

## Deep Map Country: Proposing a *Dinnseanchas* Cycle of the Northern Plains

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[See table of contents](#)

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# Deep Map Country: Proposing a *Dinnseanchas* Cycle of the Northern Plains

SUSAN NARAMORE MAHER

IN 1962, WALLACE STEGNER published a remarkable non-fiction narrative, so innovative in structure that he had to subtitle this work *A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier*. While other non-fiction milestones from the northern Great Plains, including Walter Prescott Webb's *The Great Plains* (1931) and Loren Eiseley's *The Immense Journey* (1957), had explored the nexus of nature and human culture in the centre of North America, none had spun so many webs of connection in dialogical narrative before. *Wolf Willow*, Stegner's groundbreaking work, established a new form of narrative non-fiction writing that a later Plains author, William Least Heat-Moon, in *PrairieErth* (1991) would coin "the deep map." Stegner's subtitle establishes the complexity of deep map country: it begs for narrative that complicates and compounds the possibilities of telling a story. The cross-section of material in deep map writing extends across boundaries that are generic as well as spatial and cultural. Rather than "totalizing" and "unifying," deep maps present narratives "in which many voices speak, many, often contradictory, histories are told, and many ideologies cross, coexist, and collide" (Campbell 20). So resonant is this narrative form, Randall Roorda argues, that deep map writing in the early twenty-first century is now an established genre, "marked by attention to the ways in which the smallest, most closely circumscribed locale eventuates from the deepest recesses of time and is subject to attention in the most diverse, disparate terms from the widest array of perspectives" (259). The deep map, then, presents the multiple histories of place — the stories of natural and human history — as traced through eons and generations.

While contemporary North American writers have been employing the deep map narrative to explore terrain as diverse as Alaska, the Sonoran Desert, and the exurban US Northeast, writers from the Great Plains have made this genre especially vigorous, a signature effort (see Naramore Maher, "Deep Mapping"). No other region of North America has garnered such a critical mass of deep map narratives. It is an estab-

lished feature of Great Plains writing and scholarship to highlight the horizontality of the place, what Robert Thacker has called “the vast featurelessness of the prairie” (52). The popular conception of the Plains, as numerous writers have reminded us, is that of flatness, fly-over country, emptiness, a physical and cultural void. Something in the Plains space itself — indifferent, alien, diminishing to the self, overwhelmingly horizontal — repels. But to Stegner and those who have followed him as deep mappers of the Plains, a narrative impulse kicks in to delve vertically. As a consequence, the states and provinces on the Plains have provided fertile ground for the deep map genre.

Stegner’s text encompasses memoir, Canadian political history, natural history, fiction, and polemic. His narrative sweeps across geological and cultural eons, encompassing millions of years; yet the heart of his story telescopes the last two hundred years of cultural conflict and colonization in North America. Stegner’s interwoven narrative establishes many of the features of Plains deep map writing that persist into the twenty-first century. First, the strata of cultural and natural history meld with the personal perspective of one individual’s life. In seeking understanding of a place and his place in settlement history, Stegner resorts to somatic interchange, to intimate, physical encounters with soil, grass, human structures — all of the material realities of Whitemud, his fictional name for Eastend, Saskatchewan. His body, charged with sensuous stimuli and reawakened memory, becomes a vehicle for negotiating the many layers of space and time. Additionally, in Stegner’s text one finds a fluidity between interior and exterior boundaries, between political and mythological borders, between memory, history, and the imagination that later writers of the Plains have adapted. Moreover, the cross-sections of story are grounded in a particular biome — grasslands — and its systematic transformation and exploitation when the era of settlement began. At the heart of *Wolf Willow* and of subsequent Plains deep maps is an accounting of loss brought about by the legal, political, and economic institutions of Empire, what Stegner calls “the problems of an expanding continental hegemony” (103).

Indeed, the dissonance between deep history and modern myth-making, between the grassland biome and one frontier town, strikes a central irony in Stegner’s vision of Whitemud. Frontier stories mythologize the imposition of white settlement on the Plains on both sides of the forty-ninth parallel, elevating the encroachers to epic stature and

inventing a pantheon of settlement heroes and villains whose stories continue in permuted form to this day. But in Stegner's deep map, the perspective of geological history casts a cold eye on the making of one settlement community. Whitemud, vulnerable in a harsh environment, "as bare as a picked bone," stands in contrast to the mythology that initially lured individuals to its streets and into its homesteads (13). Nature eventually proves too stern a master to the Stegner and scores of other settlers, failures as farmers and losers in the disruptive boom and bust of economic life west of the one hundredth meridian. Cast out as a child, Stegner returns in adulthood to assess his family's part in homesteading Saskatchewan. Their story is but a very small piece in the larger displacement of Indigenous people and the disruption of a biome twenty million years old. Stegner's refusal to celebrate white settlement, his growing consciousness of his family's complicity in a historically brief land grab, his recognition of the racism that underlies the settlement project, and his concern for the environmental consequences of commodifying the Plains, establish a markedly critical tone that has marked deep map writing from the Great Plains ever since.

What to do with this sense of loss and *mea culpa*, how to acknowledge it, mourn it, and rectify it, remains incomplete business in Stegner's deep map and continues to press upon Plains deep map writers of this era. The current interest in bioregional narratives or environmentalist essays of place finds a firm foothold in Stegner's examination of the "last Plains frontier" land rush in Saskatchewan and its illusory mythology. He castigates the settlers' tragic detachment from the environmental realities of the northern Plains, their heedless, ruthless damage to the arid land, and then clear-sightedly dramatizes the inevitable blow back from the Plains environment itself. At the core of Stegner's critique, however contradictory, is a firm love of the landscape, a desire for restitution, and a need to redress loss. With the hindsight of later years, Stegner assesses the outcome and begins to articulate a grassland land ethic, a Plains bioregionalism that marks all deep map writing from the centre of the continent. In re-establishing his roots in Saskatchewan, Stegner establishes an innovative aesthetic to plumb a story that requires a complex matrix of connections, histories, feelings, temporal and spatial dimensions, and science.

Stegner's multi-layered history of Eastend continues to generate

responses from Canadian writers connected to this small Saskatchewan town, giving it the distinction of being the most deeply mapped place on the Great Plains. In 1990, science writer Don Gayton published his celebrated volume, *The Wheatgrass Mechanism*, and writer Sharon Butala, in a series of memoirs culminating in *Wild Stone Heart* (2000), limned a unique exploration of southwestern Saskatchewan. Gayton and Butala self-consciously build from Stegner's material, adding important dimensions from archaeology, evolutionary biology, and spiritual practice. Their works, following the pattern that Stegner established, critically examine the era of settlement and its aftermath and explore their own ambivalence to the economic, political, and ideological work of modernity. To look at all three writers together enables one to build a particular, intergenerational vision of one distinctive place: Eastend. For Wallace Stegner in *Wolf Willow*, Whitemud/Eastend is "the Last Plains Frontier." For the younger Don Gayton, in *The Wheatgrass Mechanism*, Eastend is a "dynamic edge," a contact zone ecologically and culturally that opens up "Science and Imagination in the Western Canadian Landscape" (his subtitle). In the same decade, Sharon Butala reads her own personal story into the land around Eastend, particularly into the unused field on the Butalas' ranch, examining the spiritual dimensions of a vivid, living place.

It seems apt, as a point of entry into their distinctive narratives, that each writer's text begins with a cartographic image of place. Stegner's map appears before the table of contents, Gayton's at the beginning of his introduction, and Butala's inside the book cover, front and back on the endpapers. The Cypress Hills, the Old Man on His Back Hills, the various buttes, lakes, and rivers stand out, but each map also implies a particular emphasis of the author's deep map. Stegner's map puts greater emphasis on town names and the forty-ninth parallel marking the national borders, for white settlement and its aftermath is his central story. Gayton's map provides the ecological borders setting off tall grass prairie from mixed prairie, fescue prairie, and the Pacific Northwest bunchgrass ecosystem. His deep map bends to science and ecology. Butala's map is older (the edition I have does not provide a date, only the note "courtesy of Aquila Books, Calgary"), identifying Native people's traditional grounds, but also noting "rich pasture," "valley well timbered," "great abundance of game" — the kinds of resources settlers would need to usurp the land and to survive in arid, southwestern

Saskatchewan. Butala examines the psychic effects of settlement and the need to uncover the Indigenous past to provide a way to heal the ecological and cultural rupture scarred into the Plains. In Great Plains deep map country, Eastend, Saskatchewan is the beginning point of a longer dialogue; yet it continues to generate narratives, reader interest, and critical debate. What Euro-Canadian writers Stegner, Gayton, and Butala together have assembled is a localized practice of place-based writing that finds its parallel across the Atlantic in Ireland. They have created a sequence of place-based writing that approximates the ancient Indigenous practice of *dinnseanchas*, or “the lore of places,” in Irish writing, a thousand-year-old established discipline for poets or writers who wish to speak for their local place and culture.

While *dinnseanchas* chronicles are not a direct influence on Stegner, Gayton, and Butala’s Eastend cycle, they offer an established literary model of deep mapping that sustains communal connection to the land. As scholar Lisabeth Buchelt notes, “Since the early Middle Ages in Ireland, no professional poet was considered educated if not fully acquainted with this discipline, which gives voice to the mythical, ideological, or psychic landscape manifested by and layered into the physical one” (115). Buchelt explains that *dinnseanchas* excavate “the storied past of place” (115). She elaborates that

a sense of place develops as people experience representations of present and past landscapes not only visually, but also through narratives inspired by and about the environment. Those who inhabit a particular landscape experience it through a fused aesthetic encounter with the land that is inherent in our sense of regional identity and ‘geographic understanding.’ (115)

In contemporary Ireland, *dinnseanchas* now appear in non-fiction prose, expanding upon the tradition that originated in poetry. Perhaps the most noteworthy of these non-fiction writers is Tim Robinson, whose deep maps of Aran and Connemara present “timescapes” that interweave geological, mythical, political, cultural, and personal narratives into one overarching narrative about the central western coast of Ireland. The tradition of *dinnseanchas* links generations of place-lore storytellers. Behind Robinson is a tradition of timescape artists recalling and defining their land, refining stories that help their neighbours understand, live, thrive, or survive in a place. The *dinnseanchas* tradition depends

upon a certain continuity of culture — of people staying close to the land that sustained their ancestors. In some parts of Ireland, communities boast *dinnseanchas* cycles, reiterative stories from different time periods that speak to the generative wellsprings of birth, trauma, and loss. The many recurring and repeatable stories embedded in a particular site bespeak the nature of a place and its effects on the people living there over centuries. Despite the pressures placed upon the Irish by English colonization, the literary practice of *dinnseanchas* has survived a millennium and continues as a vital literary discipline today.

Herein lies the irony of contemporary deep map writers on both sides of the forty-ninth parallel whose cultural roots extend back to Europe, but whose presence on the Plains is brief, historically. For millennia on the North American Plains, Indigenous Nations established practices comparable to *dinnseanchas*. As Native writer Gerald Vizenor has made clear, “creation and trickster stories, dream songs, visions, and other presentations in thousands of Native oral languages in North, Central and South America” connect their communities to written and oral narratives that found their genesis millennia ago (53). Stories, ceremonies, forms of cartography have served to guide generations of Indigenous inhabitants, including those on the northern Plains, into fuller existence on particular landscapes. Vizenor argues that since settlement these deeply held stories have guaranteed “Native survivance” in the face of contact history (53). These Native North American efforts in communal deep mapping not only have been passed along through time, they have also built onto established narratives about place. Like the Irish, Indigenous Plains groups have suffered the effects of relentless colonization. The parallels, as scholar Ron Marken has pointed out, are salient (156). Both have suffered a diaspora, a displacement that can potentially weaken or fracture the continuity required to sustain a discipline like *dinnseanchas*. Both have been pushed to the margins, mocked, and stereotyped, and redefined by “acts and statutes adopted to bring the ‘barbarous savages’ under control” (Marken 164). Before colonization, as Leanne Simpson relates, “Indigenous Nations were strong, healthy societies with complex knowledge and values systems, structures of governance, healing and wellness philosophies, and sustainable ways of living” (122-23). But following the onslaught of farmers and ranchers, of mining and industry, “Indigenous Nations currently face some of the most devastating effects of environmental destruction in Canada” (122).

Still, one sees in the vitality of Native North American literature today deeply rooted connections to place and to places that are sacred, and one senses the voices of the deep past contributing to or speaking from this literature and oral heritage. Resistance to the encroaching settlers preserved “languages, spirituality, knowledge systems, ways of life, and the land” (Simpson 125). As in Ireland, colonization did not destroy the essential integrity of place lore among the Indigenous Nations of North America. They are the continent’s first deep mappers.

What makes contemporary deep map writing from Saskatchewan and other parts of the Great Plains so strikingly ironic is that the colonization of settlement, continuing to the present day, has left a profound sense of loss and disorientation in the non-Native descendants of those who first imposed the mandates of settlement. These sons and daughters of settlement now seem willing to retrace the knowledge and values of the Indigenous Nations whom their ancestors uprooted. So far, as Laura Smyth Groening has documented, bridging the historical divide of colonization has proved complicated and fractious, for the elegiac tone of much non-Native Canadian writing, including deep map writing I would add, continues to oppress through “hundreds of white-authored representations of Native people that, no matter how well-meaning, sympathetic, or even admiring, consistently deploy the trope of the dead and dying Indian that deny [*sic*] Aboriginal people a flourishing future” (24). The Euro-Canadian presence on the Plains is too brief to give their communities the experience or knowledge reflected in Indigenous deep maps. Yet the urge to connect deeply to place is now gripping the heirs of colonization. Stegner has diagnosed this dis-ease as “the dissatisfaction and hunger that result from placelessness,” the disaffection of being “displaced” and “mythless” (“The Sense” 201, 204).

The inexorable changes wrought by settlement in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on the American and Canadian Plains, and the imposition of the abstract surveyor’s grid onto place, redefined the landscape into a new nationalized, politicized space that engendered new kinds of myths. The surveying of the western territories, as geographers Daniel Dorling and David Fairbairn explain, followed the colonial concept of *terra nullius*, “empty land” (82). In dismissing the claims and stories of Indigenous cultures, the idea of *terra nullius* justifies the mandates of the colonizing power and its desire to reconstitute the land along new lines of ownership. As William Least Heat-Moon and others



have argued, the re-imagining of the North American Plains along the abstract grid glosses over the complex features of landscape and denies the accumulated history and sense of geography of Native people. One outcome of this abstraction has been a sense of disconnection and spiritual displacement in those whose ancestors originally colonized the landscape. Heat-Moon, looking at his US Geological Survey maps of the Kansas Flint Hills area, decries the “arbitrary quadrangles that have nothing inherently to do with the land, little to do with history, and not much to do with my details” (*PrairyErth* 15). To him, “[a] person or people who cannot recollect their past have little point beyond merely animal existence; it is memory that makes things matter” (266). Echoing Heat-Moon, Kent Ryden argues that the concepts of *terra nullius* and the grid “[epitomize] the view of geography as space; ignoring the texture of the terrain over which it passes and the exigencies of the lives that people live on the land, it covers the country with a uniform blanket of identical squares and evenly spaced intersections” (37). Such two-dimensional cartography erases the deep narrative of place, the “invisible landscape” that gives meaning to place. In Indigenous practices of both Ireland and the Northern Great Plains, memory embedded in landscape is exactly how one “makes things matter.” What mattered to the early mythos of settlement on both sides of the forty-ninth parallel, however, showed little interest in the accumulative knowledge of Plains Nations, whose place lore offered a corrective to the illusory, destructive ideas of settlement. In the flush of national movements to settle the western territories, the migrant settlers engaged in a form of communal wishful thinking. As Diane Quantic has argued, and Stegner, Gayton, and Butala all confirm, in the nineteenth century, “the process of mythmaking shifted from refining imported European myths to selecting, misconstruing, and misunderstanding the explorers’ quite accurate reports so that they fit the mythic expectations and, more important, the political and economic purposes of the missions” (32). Of course, living on the North American Plains challenged these myths, and the non-Native settlers had to contend with the unromantic conditions of climate, soil, markets, and other external pressures beyond their abilities to control. Such stressful adaptation left many disillusioned and further alienated from the space they had forcefully claimed and settled.

This background of change is well known among those who study

the history, geography, and literature of the Great Plains extending from the American Southwest to the Canadian prairies; but I think this historic shift into the settlement era of the late nineteenth century and the subsequent transformation to industrial agriculture, a modernized landscape of mass transportation, interlinked markets, corporate and private ownership, national or even global retail chains, housing subdivisions, and a cultural de-emphasis of place (for a mobile workforce), explain something about the current desire among the heirs of white settlement for establishing deep map narratives of the Plains comparable to the discipline of *dinnseanchas*. As one writer, James Howard Kunstler, has argued, the Plains, like much of the North American landscape, evokes a “geography of nowhere”; Kunstler further insists that “we have become accustomed to living in places where nothing relates to anything else, where disorder, unconsciousness, and the absence of respect reign unchecked” (185). The disregard of region, of idiosyncratic, unique landscape, of the “living organism based on a web of interdependencies” lies at the heart of this continental malaise (186). The separation of landscape from human enterprise exacerbates this detachment from place. Don Gayton echoes this sentiment when he laments, “If we are to actually create a local narrative tradition, there are few precedents to build on. We are spoonfed a mass culture that is suspicious of both narrative and of place, and we turn increasingly to that haven of atomistic, placeless particularity, the internet” (*Kokanee* 88). The long-term consequence, for many non-Native people, is a longing for deeper connection. Perhaps this under-fulfilled need provides one explanation for the numerous deep map narratives that have been published, particularly in the last fifteen years by such diverse writers as Barry Lopez, John McPhee, Sheila Nickerson, John Janovy, Jr., Julene Bair, and Linda Hasslestrom, among others (see Naramore Maher, “Deep” and “Erosion”).

American and Canadian non-fiction writers continue to explore ways of delving into the many stories of multiple Plains communities in order to tap into the wellsprings of place lore. These literary deep mappers of the Plains are encouraging this reinvestment in practices that root us to the landscape and draw inspiration from that attachment. They also provide us with cautionary information that offers a sobering account of this place. Like the Irish *dinnseanchas*, Plains deep map narrative non-fiction presents stories of “transition, change, fear, courage, and the possibility of redemption” (Buchelt 120). Contemporary deep mappers

register a sense of loss and ecological trauma, brought on by the wholesale transformation of a landscape — a landscape that historian Dan Flores says was “ripped to pieces” over the last century (181). I would argue that this vestigial landscape, and the history embedded in it, haunts much contemporary non-fiction from the Plains. In deeply mapping Eastend, Saskatchewan, Stegner attempts the first literary riposte to the ecological and cultural mayhem that followed colonization in southwestern Saskatchewan and across the Plains — colonization that his own family embraced. In following up Stegner with their own deep maps, Don Gayton and Sharon Butala accrue further laminae onto Eastend’s story, extending the Eastend deep map and raising the possibility that a modern *dinnseanchas* cycle is evolving from this corner of the Northern Great Plains.

Stegner begins *Wolf Willow* with this statement:

that block of country between the Milk River and the main line of the Canadian Pacific, and between approximately the Saskatchewan-Alberta line and Wood Mountain, is what this book is about. It is the place where I spent my childhood. It is also the place where the Plains, as an ecology, as a native Indian culture, and as a process of white settlement, came to their climax and their end. (3-4)

Memory infuses this part of his narrative, as well as information on the earliest encroachments of white colonization: the Mounties, the Hudson’s Bay Company, stagecoach lines, cattlemen, railway men, and then farmers. Stegner’s family participated in this last migration into “a pretty depressing country” (5). Yet on its best days, Stegner remembers, the landscape around Whitemud (Eastend) knew no parallel. The somatic memories of childhood revivify: “low bars overgrown with wild roses, cutback bends, secret paths through the willows, fords across the shallows, swallows in the clay banks, days of indolence and adventure” (6). The Frenchman River was Stegner’s childhood playground, and the “smell of distance” in the wind, the “overpowering” circle of sky, the “tantalizing and ambiguous and wholly native smell” of wolf willow stir his connection to this home place. Without the scent of promise, settlers to southwestern Saskatchewan in the early twentieth century would have been few and far between. The landscape and cheap land inspired a short-lived rush that Stegner documents in his early novel *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* (1943).

Yet much of Stegner's narrative of Whitemud exudes despair and emptiness. Returning to Whitemud as an adult, Stegner notes the "false front" bravado of a struggling town that has seen better days. He remarks that Whitemud "is an object lesson in the naïveté of the American hope of a new society" (287). The Plains climate made this curve "from hope to habit, from optimism to a country rut," inevitable, "because on the Plains the iron inflexibilities of low rainfall, short growing season, monotonous landscape, and wide extremes of temperature limit the number of people who can settle and the prosperity and contentment of the ones who manage to stick" (287). Moreover, the residents themselves are not educated to appreciate their own culture, their own place. In many ways, *Wolf Willow* is a record of destruction and discarding as the legal, political, and economic institutions of Empire were put upon place. His chapter titles — "Preparation for a Civilization," "Horse and Gun," "Company of Adventurers," "The Last of the Exterminators" — speak to this subtext of violence, exploitation, and intolerance. Stegner struggles to present this century of change because it was not part of his curriculum in school. As an adult he must recreate a history that was denied him. His family history interweaves with this larger political history, and yet the archaeology and geology of Whitemud present even deeper layers than this sediment of "continental hegemony" (103).

When the facts as lived, recorded, told, and published no longer suffice, Stegner famously turns to fiction halfway into his history, story, and memory. His cowboy tale, "Genesis," and his homesteading drama, "Carrion Spring," relate human struggle against a fierce landscape during the killing winter of 1906-07. These stories vividly demonstrate the costs of living in a land one does not understand. Stegner connects this tragic ignorance to his own family's short time farming near the Frenchman: "Out here," he argues,

we did not belong to the earth as the prairie dogs and burrowing owls and gophers and weasels and badgers and coyotes did, nor to the sky as the hawks did, nor to any combination as meadowlarks and sparrows and robins did. The shack that my father built was an ugly tarpaper-covered box on the face of the prairie, and not even its low rounded roof, built low and round to give the wind less grip on it, could bind it into the horizontal world. (270)

Worse yet, his father did not possess the knowledge of place that could have assured success or even some kind of survival. All that remains of his family's time in Saskatchewan is a faint trail and an old house. His mother grasped the severity of their situation: "She knew it was a failure we were living; and if she did not realize, then or ever, that it was more than family failure, that it was the failure of a system, and a dream, she knew the family failure better than any of us" (280). Like a *dinnseanchas* narrative, Stegner's layers provide a keening vibration of a genesis that brings failure and death.

Stegner's attempt to provide a deep map of Eastend springs from his own need to re-educate and reorient himself. Ignorant of this formative childhood landscape, Stegner bridges his personal story to the larger histories of geology and the environment as well as to the cultural and mythological stories of Indigenous and settlement communities. When these stories prove insufficient, he switches genre and writes fictional accounts of settlement's tragedies. While the deep time of Plains natural history undergirds his narrative's many layers, Stegner's emphasis is on the last two hundred years of colonization on the Northern Great Plains. In the end, his text expresses a profound disaffection with this history and its attendant losses. With the next generation of Eastend-inspired deep maps — the writings of Don Gayton and Sharon Butala — one perceives the indelible imprint of Stegner's *Wolf Willow*, for Stegner's textual pattern finds its home in *The Wheatgrass Mechanism* and *Wild Stone Heart*. At the same time, Gayton and Butala turn their texts toward the prospect of healing the wounds of settlement, of reclaiming and bonding with the landscape, and of furthering the literary cycle of Eastend's place lore.

In an article devoted to Stegner's writing, historian Elliott West has underscored the essential narrative elements that make place-based historical writing so vital: place "is the accumulation of all the things that people have done on that spot . . . a 'place' involves the meanings that humans have taken from an area and from what has happened there, the perceptions and emotions of individuals responding to their surroundings, and to events" (64). Don Gayton's perspective on Eastend offers an extension of Stegner's deep map, as well as a corrective vision and new measures. Like Stegner, he is "responding to [his] surroundings, and to events," but he is writing a generation later. Like any good writer of place lore, he bends to his predecessors, but Gayton also offers

his own voice, his own “perceptions and emotions,” and like a *dinnse-anchas* writer, he marks transitions since Stegner’s 1962 publication and presents “the possibility of redemption” (Buchelt 120). Gayton does not turn a blind eye to the deleterious effects of white settlement; indeed, that history is an important component of his narrative exploration of wheatgrass country. But through the study of native grasses, Gayton can offer up “landscape lessons” on survival, what he has called in another essay “ground truth” (see *Landscapes of the Interior*). Much of Gayton’s published work supports the idea of restoration of ecosystems. “The attempt to actually reproduce an ecosystem,” he has written in the essay “Tallgrass Dream,” “may be an act of incredible ignorance, and yet it is also an act of profound faith in the future of nature and human beings” (*Landscapes* 107). To study, in-depth, the nature of place and to use this information to connect non-Native people to their landscape is his mission. In this way, his deep map recognizes Stegner’s disaffection but offers new knowledge and a new direction for current inhabitants of the Plains.

*The Wheatgrass Mechanism* highlights a number of unique ecosystems in the western Canadian interior that illuminate the storied landscape of wheatgrass: Bragg Creek, Alberta, an ecological “zone of tension”; the Cypress Plateau and its hidden near monoculture of lodgepole pines; Don and Dorothy Swenson’s ecologically sound farm near Moose Jaw; Roy LaMotte’s rangeland near Okapan; the salt lands where Old Wives’ Lake used to exist. Gayton takes us into the Paleolithic past, to the last ice age that reshaped this landscape, and to the present arid, grasslands landscape, which owes its origin to that past. Transition and change stand as a marked feature of this part of Canada, despite its seeming stability. Gayton’s representation of the Cypress Plateau is of particular interest, because he self-consciously re-enters the landscape of Stegner’s text. This chapter, “Analogues and Desires,” begins in Stegner territory, musing over the nature of exploration. In particular, he highlights John Palliser, the man sent out to investigate the possibilities of colonization in the western interior of Canada and to survey the lands he covered. In 1860, he completed his “Report to Her Majesty.” Gayton marvels at the minimal outfitting of this scientific survey: “Palliser, together with his geologist Hector and the botanist Bourgeau, explored the prairies with only compass, theodolite, and notebooks” (80). Gayton and his colleagues now have access “to computerized weather modeling . . .

infrared satellite imagery . . . neutron-activated soil moisture probes [and] historical databases” (80). Their ability literally to delve into the earth around Eastend is unparalleled in scientific history. This section of Saskatchewan is part of the Palliser Triangle, a landscape now covered “with underground gas pipelines, feedlots, and golf courses. Many of the dramatic heights of land [Palliser] described,” Gayton continues, “are now staked with microwave transmission towers” (80). In terms of the history Stegner explored, Gayton’s contemporary landscape bespeaks the power of modernity to reshape and reuse native places, to bring to far-flung rural communities communication, material goods, and “the good life.” Still, to the urban visitor, the Cypress Hills are “hinterland,” and Gayton’s curiosity and imagination impress upon him the need to “re-explore” Stegner’s text and this landscape through an ecological lens.

Gayton notes the buttes and heights in this part of the triangle, rises from the Plains that give view of the vestiges of the Pleistocene glacier advance, of the ranchlands and the watershed divide. “Certain tracts of land focus elements of the landscape, physically and symbolically,” Gayton explains. “The Cypress plateau does that; it is the geographical clasp, joining the Gulf of Mexico to the Arctic Ocean, and the Rockies to the prairies” (82). Here lived the last free-ranging bison; here lived the final groups of non-reservation First Nation bands. The Cypress Plateau escaped glaciation, adding to its uniqueness within the larger grasslands biome. Gayton’s descent from the Cypress Plateau to Eastend supplements Stegner’s deeply mapped story. He gives us the geologic and biologic history in detail, passing through several ecological zones, from the “zone of tension” at the top of the plateau with its lodgepoles and white spruce to the “plains rough fescue country, with admixtures of silver lupine, cinquefoil, and prairie sage” (85). He joins the Frenchman River at Ravenscrag, entering into yet another landscape, “a glacial melt-water channel that had cut deeply into the prairie” (86). Here one sees “Cretaceous shales and Jurassic coal seams” (86). In these valleys one finds evidence of the deepest map, time embodied in dinosaur bones fossilized into rock, the imprint of another landscape eons ago before humans entered this country. In such places, time conflates, the present rubbing up against the palimpsest of a once vital world. At the end of his journey, Gayton detours through Eastend to see the old Stegner house and to remember *Wolf Willow*, a “work rooted in land” (86).

In the fifty kilometres of his textual journey, Gayton seams together

the deep past with the present of grid roads and mainstreets, of modern science and technology. He examines ecological contact zones, where the flora and fauna of differing geographies meet in a zone of contact, a “dynamic edge.” This phrase is highly charged in Gayton’s text. In the meeting of forest and grass, in the juxtaposition of open and closed spaces, Gayton feels something “right,” something generative for the human soul. The creative juxtaposition of histories embracing the natural and cultural realms becomes another edge in his deep map. Within *The Wheatgrass Mechanism*, Gayton folds in other, older texts and place lore, furthering the dynamic tension and interface. His text offers a new way to map Eastend, but leaves room for many more explorations. He sees his own short journey as only a beginning.

Gayton notes the many “rounded, flattened stones” that are scattered across the surface of the area around the Cypress Plateau. Gayton gives us a geological explanation in his text. Sharon Butala gives another interpretation of them in her deep map *Wild Stone Heart*. I think it is important to note that both Stegner’s and Gayton’s literary cartography underlies Butala’s. Like theirs, her text provides interconnected histories grounded in personal experience and a quest for place-based knowledge. Butala offers up analyses of cultural practices, critiques of colonization, and a compendium of natural history. Measuring her small corner of Saskatchewan, discerning its far-reaching dimensions and grasping its comprehensive nature, Butala embraces Stegner’s narrative pattern. At the same time, she is conscious that she is building anew from previous deep maps, reiterating or extending some of their layers into her own text, but also adding new sediments connected to gender, regret, and illness. Following Stegner’s pattern, memoir is the anchor of her narrative. Unlike Stegner’s family, Butala’s has not been displaced from their ranchlands; unlike Gayton, she is not attempting months of field work, but rather attempting to adjust to a fixed life on this place. The nature of home is a central question in her narrative, a question made complicated by her new home’s haunted status and to the mysterious nature of the stones littering a one-hundred-acre field, left untouched by the Butala family. Moreover, Butala’s enigmatic physical ailment — an inexplicable sapping of energy — seems in some unknown way connected to her life in Eastend, to her incomplete surrender to rural culture and ranch life, and to wayward desires to “get” something from the land her husband’s family has ranched for several generations. She



shares with Stegner a sense of ignorance of the land and of its history, and her narrative (connected to her earlier memoirs) suggests that living in a place is not the same as being deeply of that place.

In reconceptualizing the field, Butala must critically examine herself and her placement in the colonization of Canada. To borrow from Susan Stanford Friedman, she must enter into the “geographics” of a new terrain, a space of “dynamic encounter” that repositions her and presents deeper knowledge of the field (Friedman 18-19). In this field space, Butala gains insight into Indigenous practices and history, into the dissonance of modern life, into the extractive mentality of the western Canadian economy, and into the difficulties of communicating a revised vision of oneself to one’s immediate community. Many axes intersect in the field — cultural, racial, sexual, spiritual, personal — making it a particularly rich, if conflicted and inflected, site of encounter (see Friedman 109-10). Butala’s struggle endorses Wes Jackson’s comment, in *Becoming Native to this Place*, that “cultural information like biological information is hard won” (106). They do not hand these maps out at gas stations or welcome centres located at borders. Family, friends, and neighbors can only guide one so far into a site like the field. Butala must trust her own experience and instincts to negotiate her way through the layers of the field.

“*What do you want of the field?*,” an internal voice keeps prodding Butala. Knowledge, atonement, mourning, forgiveness, love are all possible answers. Ultimately, muting desire and want renews her energy, and in replacing “want” with “give” — literally establishing, with her husband Peter, the Old Man On His Back Prairie and Heritage Preserve — Butala finds, after twenty years, a sense of peace that has eluded her. The stones in the field hold the key to this transformation in the text. Indeed, the stones prove to be an enabling device that allows Butala to enter into memory and collective unconscious space, into what Butala calls “the bedrock of mystery” (29).

Yet the field at first appearance looks to be “simply grass with rocks protruding here and there” (54). Like so much of the Plains landscape, the field lacks definition. John Palliser, walking through this same landscape in the late 1850s, called it an “immense waste” (qtd. in Thacker 37). The earliest settlers, Butala explains, “defined the field as barren and useless” (38). To uninitiated eyes, the field and the larger Plains region it represents appear empty, unyielding, barren. Closer inspec-

tion, however, reveals a stunning biodiversity of flora and fauna that sustained generations of Plains Indigenous peoples before settlement. The field connects in vital ways to the original northern Great Plains grassland, a landscape “vanishing to such a degree,” Butala explains, “that it has been said that few places on earth have been changed so much by human hands as southern Saskatchewan” (103). “Waste,” as the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells Butala, is a synonym for “wild.” Though some might scoff at the idea of a one-hundred-acre field being wild — and Canada’s Indigenous people have no concept of this land’s wildness — Butala argues otherwise. Wildness cannot be reduced to the undomesticated and uncultivated, she counters; wildness also suggests the ineffable, “indescribable,” possibly “unknowable” dimensions — the invisible landscape (94). In her field, she encounters something she can only call “presence,” some “quality of *consciousness*,” a force that “[calls] on all my resources of concentration, energy, and devotion” (98). She feels compelled to be its supplicant. Thus the seemingly ordinary field transforms itself into sacred space, into territory that can be deeply mapped for the reader’s edification and elevation to higher understanding.

Part of the presence here in the field is ghostly, that of millions of acres of an evolved biome transformed by European colonization and its agricultural practices. Butala’s position within this agricultural history makes her acutely aware of its contradictions. White settlement in western Canada, “*from the very beginning*,” she emphasizes, was promoted purely as a business venture, with the land viewed primarily for its economic potential. Yet the ranchers’ connection to the land has also inspired “topophilia,” Yi-Fu Tuan’s memorable word for a genuine love of the land and its beauties (4). Such aesthetic and spiritual appreciation opposes the economically expedient and complicates any understanding of nineteenth-century settlement history on the Plains. When Peter and Sharon give their ranch to the Nature Conservancy of Canada in 1996, their gesture is not appreciated by all. Economic interests remain powerful in western Canada, and the idea of restoring land to its original state strikes some in her community as an almost perverse kind of waste. The property is not returned, either, to the Indigenous dwellers on this land.

Giving the land to the Nature Conservancy of Canada does nothing to redress the history of usurpation from the land’s original inhabitants,

and thus the gesture she and her husband make does not soothe her soul. The field continues to stir strange insights and visions, to suggest histories and realities that beg disinterment. She vaguely grasps that they are connected to Indigenous people who lived off this land for generations before Peter's family bought and ranched this place. In her regular walks, Butala discerns stone features and patterns, clearly human made, arranged in circles and cairns. They are not teepee rings, she knows that much. Their arrangement hints at ceremonies, even burials. Discovering the stones coincides with three uncanny happenings in Butala's life: first, the new house she and Peter have built is haunted by capricious spirits that create banging sounds, thunderous noises in the walls and on the roof, and open and shut doors, cabinets, windows. Second, Butala suffers "a tide of illness," a "terrible exhaustion" that "was somehow connected to the field" (32-33). Finally, weird visions and dreams give her cryptic glimpses into other, wilder dimensions in the field. The mystery of the stones bespeaks deeper layers of narrative, other ways to map the surface of things, to guide and illuminate our spirit.

The field becomes a border space in her text, a dynamic edge between dimensions that has opened her imagination to the past, to the land, to the non-material, sacred reality. She discovers as well that the field is a site of trauma: her map of the field must "refigure sorrow," to borrow Mark Allister's apt phrase. Unconsciously she has grasped the presence of tragedy, but the full grip of its truth does not hold her until she has an epiphany in the field: many had died — from famine? from disease? from warfare? — and lay buried in the field. Indigenous people lie dead within a field now embraced by white settlement's landscape, and their presence brings the fractious and difficult history of colonization right to Butala's doorstep. The stones that had brought Butala surprise and often pleasure represent something far uglier, and Butala grieves:

I wept for a moment, and my grieving was for once genuine. I felt ashamed that I had not felt this before, that I'd been so proud of myself, so possessive of what was not mine at all, of a place where I walked only on sufferance of the ancestral spirits guarding it, and only because those to whom this field and those graves rightly belonged to had been rendered powerless to stop me. (187)

Butala's deep map brings to the forefront discomfiting knowledge and unsatisfying irresolution. In establishing the boundaries of her cartography, she must face presences that are not benign, that do not comfort,

and that demand mourning. The lived space of life, that so desires hope and optimism, must also include layers of presence that haunt and prod. A former landscape no longer breathes, populations tied to this landscape now face radically altered lives, and even the heirs of colonization face diminishment as the farm and ranch economy suffers. One reason the Butalas had given their land to the Conservancy was because “the farming economy . . . is in shambles” and “bad news” arrives “every day,” so that “with every passing year in economic terms we go farther backwards” (198). In its own way, the path of white settlers, the trajectory of people like the Butalas, may be leading to another kind of burial. Eastend faces again the boom and bust cycle, which has chipped away at its modern face ever since the Stegner left town broke many years before. Yet this knowledge lifts Butala as well and ironically helps heal her body. Ultimately, she embraces a profound shift of consciousness. To map the land — “to walk on it with respect” — one must submit “to be terrified, shattered, humbled, and, in the end, joyous” (188). In that way, Butala argues, one can “come home at last” (188). But this homecoming excludes the descendants whose ancestors lie buried in the field. Inexplicably, Butala does not seek knowledge of this place from her Native neighbors or from Native scholars and writers. Their voices are uncomfortably absent in her text. As a result, her deep map is unable to resolve a vexed history, though it takes important steps toward acknowledging injustice and seeking forgiveness.

The three Canadian writers I have examined demonstrate the diverse paths that contemporary deep map writers can take, even when they are plumbing the depths of the same landscape. As an important genre in contemporary environmental literature, the deep map narrative proves dexterous and polyvocal. The deep mapping of Eastend is not over, I hope, and the voices of Stegner, Gayton, and Butala should not predominate. The critical, primary voices of Native Canadian writers, connected as they are to millennia-old, intimate knowledge of this part of Saskatchewan, must be placed front and centre and amplified in revising the cumulative deep map of place if it purports to be a true record of humanity’s presence on the Plains. Theirs are the original Plains deep maps. Indigenous stories present a generative vision of this land, its histories, and its myths that Euro-Canadian writers and readers have resisted for too long. Conjoining stories from multiple communities, despite conflicts, contradictions, and the colonial divide, could help

pave the way toward knowledge that sustains and protects all people living on the arid grasslands. An alignment of deep maps, from both Native and non-Native perspectives, could serve to hasten a change that Leanne Simpson and other Indigenous writers desire: the “dismantling” of “the colonial relationship between Canada and Indigenous Nations” and the “reconstruction of Canadian history” (122). Laura Smyth Groening, too, addresses the concept of a “healing aesthetic” — she does so in the context of Basil H. Johnston’s text *Indian School Days* (1988) — which counters “stories of guilt and despair” (151) and allows for “a flourishing, future-oriented ‘Indian-ness’ in First Nations people,” as well as a balm for non-Native guilt that remains unhealed (146). Only then will something akin to a full *dinnseanchas* cycle be configured on the northern Great Plains.

While population shifts might be emptying out some towns on the grasslands, a portion of the people who remain show signs of desiring a bioregional culture. (Gayton, in his recent book *Kokanee*, has written of his area of British Columbia as collectively investing in a Kootenay bioregional culture, one deeply tied to the land and its history.) I see the signs of a strengthening bioregional desire evident in my own part of the Nebraska Plains in multiple ways: at academic gatherings, in bookstores that increasingly display Indigenous and regional literature, in regional environmental organizations fighting for grasslands preservation, or in the writers who stay connected to the Plains, who write from their regions and fight for them. I see this desire in the return of bison to our grazing lands or the investment in better grazing practices; in the establishment of organizations like the Centre for Great Plains Studies, the Cather Foundation, the Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Centre in Chadron, all in Nebraska but reiterated across the Plains; and in the prairie preserves from Canada to Texas. Voices coming from divergent communities — Indigenous, farming and ranching, literary, environmental, educational, to name some of the biggest — are speaking from the Plains, for the Plains, to protect what little remains of the original grasslands and to make others understand the integral value of the Plains environment. Native and non-Native writers who negotiate Plains deep map country are a significant part of this bioregional chorus. Irish scholar Gearoid Denvir has written that the discipline of *dinnseanchas*

gives a deep sense of rootedness and belonging in both a psychic and a physical sense. Communal, and thus personal, memory is thereby perpetuated and a definite and definable sense of both communal and personal identity established over time. This sense of identity connects the inner world of the psyche to the external world of the physical by providing as it were a complex of spatio-cultural coordinates for what Fredric Jameson calls the process of “cognitive mapping.” Knowledge and lived experience are thus grounded specifically in spatiality, making particular places, lieux sacres, both real and metaphorical at the same time. (“From Inis Fraoigh”)

Deep map writing from all corners of the North American Plains could serve just such a homing purpose. The evolving cycle of deep maps from Eastend, Saskatchewan may very well be guiding the way.

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