

## Reinscribing the Multilayered Landscape : The Heart of the American Prairie in William Least Heat-Moon's *PrairyErth*

Wm. Thomas Hill\*

### I. Introduction

Not unlike the casual reader's response to the poetry of Robert Frost, one reviewer, examining William Least Heat-Moon's *PrairyErth*, observed that

It is all prairie, and mostly pleasure — nothing here that smacks of the prairie fear felt by such natives of it as Willa Cather, who had an absolute horror of grassland. If *PrairyErth* has a fault it is that it is almost entirely a celebration, even when it does not mean to be. It is a good-hearted book about the heart of the country.<sup>1</sup>

A casual reading of *PrairyErth* does seem to reveal a celebration of the landscape. And yet... if the reader enters, *deep map* in hand, into the many layers of the landscape of Chase County in the Flint Hills of central Kansas (See, Figures 1, 2 & 3 below), there is another story beneath the celebration. There is celebration, yes ; but more importantly, there is an undercurrent of unease and darkness which permeates the entire text :

I headed back to the road to get away from the gloom of overgrowth and the infested buildings. In the county are many campsites Indians used for centuries, yet this homestead around Perkins Spring hadn't lasted sixty years, and I figured my unease came from some notion about white men's inability to endure, about their incapacity to live with the land, people who were *users of* and not *dwellers in*. (226)

This question of persisting versus dying out underlies the celebration throughout the entire text (much as it does in Frost's poetry). At least on one level, this paper is an

---

\* Professor, Department of English Literature, Sophia University

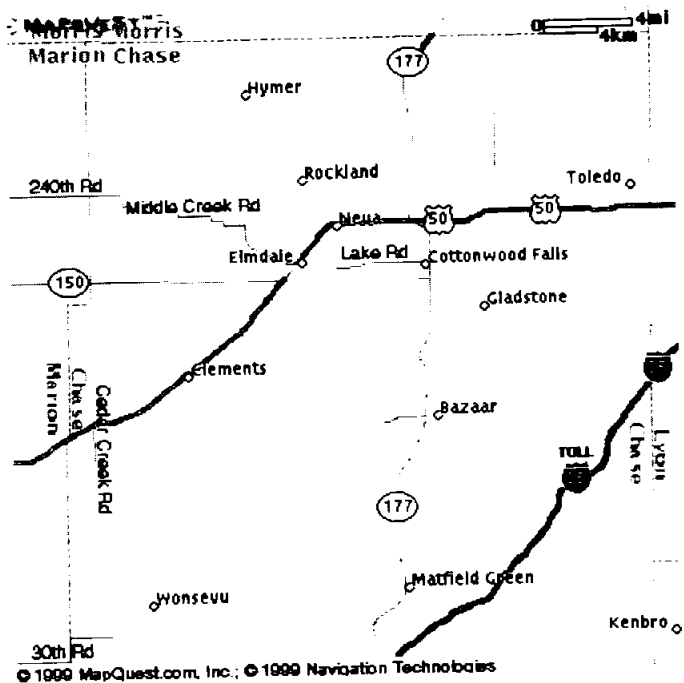


Figure # 1

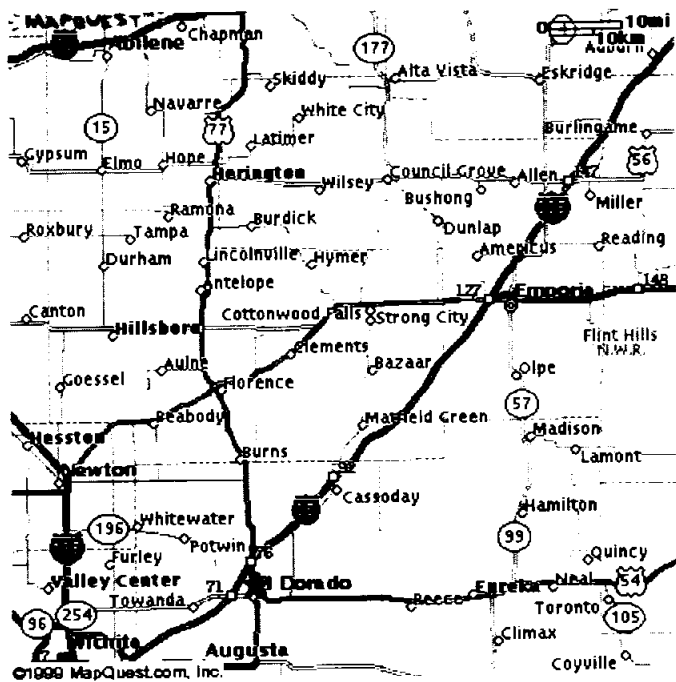


Figure # 2

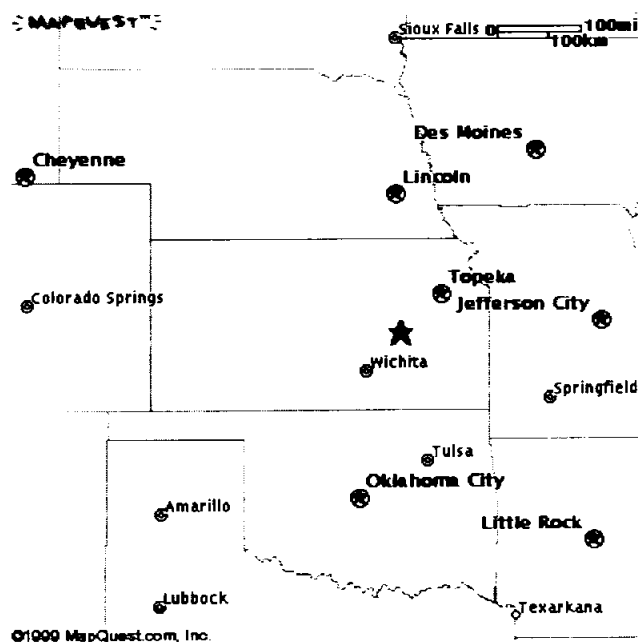


Figure # 3: The large uncircled star above Wichita represents the location of Cottonwood Falls in Chase County, Kansas.

attempt to examine this unease in Heat-Moon's text because to miss it is very much to miss the point of his text altogether. As for the unease, it never lets up simply because the cause of the unease still persists in U.S. society.

*PrairyErth* is a "deep map" into this scene of decay and loss and amnesia that exists within much of the United States. Heat-Moon enters the discipline of Chase County's wilderness in an effort not to just get through it, but rather to get into it, wrestle with what it is, and attempt to know it and in so doing to re-inscribe it. As Primeau puts it in his description of Heat-Moon's *Blue Highways*, "Ultimately Heat-Moon remakes himself through his vision in the telling of his story, and he invites readers in on the process by drawing attention to the problems he faces in the construction of events" (73). Heat-Moon follows much the same strategy in *PrairyErth*. He remakes himself and at the same time he remakes the Flint Hills of Chase County, the largest remaining area of tallgrass prairie in the United States and by extension, draws his readers into the remaking of their own environments and more pointedly, their own homes. He walks the fields and long forgotten roads, the rolling fields, and the bottom lands; he pokes around under rocks and in holes, touching the land like a doctor probing for answers; he listens to the stories of everyone who has one to tell; he listens to the local characters in the bars and cafes,

pulling and gathering for, as Robert Frost says, “a hint of an explanation.”

Like Hemingway, looking for one honest word or sentence, Heat-Moon attempts to get at the myths that inform our sense of history, not to do violence to these myths but to simply acknowledge them as such so that we may move on more informed and with a more complete story. We live with myths. We live with stories of our own communities. There is nothing wrong with either; it is only important that we fill out the whole picture as best we can. This process is not always neat and tidy, and we should not expect it to be. We cannot always choose or control the ways in which this picture will be filled out. We often have to let it happen as Heat-Moon does when he meets a civil engineer with his own view of the white man’s movement west. He says,

“The past we believe in is fabrication. We’re informed idiots about it. The truth is, white settlers were motivated to come out here not for noble ends but self-serving, economic ones. At their worst, pioneers were genocidal and environmental exploiters encouraged by a grasping and moronic and inhumane government. And the inheritance continues. ... He didn’t blame movies, television, or popular novels for the distortions so much as a couple of generations of American historians who let the public get by with myths. ... When I took the covered wagon tour a couple of years ago, one passenger was a history prof back east, a nice guy in Hush Puppies, lots of information, but he couldn’t tell a sycamore from a cottonwood, hadn’t the least idea of what kind of tree to cut a wagon axle out of.” (422)

Of course there is nothing new in the civil engineer’s complaint, but his example does turn in the initial hands-on direction that one must begin to move in order to bet beyond that of a spectator to a *deep-map* historian.

Drawing from Anatole Broyard’s term “thick description” Heat-Moon’s “deep map” refers to the layers of ordinary information that any culture accumulates over the years. These layers of information form a grid much like the one Heat-Moon follows into Chase County. Only instead of being directions on how to get from one end of the county to the other, these directions move down into the earth upon which we live and back up again as we attempt to interpret what we see and hear and taste and smell and feel about what the information has to tell us. All of this is done poetically-time and again reminding one of Robert Frost-in a cadence that draws us into the atmosphere of Chase County, the people as well as the place itself, allowing us as readers to step into the rhythms of our narrator.

Primeau’s use of the word *story* is an important one because Heat-Moon’s book, as

we will touch upon later, is filled with them from stories of history to stories of legends and all the gradations in between: legend filled histories and history fed legends. Barbara Johnstone, in her excellent book *Stories, community, and Place* makes the point that “Stories do not mirror social reality, but rather create it and perpetuate it. ... details about places make places seem real, but they also serve particular local functions in the creation of meaning in discourse” (15). Throughout the entire text as Heat-Moon moves throughout Chase County from area to area in his grid, he interviews people so that the book is as much a compendium of oral history as it is a walking travelogue of the area.

As Edward S. Casey has pointed out in *Getting Back Into Place*, “In exploration the primary issue, so far as place is concerned, is orientation. Unless we are oriented to some degree in the places through which we pass, we do not even know what we are in the process of discovering” (121). This is well stated, particularly with regard to the surface features of Chase County. The book is divided into twelve sections, each corresponding to the different quadrangles on the grid into which the U.S. Geological Survey originally divided Chase County on the map. Each quadrangle, or section, is composed of six chapters in the book. The first chapter, always called “From the Commonplace Book,” consists of pages of quotations that introduce the various themes of the succeeding chapters of the section. In fact it is almost impossible to read the rest of each chapter without being drawn back again and again to the Commonplace Book just to verify one of the quotations and its relevance to the text. The necessary history, the necessary digging back into the past of the text, thus becomes vital to an understanding of the ongoing text. One does not simply start at the beginning and read to the end. The text continues to pull the reader back into itself. Even while discussing the various people and places and plants and animals, one senses increasingly that this experience of the text is not simply about one place called Chase County; rather, it is about every individual place in the United States and about being conscious of the land moving through the reader as the reader creates his or her own history in the land. It’s about developing the sense of one’s own place. As Fritz Steele explains it, “A Sense of place is the pattern of reactions that a setting stimulates for a person. These reactions are a product of both features of the setting and aspects the person brings to it” (32). These reactions develop only as we live vertically (conscious and aware of history and place) as well as horizontally (interacting within a community of dwellers) in a particular place.

Beyond the oral history and travel literature, *PrairyErth* is anthropology, archeology, biology, confession, culture studies (U.S. and Native American), environmental science, geography, geology, private journal, philosophy, and poetry. It is also self-consciously mythology. Heat-Moon is clearly aware of the mythic dimension in any history, and no

less so here. What Tuan in *Space and Place* has called the “hazy knowledge” brand of mythology helps to fill out our perceived worlds. E.V. Walter is right when he says that, “We cannot separate sensory experience from the mythic imagination” (69). However, this does not invalidate the truth value of the text in the least. If anything, Heat-Moon’s conscious awareness of it, seems to give it greater validity. As Barthes points out, “Myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflection” (129).

As mentioned, each quotation from the *Commonplace Book* seems mysteriously to point to the material about to be covered. But beyond this, there is not much more organization than you would find in *Moby Dick*, a point, by the way, that has been made by a good many reviewers. I like Heat-Moon’s perspective on this: “I realized that forward or backward didn’t matter so much as the depth of the view, a long transit at once before and behind: the extent of cherishing depends upon the amplitude of the ken” (269). Also, like *Moby Dick* there are whole chapters on one single feature of Chase County. For example, there is a whole chapter on hawks and another on tall-grass and another on the origin and meaning and various types of maps and one on the history of fence posts.

Of course the remaking process is never an easy one. It is difficult to overcome years of education and bias building. Heat-Moon writes,

Robert Frost said it, they believed that something there was that didn’t love a wall, that wanted it down, and that something was wilderness, the abode of the devil in Christian thought. They also believed that good fences make not only good neighbors but progressive communities. They understood that, while fences separate animals and crops, they link people into a utilitarian webbing. (281)

Amusingly, while Heat-Moon has no more understanding of “the abode of the devil in Christian thought” than any other non-Christian English major filled with medieval mythology, he does grasp something fundamental in Frost here, and this is the all too human desire for order, defined as a certain standard of security and comfort, as opposed to living with the heartbeat of the wilderness. We may chuckle at Heat-Moon’s ancient take on the “evil wilderness,” but the fact is, our narrator on this trip is as *American as* any of his readers.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, *PrairyErth* is a type of re-inscription; he has one chapter taken from the morgue of a daily newspaper. As he says, “... if you really want to see how life was in America in an earlier time, to encounter

it told first hand, look to the morgue of your daily *Mirror* ; if you would hear stories from your great-great-grandparents, then listen to your *Echo*" (514). Throughout the text we are constantly called upon to remember... remember, like a mantra echoing with the same resonance over and over again. For Heat-Moon, it is memory that holds any nation together. Memory requires an understanding of origins: origins of everything from the names of Maclura wood and Osage oranges to the State of Kansas. Forgetfulness is a greater killer of nations than any plague.

My grid walking half complete, I understood this: I'd come into the prairie, this place of long and circling horizons, because of a vague and undefined sense that I lived in shortsightedness; I saw how the land, like a good library, lets a fellow extend himself, stretch time, rupture the constrictions of egocentrism, slip the animal bondage of the perpetual present to hear Lincoln's mystic chords of memory. If a traveler can get past the barriers of ignorance and forgetfulness, a journey into the land is a way into some things and a way out of others. (269)

We carry on our lives, our daily existence under the eyes of those who stalk our blood. To ignore or to live in ignorance of this is to loose touch with who we are. Heat-Moon's motive in writing his book, then, at least on one level, is a healing one... to heal the gap between the past and the present left by the *ignor*-ance of previous generations. He seeks to reunite those who inhabit place with the healing power of the pen. Inscription becomes an extension of naming; only more than naming, inscription requires that the writer dwell within the grid opened by the inscription process.

## II. The Place in the Plains

The plains themselves, with their vast open spaces, do not beckon the traveler in. The hard open terrain, while enormously fertile for wheat, corn, and an enormous variety of grass plants, can leave those who do not hurry through on their way to the more comforting Rockies beyond, rather breathless and diminished. So much open invariable space has left many writers of the prairies filled with terror. In fact, as Heat-Moon points out, the first settlers to Kansas, uncomfortable with the flatness, attempted to plant trees. With few exceptions, these attempts failed. Some types of trees will explode in the brutal winters; others, particularly tall trees, are easy targets of Zeus's wrath frequently poured out on the prairie. Nevertheless, Cottonwood Falls in Chase County is a testament to the determination of those who insisted upon verticality in the midst of horizontality.

*PrairyErth* is a six hundred twenty-four page examination of a multilayered landscape at the heart of the United States of America and the story of one writer's attempt at it's inscription, or perhaps more properly, re-inscription: by which I mean, an acknowledgment of the history that has been inscribed there. Heat-Moon writes:

... I know I'm not here to explore vacuousness at the heart of America. I'm only in search of what *is* here, here in the middle of the Flint Hills of Kansas. I'm in quest of the land and what informs it, and I'm here because of the shadows in me, loomings about threats to America that are alive here too, but things I hope will show more clearly in the spareness of this country. (10-11)

What "*is*" here, as Heat-Moon discovers, are fragments strewn in all directions in seemingly endless horizons (See, Figure 4 below). Fragments that expose the wasteland left behind by manifest destiny... fragments left behind by those who have too easily forgotten their history. The charge to "go west, young man" is part of a long forgotten past. The "westering" that Steinbeck's characters speak of was never a call to enter in to the *journey* in the traditional sense of the word because "westering" never involved a return to a place of origin to educate future journeyers. It was not circular. It was linear. It was like a long migration into an endless horizon traveled by those not yet ready or willing to settle down and plant roots. And this trend has not yet changed. Only now, there is no more horizon. *PrairyErth* seems to point out an illness shared by wanderers, confused and uncertain about where they are heading because they have forgotten where



Figure # 4: These are the Flint Hills... not much in the way of hills but plenty of flint.



they came from and why they are moving on. Heat-Moon's challenge is to find some center in this movement of history through the land, some center that can be called something identifiably American. But it is difficult without a solid concept of home ; and most of the homes that Heat-Moon examines are either abandoned or lived in by solitary eccentrics who seem to have no connection with any other living being outside of themselves. They live in their own worlds in vertical defiance of their harsh environment.

It is people who name though. Ultimately, it is people who live the story. As Barbara Johnstone writes, "Meaning is always meaning by someone, and meaning to someone ; stories don't mean things, but people, who tell and listen to stories, do" (64). William Least Heat-Moon has a remarkable talent for drawing people out. Throughout *PrairyErth* he talks to farmers, restaurant owners, former school teachers, truck drivers, attorneys, retirees, all with the same undivided attention and genuine curiosity. He takes time, believing in the importance of the stories each of the Chase County dwellers has to share. He is as comfortable with the politician or librarian as with the local drunks.

And so, Heat-Moon also assumes a vertical posture. He turns down and at times in to the land itself :

... after the thrall of the grassland itself, the thing that lured me here was stone architecture ; the adroitly laid rocks of the courthouse, the Cedar Point mill, and the bridges, banks, homes, fences, cattle, chutes. Once I came to understand that these things were only one expression of what undergirded the place — geologically, biologically, and historically — then my quest turned toward the bones of the land, toward the hard seed from which this prairie and its people grow. Whenever we enter the land, sooner or later we pick up the scent of our own histories, and when we begin to travel vertically, we end up following road maps in the morrow of our bones and in the thump of our blood. (273)

To travel vertically is to travel alone. It's to arrive at one's own conclusions based upon one's own observations. It is to remain outside as a spectator looking in. Yi-Fu Tuan in his excellent work, *Topophilia* makes the point that "Generally speaking we may say that only the visitor (and particularly the tourist) has a viewpoint ; his perception is often a matter of using his eyes to compose pictures. The native, by contrast, has a complex attitude derived from his emersion in the totality of his environment" (63). In order to recreate the world that he enters as an observer, Heat-Moon must use all of his senses, listening to those who are emerged in the environment and picking and choosing among

the ruins for those parts of the environment that have been forgotten or mis-*placed*.

Throughout the text, Heat-Moon is an objective reporter. Nevertheless, keenly aware of his audience, he remains remarkably horizontal in his personal approach and in the relationship that this creates between himself and his the reader. If, as Bernd Jager has said, "The horizon is primordially that which calls us forth and invites us in" (213), than Heat-Moon has created an effective poetic balance between his vertical objective reportage of the material and the horizontal relationship that he creates to "call us forth and invite us in."

### III. Bearing Witness, Making a Record

As I have mentioned, Heat-Moon records his experiences and the people he meets as an observer much as Dos Passos and Hemingway recorded events, just the way they were. As such the grid that this opens up continues opening until it envelopes the whole of the United States and shows the mind — the anger, the laughter, the bigotry, the hope, the frustration and boredom, the fascination and the fear — at the foundation of it all. Heat-Moon finds more than his share of all of these and more among his contacts in Chase County, Kansas. As he observes toward the end of his text, *and without* celebration, "the movement from liberalism to conservatism, from a more open society to a narrower one, is the history of all Kansas" (467), just as it is all of the United States since the 1880's and 90's during the rise of corporate capitalism.<sup>4</sup>

On a physical level, *PrairyErth* is about the prairie and about the images implanted in it by the earliest life forms and later by those who dwelt in it and occupied it and then by the immigrants who came later and eventually named it Kansas. For Robert Frost and many others we can probably think of, ancient artifacts were messages sent to future generations from the past. *PrairyErth* is about the hope of persistence and the fear of annihilation in the midst of what this prairie is and represents. According to Heat-Moon, "Whatever else prairie is — grass, sky, wind — it is most of all a paradigm for infinity, a clearing full of many things except boundaries, and its power comes from its apparent limitlessness" (82). The first twelve lines of Robert Frost's poem "Directive" begins :

Back out of all this now too much for us,  
 Back in a time made simple by the loss  
 Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off  
 Like graveyard marble sculpture in the weather,  
 There is a house that is no more a house

Upon a farm that is no more a farm  
 In a town that is no more a town.  
 The road there, if you'll let a guide direct you  
 Who only has at heart your getting lost,  
 May seem as if it should have been a quarry—  
 Great monolithic knees the former town  
 Long gave up pretense of keeping covered.

William Least Heat-Moon's *PrairyErth* is very much like this "house that is no more a house / Upon a farm that is no more a farm / In a town that is no more a town." Like Frost's poem, it is a study of a built environment, one that is built on history and artifacts of families that are no more families upon farms that are no longer farms in communities that are no longer communities.<sup>2</sup> It is a study of a multilayered landscape, a landscape that, no matter how far you dig down, always seems left behind. And if the reader is tempted to follow the maps provided in the multi-voiced text as a guide, the sense of vertigo coupled with the sense that the guide "only has at heart your getting lost" in this vast openness becomes overwhelming.

*PrairyErth* is a haunting work. The empty houses, the abandoned farms and mills and factories, all speak of a tribe of people who have moved on to somewhere else, much as the "typical" American always seems to be from somewhere else. According to Mugerauer, "The house establishes a place, an opening for human life in the landscape in such manner that sensitively gathers forms and materials together with bioregional features such as climate and previous groups' modes of inhabitation" (178). These features reflect the effort that went into building the houses and surrounding structures. The condition they are in reflect the way people lived in them, thus beginning to turn the houses into homes; though homes take generations of living in a house to give the home any depth. When these homes in the making (or, as Heidegger would say, in the building process) are abandoned, there is a natural incongruity and confusion in the mind of the observer. The idea of home lacks serious meaning in the United States. Relph has argued that

Home in its most profound form is an attachment to a particular setting, a particular environment, in comparison with which all other associations with places have only a limited significance. It is the point of departure from which we orient ourselves and take possession of the world. (40)

Yet the average U.S. citizen moves every four years, thus explaining the fact that there is a sense throughout the text that this abandonment of house and home is an ongoing thing. Bachelard has said that “memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are” (9). Heat-Moon is a U.S. citizen working with fragments to rebuild, to discover what has been built, and to consider the possibility of building ; and if it is possible to build, *PrairyErth* asks, upon what can anything be built in this land? We forget places easily and quickly in the United States. At least what has the potential of pulling it all together and changing this trend is memory.

I believe Indians fear loss of meaning — that is, memory — beyond all other losses, because without it one can love nothing. After all, love proceeds from memory, and survival depends absolutely upon memory. (336)

*PrairyErth* is all about lost memory and lost or abandoned history. Edward S. Casey has argued that with the exception of Bergson, James, and Husserl, serious discussions of memory have all but died out since the end of the Nineteenth Century.<sup>3</sup> Contrary to the editorial mentioned above, Heat-Moon looks at what has been inscribed in Chase County with the same harsh realism that Cather deploys in her examinations of Nebraska :

The American prairies and plains eat pretension and dreams of aristocracy with the slow patience of inevitability, corrupting, eroding, and quite dissolving them in some places, and in others leaving only a carcass as a kind of memorial, a monument, a memorandum. Drive the rock roads of Chase County and you can see old, cut-stone walls of abandoned houses roofed and unroofed, windows broken and gone even down to the frames ; in the houses still having roofs and floors, you’ll find gnawed holes and in the corner a large pile of brittle sticks like a few baskets of laundry dumped and left ; these wood-rat nests are the last insult : spheres of scat spreading and deepening over the parlor, the kitchen, the bedroom, in a final defiling of the wish for nobility. (162)

Like Frost in his poem “The Wood-Pile,” Heat-Moon discovers fragments of order, structures that seem at one time to have had meaning located in unexpected places and abandoned so that, as Frost has put it,

I thought that only  
Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks

Could so forget his handiwork on which  
 He spent himself, the labor of his ax,  
 And leave it there far from a useful fireplace  
 To warm the frozen swamp as best it could  
 With the slow smokeless burning of decay.

The point being that without any evident intentionality on the part of the builders, nature seems to be reclaiming the product of this labor and eventually shall do so without leaving any trace behind.

These abandoned Permian stone places, despite their unpretense, partake of timelessness from the rock, the material of cathedrals and castles and capitols, and their decay seems sadder than that of a wooden derelict because the hopes and labor of their builders appear to have fallen farther. (270)

Here in Chase County Heat-Moon is standing in the middle of the westward path in the middle of the United States, and all around him is desertion and decay. Even the stones, for which Chase County was once well known in Kansas, have begun to lose their story. Every time Heat-Moon finds another stone structure, he hurries off to the nearest courthouse to find the records and he searches for those who remember stories about the structure. But while the records are often there on dusty shelves under piles of dusty records, the number of people who personally recall why the structure was built or by whom is rapidly dwindling; and Heat-Moon's belief that anyone should care, is too often met with surprise or confusion.

#### **IV. The Search for Traces**

Any kind of belonging fills an invisible landscape, inscribing that belonging upon it. Speaking of an American dream creates a focal point upon which some may wish for a hopeful future, but as Heat-Moon points out, "to know a place in any real and lasting way is sooner or later to dream it. That's how we come to belong to it in the deepest sense" (105). In Heat-Moon, the American dream is one of building and dwelling and educating a future generation to be builders who remember what they are building upon. Integral to the dream are the artifacts that are a part of it, that we walk among and form as a part of ourselves. Place and the artifacts of place have a mysterious relationship. Heat-Moon explains:

So : ... we are looking at totems of this land, more certain emblems of the long prairie than any other things but the tall grasses themselves. The place is in them, and, in their ways, they carry the place. We are walking and looking, heading ourselves only in the cardinal directions, the native paths of approach to the Primal Urge. (238)

But what these icons reveal is even more of a disconnectedness than a connectedness. On a hike to Osage Hill, he writes,

I carried my cottonwood stick and my usual haversack, but my real equipage was a mind full of stories I'd heard about Osage Hill, pieces of the *real* hill, a Platonist might say : with the greater framework now lost, they were more chips of narratives than whole tales, icons without an iconography, isolated pictographs that can remind a person and involve him in more than they actually were themselves ; they were small configurations that had to be continually reinfused and reinvoked to keep them from becoming indecipherable. (336)

This fragmentation due largely through loss of memory is consistent throughout the text. Icons exist through out the text like scattered shards. Of Diamond Spring, Heat-Moon says, it "bears such an accumulation of voices and recorded events that it carries a traveler farther." And yet,

... without its years of encrustings built up slowly like so much travertine, the spring appears a barren place indeed because a traveler now must rely entirely on these depositions to open it up to the imagination and reveal its deep time, and it is these layerings that make so shameful Kansans never caring to protect or honor the spring beyond a small 1907 DAR marker. Surely this place belongs not to an absentee-owner businessman but to a whole country. To turn the Diamond of the Plain into a stock tank is the damndest thing I've yet seen here. (464)

Heat-Moon consistently discovers fragments of history ignored or misused altogether by Kansans without any understanding or concern for their significance. In his attempt to come at Kansas, then, from another angle, he attempts to make a connection with what he calls "the bones of this place of Prairyerths" (157). He uncaps a pipe to an old oil well to "see at" the now no longer extant Nehama Mountains, buried some four hundred million years before. He wishes to smell the vapors and drop a small stone... anything

to make that vertical connection, at least symbolically as a gesture toward a different approach to the same place.

*PrairyErth* is about making historical connections. It's about the limestone earth that bears the wheat and the corn and barley and soy beans and the animals that eat them and the humans that eat both, unaware of their relationship to what lies beneath them: "they [Kansans] understand their living in the hills but not the hills living in them, and so the deeper links are broken and don't inform their conscious lives.... Flint Hills beef is a 250-million-year-old gift, yet the sense of history here goes back only to 1850 or sometimes a little further to the time of lithic weapons, and then it ceases" (159).

Heat-Moon discovers artifacts that predate the people and tribes that the first Western settlers came to lump together as Indian. All of the histories upon histories... the movements of peoples with their own religions and rituals and even their eating habits are part of the landscape that makes up this land that, as Heat-Moon demonstrates, is largely unaware of or concerned with its history. In more recent years, Heat-Moon has run into no end of criticism from Native Americans by claiming that contemporary Native Americans have no inherent right to the artifacts of ancient Kansas tribes being held at the museum of the University of Missouri since there is no physical evidence to prove that modern tribes are in any way related to the particular more ancient tribes where the artifacts were excavated. This declaration led to screaming and near violence in the auditorium of the University of Missouri where the meeting was being held.

This is not to ignore Wendell Berry's pronouncement that "The Indians did, of course, experience movements of population, but in general their relation to place was based upon old usage and association, upon inherited memory, tradition, veneration. The land was their homeland" (4). Ultimately, this is still awfully vague and cannot be used to point to any one tribe as the owners of these artifacts. All emotionalism aside, archeology would seem to support Heat-Moon's claim; and thus we see that it becomes more difficult to truly dwell at peace in any place unless and until we can first be honest about what we do and do not know about it.

## **V. Re-inscribing**

### **a. The Past on into the Present**

Kansas, of course, is a real place. We all know where it is. Some of us have traveled through it a number of times from various angles, usually (or, always) just to get to somewhere else. But we've been there. It's familiar to us. And when someone mentions Kansas, we have an image that comes automatically to mind. We are confident that we

know it. Heat-Moon spends a chapter explaining the varied spellings and meanings of the word Kansas, ending the chapter with practically a whole page of names in four columns from Cah to Quonzai. In order to re-inscribe this landscape, we must first see how it has been inscribed in the first place. Interestingly, what we discover is that our perceptions of the familiar are not based upon some well thought out scheme. *Kansas* became the accepted spelling of the state more out of chance and confusion than because it named a particular tribe of Native Americans. Ethnologists call them Kansa, and the six members of the tribe known to exist (all of whom are over sixty) call themselves Kaw.

Hemingway has told us that he did not believe in words like love, justice, freedom, and mercy. He placed his faith in words like street signs and names of cities. Now in *PrairyErth*, and like Don DeLillo's fictional characters, we are suddenly thrown into a situation in which names and the meanings that we have always given them and the comfort we have received from feeling that we know them and so can easily place them in the category of the known are suddenly thrown into question. Again, we have the sense of vertigo and the sense that we are lost... so that we can discover the place we call Kansas anew for ourselves. Three hundred twenty pages later, Heat-Moon tells us in his own way what he is doing in this chapter on naming Kansas :

(A suggestion : when you finish reading, go outside and find a living thing you do not know the name of and look at it closely and give it one of your own making ; then it will become yours to carry into dreamtime because memory depends finally upon what we create for ourselves, and until we become nomenclators of a place, we can never really enter it.) (442)

Essentially, as I mentioned, we are being called upon to name this particular place for ourselves. But the entire book is first an exploration of the item to be named first. While remaining vertical in structure, *PrairyErth* is also a horizontal plane upon which naming extends out in all directions. And it is a guide map for further naming. *PrairyErth* is a close look, or a close reading if you will, of this particular inscribed and forgotten place : this place that we think we know and thus do not really need to explore.

Writing of his conversation with a friend, Heat-Moon explains, "I suggested that we were having a go at participatory history... an effort at joining in, at trying to recapture a sense of what's gone before us, to act on history" (610). The importance of this is that it brings it alive in our blood. As Heat-Moon explains, "I do, of course, believe in biological kinds of resurrecting (flesh to bird to worm to so on, and the more subtle one of genetic inclinations whereby ancestors seem to stalk our blood)" (431). This defines



the kind of intersection that Heat-Moon seems to be looking for where history and forming through human effort and naming all come together.

As I alluded to above, part of what drew Heat-Moon to Chase County, Kansas were the stone bridges and buildings. His great-great-grand-father, David Grayston, was a stone cutter ; and Heat-Moon believes that some of that ancestral memory of working with stone resides in his blood. As his ancestor worked with stone forming it into workable form, so also Heat-Moon works with words. In this way there is a bond between Chase County and Heat-Moon's personal ancestry. Heat-Moon is working to rebuild these monuments through the use of language. For as we see through this text, even monuments made of stone can be forgotten or fall apart, or become altogether misused.

At one point he gives a fascinating demonstration of waiting and watching and seeing. He parks his van in Cedar Point, Kansas — population thirty-nine - because, as he explains it, "A couple of days ago a man in cottonwood said to me, *Nothing happens anymore in Cedar Pointless*. For years I've made a practice of seeing 'nothing' because I believe the American idea of 'something' usually ends up harming our perceptions and use of the land" (485). He determines then, to spend twelve solid hours doing nothing but watching in a town with six streets going one way and four going another. What comes out of this chapter is the history of the town ; the point being that even though *nothing of seeming consequence happens* during this twelve hours, the history of the town lives on in the town. It has not died simply because the mill that was once the center of the town's existence is no longer operational. Here he is forming through writing history. A point that Heat-Moon continues to return to is that we are shaped and molded by history just as we are by language. As Heidegger has pointed out,

the essential words of language, their true meanings easily falls into oblivion in favor of foreground meanings. Man has hardly yet pondered the mystery of this process. Language withdraws from man its simple and high speech. But its primal call does not thereby become incapable of speech ; it merely falls silent. Man, though, fails to heed this silence. (148)

Language has the potential to recall and revive the history of place as long as those who use language respect it's ability to do so. Again we are back to Heat-Moon's ancestors stalking his blood. There is a reciprocity between place and the ancestors that stalk our blood. E.V. Walter is referring to this in his comments about "the feelings of place" :

... when I write about the feelings of place, I am not committing what logicians call the “pathetic fallacy” — a mental error that projects feeling on a thing, a relationship, or some “external” state of affairs. A place has no feelings apart from human experience there. But a place is a location of experience. It evokes and organizes memories, images, feelings, sentiments, meanings, and the work of imagination. The feelings of a place are indeed the mental projections of individuals, but they come from collective experience and they do not happen anywhere else. They belong to the place. (21)

Heat-Moon’s unique history, discovery, travel book (?)—whatever we may wish to call it — approaches the problem of recreation and re-inscription as a vertical traveler and recreates and re-inscribes strictly for himself. There is a very strong sense of this throughout the text. While inviting us in, Heat-Moon invites us in as observers only. The research he does is his alone. His experiences, his inscription, his confessions which seem to open him up to us... all are his alone. This method of presentation places an unspoken responsibility upon the reader to “go and do likewise.” Or perhaps more to the point, stay where one is and dwell and know one’s dwelling.

#### **b. And on Into the Future**

As the book moves toward its conclusion, Heat-Moon becomes increasingly environment oriented. While I have some quibbles with minor points that he makes, I do agree with much. I agree that it is long since time to move away from petrochemicals. Pesticides and herbicides, anything that is not compatible with our basic biological structure should be held suspect. As Heat-Moon puts it, “The major consideration here is not to put anything into our environment that our tissues have no evolutionary experience with” (502). This seems pretty basic to me. But none of us in the First Word community live this way, particularly those of us of U.S. citizenship. On the next page Heat-Moon states that, “Americans today have difficulty in looking at history or evolution for ideas to solve problems” (503). Here again we have the problem of history again: a people, to some degree migrant immigrants, moving back and forth across the North American continent, forever unsettled, still uncomfortable with places, unable or unwilling to look down into the deep map at their feet.

It is a cruel irony, then, that the Kaw which had always been a nomadic tribe following migratory herds and weather patterns, were forced into sedentary living conditions which slaughtered them from disease and starvation while the white man

traveled dizzily in circles around them, never settling anywhere but charging into Native American territory for a time and claiming to “own” the land in a never ending parade of abuse. Now that the Native Americans have been wiped out in the region, there is nothing there at all but a few largely neglected towns.

## VI. Conclusion

So in all of this, where is the celebration? What celebration there is, resides in flickers now and then while reading of Heat-Moon’s re-inscription of these shards of history; nevertheless, overall the book is not a positive one. As Heat-Moon uncovers place after place, he records and then replaces, consistently, leaving history alone for further discovery... a further call to the reader to make his own discoveries. The history is always there just as it is everywhere if we are wiling to take the time. Even as these shards “return to the land” as Heat-Moon puts it, they become part of something alive through their recording. They pass on into and become a part of American history through their re-inscription. In *Blue Highways*, Heat-Moon writes, “While I had failed to put any fragments of the journey into a whole, I did have a vague sense of mentally moving away from some things and toward others” (213). Perhaps this is enough. For now... just a beginning will do. But there are whole volumes of ignorance to surmount.

As Girling has pointed out, at the foundation of society and culture in the United States there is the religious system — capitalism — that feeds the idols — from the dynamos that horrified Henry Adams to the computers of today — before which we have sat and worshiped since the turn into the twentieth century. Heat-Moon says of capitalism that,

Capitalism rose and expanded to its highest level on a young and abundant North American continent. But capitalism is a pump, an extractive system that bases its strength on eventual exhaustion. We consume and throw away. A natural system depends on recycled materials, while an industrial one employs extraction. (498)

While I see the problem Heat-Moon is discussing, it seems to me that he confuses natural and industrial as though the two are antithetical systems when in fact there is no logical relationship between the two or between them and capitalism. Furthermore, while I see that capitalism in the United States is extractive, it seems to me that this extractiveness is less an aspect of capitalism itself than the byproduct of how capitalism is practiced in the United States. That is, capitalism does not have to be extractive by nature. For example,

Weyerhouser cuts down hundreds of thousands of trees in the northwest region of the United States. Nevertheless, since the nineteen seventies when it was pointed out to them by the Sierra Club and others that they were destroying their own livelihood, they quickly developed an entire branch of their industry that does nothing but replant and nurture what they have cut down.

Human beings decide the dimensions and practice of how business is conducted within a capitalist system. To see it otherwise is to create another myth about this extension — this extractiveness — to capitalism which must be hurdled before we can move on in a constructive way to more sensible practices. I have no problem with capitalism itself. I do have a problem with the republican dispensation of greed and self-interest with which is it so commonly attached.

Heat-Moon gives us an enormous amount of information, much more in fact than many would probably think they need about some sparsely populated county in central east Kansas. Driving down I-335 from Topeka till it turns into I-35 near Emporia, and then continuing on down to Wichita, most would not even know they had passed through Chase County. And while this text will not speak to everyone in the same way, there are some universals that I believe it does possess. *PrairyErth* is about much more than Chase County. The very fact that it lies in the geographical center of the United States gives it metaphorical dimension. It is safe to generalize. Heat-Moon looks at the everyday, the ordinary, the mundane and shows us ourselves from a unique angle. He forces us to confront our ignorance of our own history while at the same time involving us in a historical process through the craftsmanship of his work.

#### Notes

1. See, "The Wizard of Kansas" by Paul Theroux.
2. See, my discussion of Frost's "Directive" in "Nature, Love, and Labor : Iconographic Representation and the Negotiation of Messages in the Poetry of Robert Frost."
3. See, Edward S. Casey, *Remembering : A Phenomenological Study*.
4. See, Martin Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916*.

#### Works Cited

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Maria Jolas, translator. Boston : Beacon Press, 1964.

- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Annette Lavers, translator. New York : Hill & Wang, 1972.
- Berry, Wendell. *The Unsettling of America : Culture & Agriculture*. San Francisco : Sierra Club Books, 1977.
- Casey, Edward S. *Getting Back into Place : Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*. Bloomington : Indiana Univ. Press, 1993.
- Casey, Edward S. *Remembering : A Phenomenological Study*. Bloomington : Indiana, 1987.
- Heat-Moon, William Least. *Blue Highways : A Journey into America*. New York : Fawcett, 1982.
- Heat-Moon, William Least. *PrairyErth : (a deep map)*. Boston : Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. San Francisco : Harper & Row, 1971.
- Hill, Wm. Thomas. "Nature, Love, and Labor : Iconographic Representation and the Negotiation of Messages in the Poetry of Robert Frost." *Studies in the Humanities* # 58 (March 1996) : 113-34.
- Jager, Bernd. "Horizontalty and Verticality : A Phenomenological Exploration into Lived Space." *Duquesne Studies in Phenomenological Psychology* 1 (1971) : 212-35.
- Johnstone, Barbara. *Stories, Community, and Place : Narratives from Middle America*. Bloomington : Indiana Univ. Press, 1990.
- Mugerauer, Robert. *Interpretations on Behalf of Place : Environmental Displacements and Alternative Responses*. Albany : SUNY Press, 1994.
- Primeau, Ronald. *Romance of the Road : The Literature of the American Highway*. Bowling Green : Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996.
- Relph, E. *Place and Placelessness*. London : Pion Ltd., 1976.
- Sklar, Martin. *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916*. New York : Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988.
- Steele, Fritz. *The Sense of Place*. Boston : CBI Publ. Co., 1981.
- Theroux, Paul. "The Wizard of Kansas." *NYTBR* (October 27, 1991) : 1, 25-26.
- Tuan, Ye-Fu. *Space and Place : The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis : Univ. of Minn. Press, 1977.
- Tuan, Ye-Fu. *Topophilia : A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. : Prentice-Hall, 1974.
- Walter, E.V. *Placeways : A Theory of the Human Environment*. Chapel Hill : Univ. of No. Carolina Press, 1988.