comment, “What is left bare, the human psyche fills” (101), echoes Emerson’s declaration that “the beauty of nature [is] not for barren contemplation, but for new creation” (12). Like Emerson, she assigns a kind of determinism to nature: “close proximity to a natural environment alters all of us in ways which remain pretty much unexplored” (105). This influence, Butala suggests, is very real, even if unacknowledged, and one assumes the reverse is true: that humans can control the natural world. For her, Nature is the source of her spiritual conversion, and she sets out to learn what it has to teach people:

When I decided to marry Peter . . . I had expected to learn new things and meet new people; what I hadn’t expected was to be changed myself in elemental ways by my new environment, not thinking that an environment in itself could change one in any essential way. I hadn’t reckoned with the dimension that was the most basic ingredient of all in rural life; that it took place in the midst of Nature, that Nature permeated the lives of rural people, and that this was, more than anything else, the element which separated true rural people from urban people. (130, emphasis in original)

Butala learns that Nature has an *essence* that differs from such physical elements as storms and prairie fires, and that it is not the same as our aesthetic pleasure in sunsets, fresh air, spectacular views, and the like. Nor is this “essence” the same as a life lived in Nature, a state of being in which human beings place themselves *in* Nature and establish relationships with wild animals, a situation often associated with a mythic or aboriginal past. Such a life, she admits, may still be accessible, but she did not consider it a possibility during her early years on the ranch (130–31). She explains that one’s experience in and knowledge of Nature influences how one views Nature: as real estate, a commodity, an extension of the self, or a larger creature with its own way of being in the universe (132). Clearly, Butala views Nature in this last context and

in this sense closely conforms to Emerson's idea of transcendence of meaning in the natural landscape that goes beyond mere scenery. As Emerson says, "the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind" (16).

For Butala walking becomes the medium for learning to read place; it is not only a physical act but a metaphor for a deeply spiritual one as well:

We use words like "awareness," "perception," "sense," or "intuition," or a "sixth sense." They are as close as our language, as far as I know, allows us to come to describe the way in which we apprehend experience that is out of the realm of the ordinary. None of these words seem quite sufficient. And as for describing the quality of the experience, its texture, color and the accompanying emotion, the way it permeates our being and floods us with new knowledge / awareness / perception, it seems to be impossible to find the right words and a way to structure them that will make our listeners believe us. . . . Those of us who allow these experiences room in our psyches, who do not refuse or deny them, know we are walking a narrow ledge with psychosis on one side and scientism on the other. It is a dangerous journey we gladly make, putting one foot carefully before the other, our arms out to maintain our balance, our concentration on the path absolute. . . . To discover these truths we don't need to scale Mount Everest or white-water raft the Colorado or take up skydiving. We need only go for walks. (65)

Butala's medium for her spiritual awakening is walking about on the land itself and writing in contemplative journals about that experience. She reads, searching for information that might help her understand her experiences—especially the mystical dreams that become an integral part of her experience on the land. Her years on the ranch, she says, "have been a long, intensely personal spiritual journey, one that has been inextricably intertwined with my reacquaintance with the land and the effects of this renewed relationship with Nature on

my own woman's soul" (xvi).

A former teacher and visual artist, Butala soon finds that words, not painting, are her natural medium for expression. Because the new things she discovers are ordinary to her husband and neighbors and incomprehensible to her former city friends, "I wrote [my discoveries] down," she says. "I did this with no clear reason in mind. . . . I wrote them out of a deep drive, a need to fully assimilate them so extraordinary did they seem at the time that I couldn't think of them as *my life* until I had in some way concretized them" (50, emphasis in original). These early utilitarian journals reflect Butala's effort to establish a daily routine as a ranch wife in a small house with electricity and running water but without central heating or a bathroom. She found isolation—her inability to understand fully her place on the land and in the community, her being without a job, car, or money of her own—harder to adjust to than the necessary ranch chores, which had been a part of her life as a child in northern Canada. Butala's journals prompt her to consider writing a novel, but writing doesn't relieve her profound loneliness. Four years after her arrival, she can write "*I feel invisible here and dead*" (77, emphasis in original), a feeling that for Rølvaag's Beret also persists for years, even after her homestead has become a showcase farm.

Nevertheless, Butala's new life gradually changes the way she perceives the world (77). She tries to understand a cow's consciousness — "They know what they need to know," Peter explains simply. She begins to feel more like a creature than mere space, and although she is not consciously aware of it, the land is "working away inside me" (78). She begins to have dreams with obvious psychological meaning. Still relying on her intellect, she reads books on dreams and classic mythology so that she experiences a whole new dimension in her intellectual life. In other words, the developing relationship with the land and her effort to put her experience into words became for Butala vehicles for her discovery of self. Her account of this spiritual awakening is grounded in a series of epiphanies—sudden experiences of increasingly spiritual revelations. Butala's first surprising discovery about the land and people's relationship to it comes during one of her

walks, when she observes her husband asleep on a hillside surrounded by his animals—cattle, his horse, and even a small herd of antelope, none of them paying any attention to any other, “all members of the same contented tribe” under a “dome of sky” in the middle of thousands of acres of grass. At this early stage Butala experiences the scene as a mystery:

I stopped dead in my tracks, overcome with an emotion I couldn't identify: that I had caught him in a moment so private I felt I had no right to be there; that something was happening here that was beyond my experience and my understanding, but that meant something—something significant; I could feel it in my heart and in my gut—which my brain couldn't grasp, couldn't name or classify. (27)

This scene becomes a benchmark for Butala, who refers to it repeatedly in her narrative. It is her first intuitive connection to the deeper significance of the land. Peter asleep among his animals, she believes, has a meaning just beyond her grasp that would

be the key to understanding my new world which in turn would provide the foundation I was missing, that would show me what to do with the long hours of my days, the ways in which I might begin to think about this new world and how to live in it. (43)

Butala had not imagined that the changes in herself would go beyond her daily routine and include her emotional, mental, and spiritual life as well.

As she becomes acquainted with the ranch, as she becomes more sensitive to the land and more aware of its sensate nature, Butala's walks take on more purpose. That some sites are sacred Indian ground becomes apparent not through her knowledge of history, but because of her own experiences in these places. She describes one such random walk—another epiphany—that brings her to a pile of rocks on a high point:

I had not consciously chosen to go there, having had no destination in mind at any point, not even noticing where I was going. As I approached the stones, I began to feel increasingly disturbed, increasingly upset, and I had begun to go over all the possible reasons why I might feel so distressed, but there was no reason I could isolate. Yet the closer I came to the pile of stones the worse I felt. (210)

She realizes the stones form a circle, and when she steps inside and kneels down to turn over a stone, “my feeling of unease grew so strong that I actually began to cry. . . . I jumped up, leaped out of the circle and ran a few steps down the nearby draw.” She sees a vision of a Native shaman and knows that she has “trespassed on what had been a sacred site” (210–11).

Her experiences on the ranch teach Butala to trust her own instincts, to respond on the most elemental level to the various realities she discovers on the ranch. The connection she makes with place does not lead Butala, like Norris, to seek community but rather to explore the many layers of reality that are hidden, like Norris’s “little miracles,” in the land itself. Butala learns to approach Nature intuitively: “with this growing humility in the face of the unknown, slowly a sense of being in the presence of some great consciousness, other than one’s own, begins to grow too” (144). She approaches Emerson’s Transcendental ideal reluctantly:

What if I am walking inside the mind of a creature—call it what you will—what if the earth really is a living being and my presence here is only on sufferance? If I am learning new things about myself and extrapolating from these things to this natural world and its nature, then it behooves me to walk. (145)

Walking across the pastures, even in drought years, Butala senses a lush land, a place she is coming to know so well that she knows where deer and rabbits bed down, and can hear clearly all the sounds of the

environment—birds, insects, wind. In her journal, Butala describes another epiphany that occurred in a field when, lying in the grass trying to shut off conscious thought and acutely sensitive to the life around her, she sensed an “awareness” going out of her to mingle with the sounds. She admits such an experience is hard to describe, and after a few days it fades, but she identifies this as “throwing” her consciousness, “clicking” so that she can achieve this sense of existence outside her own body, “to see what it’s not possible to see” if only for a few seconds. She identifies this as the ability that enables Aboriginal hunters to know where animals are and what they are doing (147), yet it is a moment Emerson would understand, one much like the experience he describes when he realizes that “I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me” (6).

In a chapter entitled “Knowing” Butala sums up the changes that have occurred as she learns the “essence” of her spiritual domain:

I had heard of the very subtle and rarely remarked on effects of a life lived in Nature, such as human relationships with wild animals or with places themselves—fields, hills, sloughs—or with fieldstones or gullies or trees. I knew that where these relationships developed, the method, the technique, the ways of developing them have no names, no delineation in scientific literature or existence in socially accepted ways of describing the world. They are sometimes called intuition, and the knowledge thus gained, or relationships thus established, I had placed in the realm of myth, in the true sense of the word. . . . I thought them either out of dreamtime, a time past, or belonging only to Aboriginal people still leading traditional lives; I had not considered such understanding of and through Nature . . . for anybody I knew, much less myself. (131)

Butala’s move to the ranch coincided with a psychological crisis in her life that she is able to analyze only years after it occurs. In the midst of such physical and emotional change, she “lost [her] footing in the world” (133). Her heightened self-conscious state caused her to pay par-

ticular attention to her own psyche and emotions. In this state, she encountered a new environment that surprised her with a new way to approach the natural world, embodied in the expanses of High Plains pastureland. The life she learns is markedly different from that of the ranchers and their wives who comprise the Butalas' community. Her crisis was undoubtedly exacerbated by her move to the High Plains, but once she accepted the fact that she could not erase her past or live the life of a rancher's wife, "canning and pickling for nobody," she was able to face the fact that "I *am* different from those who were born here and grew up here. . . . It is time I accepted my life for what it has been, time that I accepted myself for what I am" (189-90, emphasis in original). When she comes to terms with this fundamental distinction—the process took ten years—she finds life easier. Then, she explains, "I had also to accept certain conditions, one of which was that I would be lonely, that I would never be in the middle of a group of women who were intimate personal friends" (190). Part of the distinction, by this time, includes Butala's life as an increasingly successful writer, a life that requires "solitude and yet . . . unnerving but unavoidable publicness" (190).

VI

A native of the rural Great Plains might find the efforts of Norris and Butala puzzling or even comical, since it took these women years to understand aspects of the land that natives take for granted and that they would rarely if ever articulate. But it is precisely this heightened sensitivity to the ineffable quality of the landscape that led both writers to articulate their responses to the Great Plains. The interesting point, of course, is how Norris and Butala articulate their spiritual awakening relative to the physical space that surrounds them. Norris conceptualizes the land as desert, not in the pejorative sense of barren or ruined but as elemental space. For her, the Great Plains is a place that is bountiful in its emptiness, offering both physical and spiritual solitude. Hers is an unusual response to a place that plunged so many, including Rølvaag's Beret and Butala, in her first years on the ranch, into depression.

Norris admits that “my idea of what makes a place beautiful had to change” (3), but her image of the terrifying reality and the overwhelming sense of loneliness differs from that of almost every other Great Plains writer: “Sometimes survival is the only blessing that the terrifying angel of the Plains bestows” (6).

Norris and Butala both experience conversion, a profound psychological and spiritual change, as they adjust their lives to the rhythms of an unfamiliar landscape. For both of them, the High Plains remain a constantly changing domain, where sudden storms require men and women to be alert to life-threatening forces, where isolation can lead to intense personal appraisal, and where the “little miracles” hidden in the grasses, visible only from certain points of view, reveal a delicate physical reality in a harsh climate. Butala admits that her response to the numinous aspects of landscape are the result of her own spiritual crisis that turned her inward. When she lost her self-assurance and doubted her own knowledge, she turned to Nature “as one might another person” (133). Norris found similar refuge in her role as a lay preacher in rural Presbyterian churches and amid the ritual of the contemplative Benedictine order. Both women responded to the unexpected Great Plains landscape by exploring their own lives in relationship to the physical, psychological, and social places where they must learn to live. Before they could accept themselves as permanent plains residents, they had to examine their spiritual lives in an attempt to reconcile their physical situation with their own self-concepts. As Butala says, the ranch became her home: “I couldn’t imagine how I might survive if I had to leave it to go back to the city to live” (208). Or as an interviewer commented, she thinks “spiritual desolation” comes from “living a life increasingly detached from the earth” (Braid 12). At the end of their accounts, neither writer can articulate precisely what it is she responds to on the Great Plains. Nevertheless, both of them are still articulating their awakenings: Butala in her continuing career as a writer of fiction, in works such as *The Garden of Eden* (1998), a novel that focuses on the fragile nature of native grasslands and the vulnerability of people whose lives depend on the land in a world where land is increasingly regarded as a commodity; Norris in her subsequent col-

lections of poetry and meditative essays that focus on her continuing spiritual journey. Both remain firmly rooted to their Great Plains places.

Butala and Norris articulate their experiences in a landscape that, in a sense, revealed itself to them. Not reluctant immigrants on the unsettled plains like Beret, or deliberate sojourners like Thoreau at Walden, but committed (if initially reluctant) residents, they discover intuitively the transcendent world Emerson promised to those who acknowledge the spiritual quality of Nature. This connection between landscape and spiritual domain is deeply rooted in American intellectual history and is repeatedly discovered by unsuspecting inhabitants of the surprising landscape of the Great Plains.

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