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Spring 1999

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# A TOPOGRAPHIC MAP OF WORDS PARABLES OF CARTOGRAPHY IN WILLIAM LEAST HEAT-MOON'S PRAIRYERTH

O. ALAN WELTZIEN

At first we explored the country with crude maps drawn by Grandfather on the back of paper bags, but as we got older we used blank maps that we were supposed to fill in ourselves as we went into new places, the deep wild places that Grandfather knew about. He said it was better if we went to those places without maps.

By the time I was ten I knew the names of almost everything I saw, and much of what I could not see.

—Rick Bass, “The Sky, the Stars, the Wilderness” (1997)

In “Thought and Landscape,” geographer Yi-Fu Tuan describes an essential double perspective required for any comprehensive understanding of rural landscape. A geographer

studies landscape “from ‘above,’” for example, but “The side view . . . is personal, moral, and aesthetic. A person is *in* the landscape . . . from a particular spot and not from an abstract point in space. If the essential character of landscape is that it combines these two views (objective and subjective), it is clear that the combination can take place only in the mind’s eye. Landscape appears to us through an effort of the imagination. . . . It is an achievement of the human mind.”<sup>1</sup> Tuan could be describing the overall descent into the land William Least Heat-Moon achieves in *PrairyErth*.<sup>2</sup> His 622-page book, “three times the length I set out to write” (598),<sup>3</sup> constitutes an enormous essay of place, a novel charting and evoking of a particular

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[GPQ 19 (Spring 1999): 107-22]

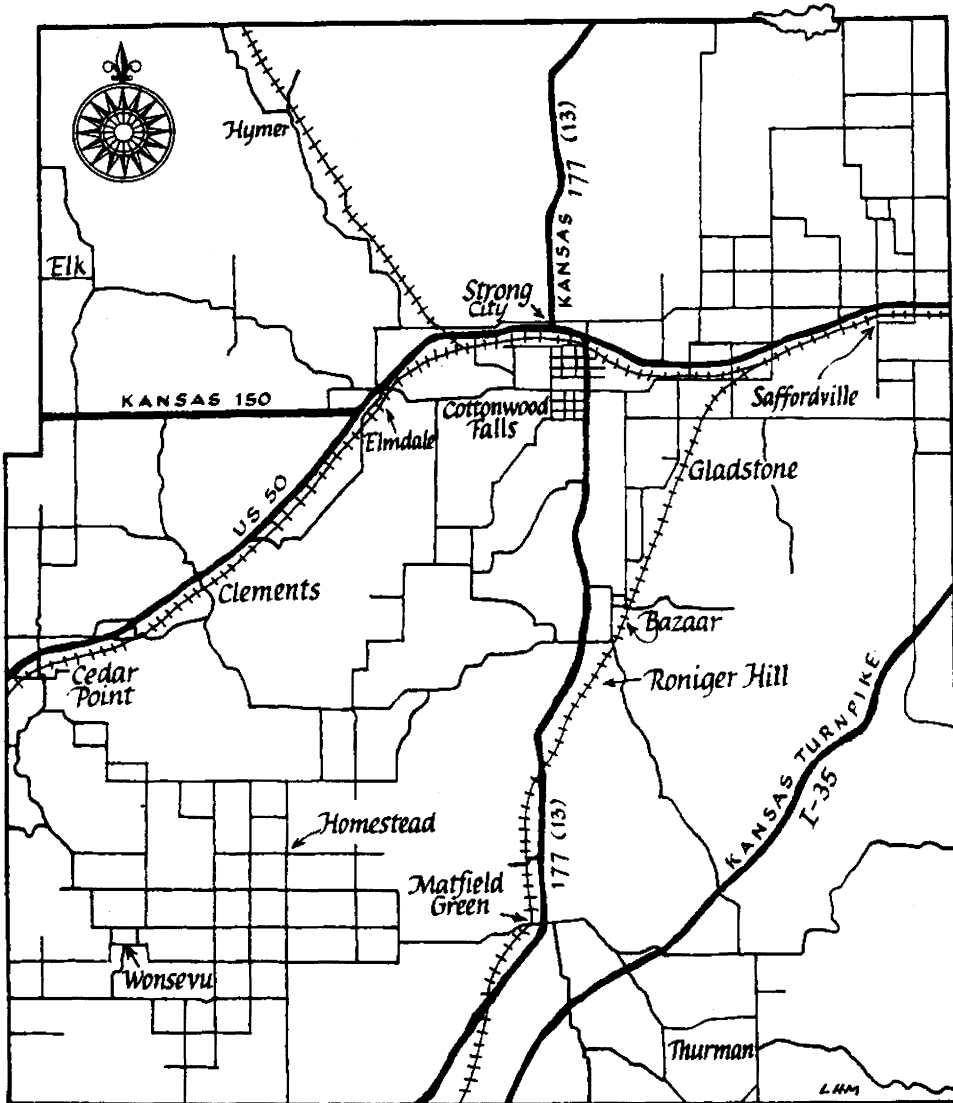


FIG. 1. Chase County, Kansas, map. From the book *PrairieEarth* by William Least Heat-Moon, a Peter Davison Book, published by Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. Copyright © 1991 by William Least Heat-Moon. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

landscape: Chase County, Kansas, a county of 733 square miles and about 3,000 citizens located in the southeast quadrant of the state, a mostly rural piece of the lower forty-eight states' geographical center that becomes a centerpiece. Heat-Moon aptly subtitled his experiment "a deep map," for map making and map reading form the book's primary formal

interests and epistemology. In "Writing in Place: The New American Regionalism," Michael Kowalewski singles out Heat-Moon's subtitle for particular praise: "Literary 'mappings' of American places have increasingly involved an interest in metaphors of depth, resonance, root systems, habitats, and interconnectedness—factors that together put

places into motion, making them move within their own history, both human and nonhuman."<sup>4</sup>

To put this Kansas county in motion, Heat-Moon creates "a topographic map of words that would open inch by inch to show its long miles" (15). His unusual word map—whose "two hundred thousand words are my nutshell" (615) of this epitome of Great Plains—contains several parables of cartography which critique certain traditions in mapping and narrate the writer's and reader's participation in map making and map reading. Furthermore, these parables continually probe points of intersection between cartographic and narrative epistemologies and practices, and locate Heat-Moon's voice in that chorus subverting the historical myth of the Great Plains' empty, oppressive, and peripheral status. *PrairyErth* provides one set of answers to questions about landscape of increasing interest in contemporary American literature: How does one best know a chosen landscape? What are the radical and radial connections between landscape and self? And what are the environmental and ethical consequences of such connections? It treats these familiar questions in ways that expose new affinities between mapping and reading and writing as fundamental interpretive acts. Yet the book's parables show that these interpretive acts both converge and diverge: that they are both complementary and antithetical accesses to knowledge of landscape. Beginning *PrairyErth* entails drawing both land contour and square survey maps, and implicating oneself in those diverse cartographic traditions. To map Chase County is to read and ultimately write it: these, of course, become aids to walking and knowing it, but are not the same. At the most, the "topographic map of words" constitutes an enormous set of directions for travel "by leg and butt," and directions, always a narrative act, both imitate and subvert the visual abstractions of the book's maps.

The opening of Rick Bass's newest novella, "The Sky, the Stars, the Wilderness," summarizes the complex relationship between map-

ping and knowledge of landscape examined at length in *PrairyErth*.<sup>5</sup> Those first "crude maps" of early childhood resemble the initial land contour and square survey maps the reader is asked to draw. Bass suggests that naming and mapping occur *after*, or at most accompany, knowledge of landscape, the apprehension of "deep wild places"; they measure, inscribe, and acknowledge it but are not themselves it. Heat-Moon's quadrangle/chapters are in some respects already overdetermined and specified; in other respects they resemble "blank maps," open invitations to inscription and travel that culminate in the renegade chapter, "Until Black Hole XTK Yields Its Light," that "doesn't exist." In "The American Geographies," Barry Lopez states, "to really come to an understanding of a specific American geography, requires not only time but a kind of local expertise, an intimacy with place few of us ever develop. There is no way around the former requirement: if you want to know you must take the time. It is not in books. A specific geographical understanding, however, can be sought out and borrowed."<sup>6</sup> *PrairyErth* virtuosically demonstrates such "local expertise," chronicles the writer's slow acquisition of it, and manifests "a specific geographical understanding" through novel exercises in mapping. Formal experiment, oral history, and sacred offering, it insistently offers itself to and includes the reader; its participatory cartography eventuates in the final section, "Over the Kaw Track," a demonstration in "participatory history" that I will discuss in my final section.

Essays of place usually play variations upon the immersion story, wherein the writer achieves, however fitfully, a state of oneness with the chosen landscape. Nearing the end, Heat-Moon declares, "my travels here have been into habitance," an "obsolete word" (613) defining an in dwelling, when self and land are one. The road to "habittance," like one of the writer's earlier blue highways, takes many turns, and the encyclopedic energy of this "deep map" always threatens to self-destruct or exhaust its reader. In the *New York*

*Times Book Review*, Paul Theroux proposes no fewer than nine descriptors, or labels, for *PrairyErth*: "history, travel, anthropology, geography, journalism, confession, memoir, natural history, and autobiography." This "topographic map of words" takes considerable risks, as if it is drawn at a scale finer and more minute than the US Geological Survey maps Heat-Moon begins, analogously, from. As Theroux remarks, "If Mr. Heat-Moon does not know when to stop, that is the sign of real passion in a traveller."<sup>7</sup> The book teems with voices of Chase County inhabitants, references to other texts, even four metaphors of design deriving from the grid, his most essential metaphor. I shall scrutinize these metaphors, above all the grid, before turning to the book's two initial exercises in mapping. These metaphors and the elaborately artificial structure of quadrangle/chapters do not overwhelm us because of his steady playfulness regarding them. The parables of cartography recommend a levity, even humility, so that as writer and readers draw and deploy maps we concede their artificiality: the stubborn space between them and the tallgrass prairie they evoke in minuscule detail. Heat-Moon self-consciously recapitulates the formal limits of any map maker: the closer he draws the scale with his giant word map, the closer yet more distant the real topographic and human landscape "looms"—to borrow a word the writer privileges to describe the acquisition of knowledge. He plays it both ways with mapping, and reading and writing, since he rests his whole project upon a logical contradiction: generally speaking, a "map" of "words" cannot exist, as it is no longer a map.

Heat-Moon borrows his central metaphor of design, the grid, from such cartographic traditions as the US Geological Survey and, long before that, the 1785 Land Ordinance. As formal experiment, the book constitutes a gargantuan metaphorical extension of a USGS quad map, though certainly it recognizes other traditions: as will be seen, the first map drawn is a land contour map, not a square survey. He appropriately titles his shorter,

opening section "Crossings" because he writes his initial parables of cartography inside the primary American cartographic narrative: "seventy percent of America lies under such a grid, a system of coordinates that has allowed wildness to be subdued" (15). Heat-Moon critiques this narrative emanating from the Land Ordinance of two centuries ago even as he borrows it. The writer's protest against the surveyor's tools and precise geometry, past and present, amounts to cliché; his recapitulation and teasing subversion of such a geometry is not. In this word map, "crossings" insistently bend into "circlings" (e.g., "*Einstein may have said that space is curved, but Indians already knew it. Your lovely grid is a great bending*" [613]); "Circlings" is the name given to *PrairyErth*'s shorter closing section that complements "Crossings," both framing and containing the whole. Though Heat-Moon mocks the surveyor in some respects, his book's design, particularly its opening and closing, unsurprisingly illustrate his own adaptations of the surveyor's measurements and precision. I shall concentrate on *PrairyErth*'s outer borders, for they introduce the book's metaphors of design and contain its primary parables of cartography. Certainly *PrairyErth* demonstrates that the grid has sometimes obscured other, more richly felt representations of landscape; the alternative representation favored by the writer derives from Osage and Kaw traditions. As will be seen, this non-geometric representation not only fulfills the writer's mixed-blood identity but recommends itself to readers as geographer Tuan's "side view." As a sacred offering *PrairyErth* begins with "white" grids in order to situate itself and its reader in a Native American tradition where one apprehends landscape religiously and ecologically and where "wildness" is cherished rather than "subdued." This is the familiar ground of the essay of place, though Heat Moon's particular essay-assay is unfamiliar ground.

If a grid system defines most of the United States over the past two centuries and more, Heat-Moon hyperbolically rehearses this nar-

rative in order to transcend it. In the originating scene, in his second-story writing room in Columbia, Missouri, we join him as Gulliver in Lilliput. He has “laid over the floor the twenty-five US Geological Survey maps that cover Chase County to the measure of an inch and a half to the mile,” and he strides about his forty-two square foot “paper land” (15) like some eager child, equipped with toy trucks and cars, ready to drive a pretend road map on the floor. The writer, ever seeking to penetrate Chase County across seasons and years, discovers his grid design back home and discovers himself simultaneously godlike, reading the central twelve maps from an ultimate omniscient vantage. Apprehending his book’s form entails redrawing these twelve quads as a new gestalt, or map. Yet Gulliver often acts comically, and if the discovery of form is tantamount to a divine rereading and rewriting of quad maps, the gleeful child at play figures more prominently in Heat-Moon’s elaboration of the checkerboard.

Heat-Moon rewrites his originating scene into “Crossings” and the book at large, since both he and the reader come from afar to Chase County and its cynosure, Roniger Hill, descending from an apparent bird’s-eye omniscience onto and below the tallgrass prairie’s surface, to a genuinely felt omniscience. In “On Roniger Hill” he writes, “I am standing on Roniger Hill four times,” thereby ritually testing his resolve. He stands emblematically, “facing west, dusk creeping up my back to absorb my thirty-foot shadow, the sun now a flattened crescent so dull I can look directly into it” (14). Contrary to Fenimore Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, facing eastward at the beginning of *The Prairie*,<sup>8</sup> the ever-westering writer feels less assured about his knowledge and his fit: “Standing here, thinking of grids and what’s under them, their depths and their light and darkness, I’m watching, and in an hour or so I’ll lie down and sleep on this hill and let it and its old shadows work on me, let the dark have at my own shadows and assail my sleep. If my configuration is still alive by morning, then I’ll go down off this ridge, and, one more

time, begin walking over Chase County, Kansas, grid by topographic grid” (15-16). Poising himself near the top of Chase County’s Flint Hills, the writer holds his grid of “arbitrary quadrangles” before him, rhetorically questioning whether his map’s tic-tac-toe geometry ensures “vertical travel” and “sacred understanding.” In fact Heat-Moon already knows his metaphorical adaptation of US Geological Survey maps does “open inch by inch to show its long miles” (15)—just as he knows that his ambitious inclusiveness leads his word flow beyond the equivalent 3/16-inch-to-1-mile scale with which he begins.

Even a cursory glance at *PrairyErth*’s table of contents enables us to assess Heat-Moon’s elaborate adaptation of the grid. Each of the twelve quadrangle/chapters contains six sections and of these, the first two and the final sections—“From the Commonplace Book,” “In the Quadrangle,” and “On the Town,” respectively—repeat themselves. Each chapter’s “On the Town”—Heat-Moon’s ironic adaptation of the quintessentially urban *New Yorker* hallmark—features a different topic after the colon, so in nomenclature this section exists halfway between the repeating (first two) sections and the variable (third, fourth, and fifth) sections. This combination of familiar and new works in concert with the steady warp and woof of Heat-Moon’s loom, through which he weaves all he knows of Chase County. On the dust jacket, front cover, and title page appears Heat-Moon’s icon, a light gray tic-tac-toe grid of three vertical lines and two more widely spaced horizontal lines. (Fig. 2) Following the Western cartographic standard locating the top as north, the loom that is *PrairyErth* shows the warp as the three north-south lines and the woof, the two east-west lines. In this grid each white square designates a chapter, and each chapter begins with Heat-Moon’s version of a quad map, presumably reproduced on the same 3/16-inch-to-1-mile scale as the Chase County map shown on the inside covers and page 2. We orient ourselves in each chapter with the icon, a black dot within a white

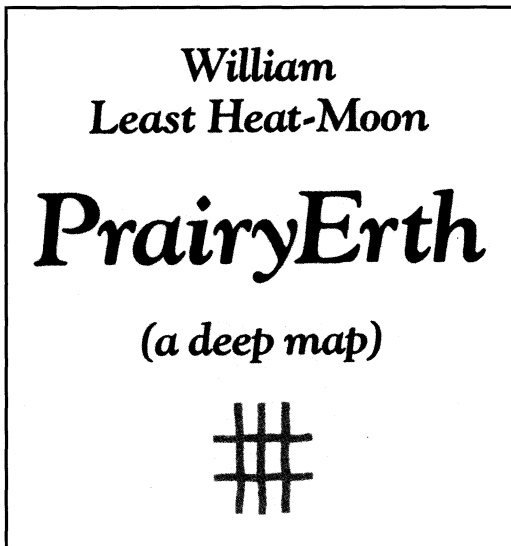


FIG. 2. Title page. From the book *PrairyErth* by William Least Heat-Moon, a Peter Davison Book, published by Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. Copyright © 1991 by William Least Heat-Moon. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

square revealing our location in the gray-lined grid. In effect we blow up and enter each of the twelve white quads successively, beginning in the northeast (i.e., the "Saffordville" quad) and gradually weaving away from the loom, north to south and then north to south again, slowly westering, as Western American literature insists upon, ultimately reaching extreme southwestern Chase County (i.e., the "Wonsevu" quad).

Heat-Moon's icon reduces all his metaphors of design to an abstracted, schematic essence; it constitutes his simplest cartographic parable, and its formal severity, even austerity, may have lead him to describe our task, in approaching his elaborated grid, like "a Japanese reading a book: up to down, right to left" (16). Each chapter's icon, only slightly different from its neighbors, resembles a Japanese character, and learning such a script, like decoding a series of hieroglyphs, means mapping the invisible landscape, to borrow Kent

C. Ryden's title: "an unseen layer of usage, memory, and significance . . . of imaginative landmarks—superimposed upon the geographical surface and the two-dimensional map . . . a vision of the world as a mosaic of places, a patchwork of fragments of people's unwritten autobiographies, a universe of gravitational centers around which lives and memories and values revolve."<sup>9</sup> The collaboration between writer and reader, insisted upon with the analogy to Japanese script and style of reading, exists in all Heat-Moon's metaphors of design. With this particular metaphor he closes the distance between map reading and reading, as if these are identical interpretive acts in learning a landscape, and sustains his original conceit, the "map of words." He uses the very materials of writing and reading and mapping—ink, print, paper—to point up his lessons in what I have called participatory cartography. Such participation probes the analogy between reading maps and reading landscapes, particularly ways in which the former accesses—or obstructs—the latter: "thinking of grids and what's under them," in other words. Even before we read Heat-Moon's adaptations of the grid, he forces our complicity, asking us to draw a pair of maps that, in some respects, recapitulate the history of cartography. Since maps are "simultaneously distillations of experience and invitations to experience,"<sup>10</sup> his conspicuous gesturing dramatizes the social epistemology of cartography; mapping, like writing, is an inherently social act. In fact we are cast as a combination of Henry David Thoreau's implicit student and Walt Whitman's "Comrade."

Heat-Moon's icon, like a radial semantic category, spreads through at least three other metaphors of design besides that of Japanese script. Like the book itself, this home-drawn grid is also a loom, and reading through this big book, as already stated, imitates the comforting monotony of weaving. Manifestly a student of Americana, Heat-Moon certainly intends this metaphor, which climaxes in the suggestion that the book resembles a Native

American blanket (599), the figure linking his metaphor with the preferred, Native American epistemology of Chase County landscapes. Too, Heat-Moon intends the etymological affinities between weaving and narrative, since in following his “arbitrary course” we follow multitudinous lines of voices and stories, the spinning of yarns, thereby apprehending the emerging, inclusive shape of story.<sup>11</sup> The icon is also “a muntin-bar window of a dozen lights” (16), which foregrounds, by way of a familiar trope, the issue of representation: of ways, for example, in which maps constitute windows, or that framing structures—the quadrangle/chapters—enhance or detract from our discerning these landscapes *in depth* (e.g., the book’s subtitle).

Reading the “map of words” is not only reading script as would a Japanese or steadily weaving a Native American blanket or gazing through “a muntin-bar window of a dozen lights,” as if the book were also a cathedral window and its light holy. Heat-Moon extends the idea of grid from cartography to archaeology and develops this metaphor of design at some length, calling himself a “digger of shards” and fancying the twelve rectangles of his map a series of test plots. Unsurprisingly, he invites the reader as if to a series of summer digs equipped with “a tool kit not of shovels and trowels but of imaginary lines and questions and loomings” (16). Again unsurprisingly, the “tool kit” turns into a “dream-kit” (326-27) just as the mesh screens of test plots yield those indistinct shapes of knowledge, as if on the horizon, coming into shape. Heat-Moon’s archaeological metaphor complements rather than replaces his central cartographic vocabulary. He uses it to explicate that third dimension implicit in maps, and depth becomes, in familiar fashion, temporal as well as spatial. Thus he prompts our travel below the surface—in every resonance of that cliché. If digging is mapping time, a “deep map” contains and reflects history rather than one moment within history. Horizontal weaving across Chase County

quadrangles repeatedly occasions “vertical travel,” just as the writer, eternally probing below the tallgrass prairie’s surface, assesses white settlement patterns of the past century or two in light of traditions of ecological habitation symbolized by the Osage and ancient Kaw, and of geologic history. About midway through his travels, Heat-Moon admits, “after the thrall of the grassland itself, the thing that lured me here was stone architecture,” a manifest of Flint Hills geology: “[M]y quest turned toward the bones of the land, toward the hard seed from which this prairie and its peoples 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 marrow of our bones and in the thump of our blood” (273). The “overburden” reveals one’s interior landscape just as “writing in place,” repeating Michael Kowalewski’s phrase, marries the self to her chosen landscape and all its history. Heat-Moon’s statement affirms that bond, inscribed in essays of place, between genealogy and “habitanace,” or the search for roots and a state of rootedness.

*PrairyErth*’s ambitious claim to exhaustively know Chase County, Kansas, and Heat-Moon’s efforts to be equally extensive and intensive, make him seize and variously develop quite diverse metaphors of design. But cartography remains his primary formal focus, and having surveyed these metaphors in relation to the grid, we must look more closely at “Crossings,” particularly at its two exercises in mapping. These exercises suggest mapping and reading and writing as complementary modes; however, the gloss or “old Indian story” belonging with these maps—their “directions” for interpretation, existing of course as words—suggest mapping as contrary, even antithetical, to reading and writing. Two-thirds through his book Heat-Moon parenthetically remarks, “until we become nomenclators of a place, we can never really enter it” (442). Perhaps naming and mapping occur simultaneously as originating acts, entrances to knowledge of place, as is suggested

by the opening of Rick Bass's "The Sky, the Stars, the Wilderness." Even as Heat-Moon introduces his overlapping metaphors of design he forces our hand, inviting us to join in the mapping. In the process we recapitulate the writer's own originating scene and abandon superficial modes of travel for one that enables us to "enter the land."

Near the end of "On Roniger Hill," within "Crossings," Heat-Moon lists, in order of value, possible modes of travel for Chase County or anywhere else, most recommending travel "by leg and butt" and by "dreaming"—the latter being his privileged mode (17-18). That mode most removed from the land—"see[ing] the county from one of the many transcontinental flights that pass right over it" (17)—parodies the scale from which Heat-Moon conceives his grid in his writing room. The view from 35,000 feet also offers a short course in the history of development ensuing from the 1785 Land Ordinance and successive legislation such as the 1862 Homestead Act. This "second American" history resembles a set of overhead transparencies, of rectangles marked by windrows or irrigated circles, superimposed over the land's sundry surfaces. The detached view "from above" is also the way most Americans "know" Chase County, and such pseudo-knowledge, among other pernicious consequences, reinforces the regional stereotype of austerity, as if "this prairie [is] barren, desolate, monotonous, a land of more nothing than almost any other place you might name" (10).<sup>12</sup>

A jet window view parodies knowledge because it discloses grids at their most abstract—at greatest remove from human scale, whether that is construed as "an inch and a half to the mile" or something finer. *PrairieEarth* continually brings us down, with the prompt of maps, to and below the land's surface. In "Crossings" Heat-Moon quickly overturns the stereotype of his chosen landscape's empty insignificance, thereby prompting our willingness to draw two maps and simultaneously accept his "arbitrary scheme" and metaphors of design. In pleasing paradox, the "nothing"

in the heart of the country contains everything, and Chase County travel becomes synecdoche and cynosure for American westward experience. The writer's cynosure on Roniger Hill is ours as well, and poised atop it at sunset, eager as any "vertical traveler" for revelation, we see ourselves "as if atop a giant map of the United States" (10). Or, approaching via car—far better than plane, but nowhere close to dreaming—we drive US 50, "the best national road across the middle of the United States" and "nearly see," right here, "that stretch of road where the West begins": "What's more, Chase County, Kansas, is the most easterly piece of the American Far West" (11-12). It "looks much the way visitors want rural western American to look" (18). Too, these Flint Hills comprise "the last remaining grand expanse of tallgrass prairie in America" (12), "an immense pasturage nutritionally richer than the Bluegrass country of Kentucky" (13)—which explains why the US government, in 1997, added a portion of the Flint Hills to the National Park System. These historical and nutritional claims have been corroborated by the National Park Service, whose mission, after all, focuses on preservation and conservation.

To travel in Chase County, Kansas, is to travel in the heart of the heart of the country. Heat-Moon's repeated journeys west from his Columbia, Missouri, home to this newer and older home recapitulate our historical experience and symbolize our pilgrimage into a heartland that both promises the American West and insists upon our reassessing the myriad mythologies attached to that West.<sup>13</sup> Heat-Moon delights in his parable that "nothing" contains everything and that this intersection of our richly constructed and abiding Wests and Easts also symbolizes the region's vegetative history and enduring visual essence. The tiny remnant of tallgrass prairie survives because it was never broken up and "worked" by individuals, nor absorbed into the occasional cattle ranches in the Flint Hills, which themselves operate contrary to the intentions of the Homestead Act. These

historical ironies sponsor Heat-Moon's parable that the American continent's center is not empty and peripheral. It thematically weights his landscape; the initial mapping parables powerfully implicate and place the reader there. They teach not only the communal essence of maps but cast us as fellow reader and writer of Chase County, even co-author of this travel. Before placing us with him atop Roniger Hill to test his grid conceit and before writing what I've called his originating scene, Heat-Moon has already broadened authorship, giving a hands-on lesson as if we were pupils drawing for the first time in a primary-grade classroom: "Let this book page, appropriate as it is in shape and proportion, be Chase County." Positioning our right hand's digits according to his instructions creates "a *manual* topography of the place" (13, my emphasis). To the extent that geography, in this case "four drainages," explains human history, we have, like God, just created the landscape: "what [those four drainages] have done and are doing mark out where and what men have gone and done" (13-14).

Through the simple and joyous act of tracing our right hand's splayed fingers and thumb—as early a drawing as any we make—we engender Chase County in its "earliest" mapped form. Such a tracing also implies the history of cartography, or the diverse relations between the represented and those representations we call maps. Our childish act also reproduces the "Major Watersheds of Chase County" map found just inside the book's covers, so we have just re-created its outermost frame, or first map. This map reappears with a superimposed, slightly curving dotted line and an additional title, "And Approximate Route of the Kaw Trail" (602), as preface to *PrairyErth's* closing parable of "participatory history." (Fig. 3) Heat-Moon links his book's first map with our own, the map of our right hand, to initiate his lengthy meditation on the precise relations between cartography and that knowledge he eventually terms "habittance." A map, after all, is an originat-

ing act of visual representation. In what ways and with what consequences, then, does this map or do successive maps distort or obscure the thing or land represented? As little kids, after we've learned to outline our right hand, we graduate to a straight edge, struggling to hold it straight, and to a "system of coordinates." *PrairyErth's* second exercise in mapping imitates this progression into abstraction, from curves to straight lines: "[L]et the book page represent this county in east-central Kansas. Divide it horizontally into thirds and split those vertically into quarters so that you see twelve sections of a grid" (16).

Mindful that "until we become nomenclators of a place, we can never really enter it," Heat-Moon immediately names, in north-east-to-southwest order, his sections already named in the table of contents. Drawing, then naming, the quads engenders them, and this mapping places us back with the writer in his writing room, discovering his gestalt. Naming constitutes our most human, and humanizing, gesture, as it locates our place in the legacy that is memory. Our second map, the child's happy discovery of the tic-tac-toe grid, engenders *PrairyErth's* narrative structure and implicates its metaphors of design; it exists coevally with our first map. These two parables in drawing recapitulate contrary cartographic traditions: mapping according to land contours and mapping according to the square survey, or grid. Certainly the former—deriving from sophisticated Native American practices and inscribing the oldest routes of exploration and transportation—has practical application denied the latter. Reflecting the three-dimensionality of land surfaces, contour maps are "real" in ways grid maps can never be.

*PrairyErth's* exhaustive definition of "habittance" grows out of the competing knowledge claims, yet inevitable lacuna, contained in this foundational pair of maps. These parables in mapping suggest that word and map come into being simultaneously, as complementary rather than competitive modes of representation. The writer's formal

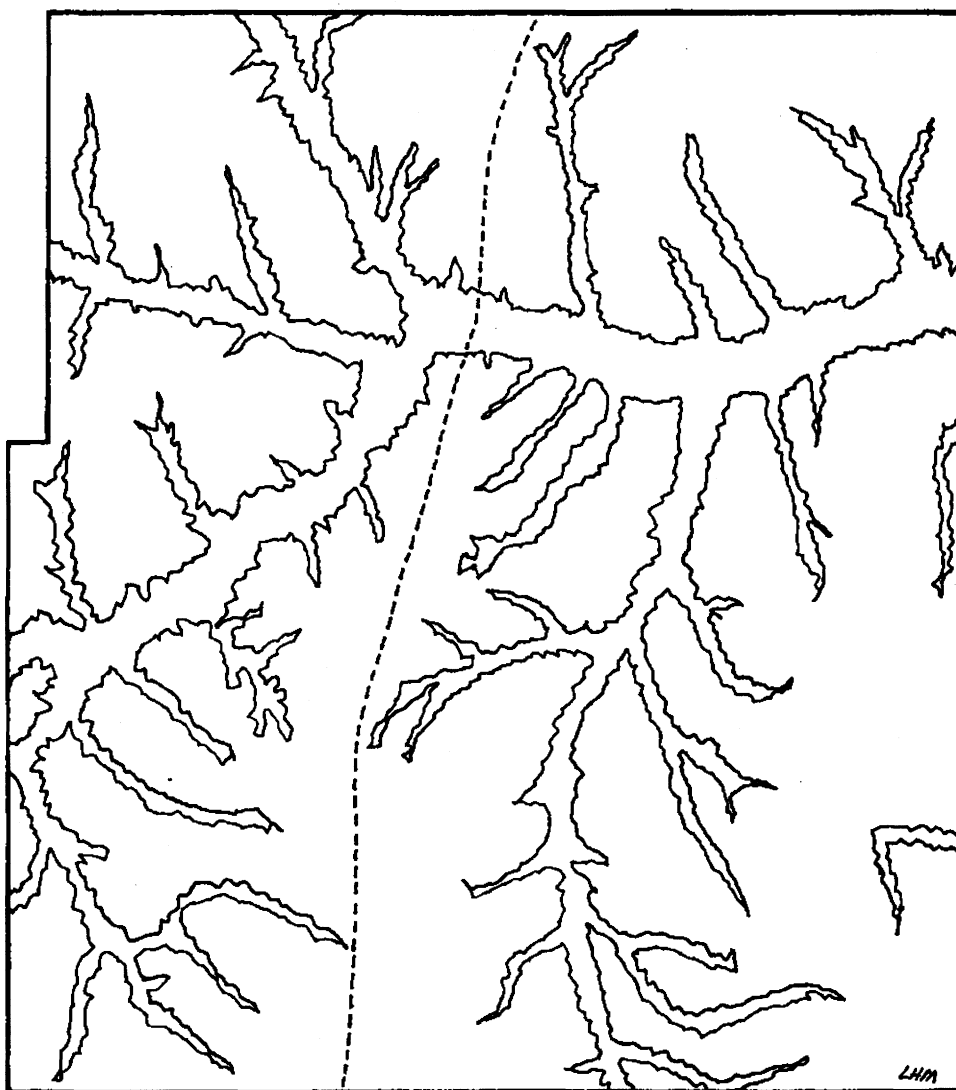


FIG. 3. Major watersheds of Chase County and approximate route of Kaw Trail. From the book *PrairyErth* by William Least Heat-Moon, a Peter Davison Book, published by Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. Copyright © 1991 by William Least Heat-Moon. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

tricks in engagement—asking us to borrow his page of print, pretend it blank, and reproduce his front cover, dust jacket, inside covers, title page, and grid thereon—not only cast us as vicarious co-author, but force our scrutiny of maps and stories as complementary distillations of a place. About two-thirds through

*PrairyErth* Heat-Moon again suggests their common origin: “When I write, I usually try to follow the directions in the images and let details point the way so that my pencil (I always begin drafting with a lead pencil as if I were drawing) is a vehicle across the map of paper, a smudged course down parallel lines,

little roads, and the best part of such a journey, the reward for the isolation necessary to it, is the unexpected encounters" (440). In this self-definition he borrows metaphors from cartography to declare that mapping and writing are not only analogous epistemologies but perhaps the same. Of course the "deep map" is verbal rather than visual, but it gains depth through its novel adaptations of conventions in cartography. The "smudged course" of the "lead pencil"—the best possible "vehicle across the map of paper"—conflates map making with map reading (i.e., "follow[ing] the directions") as prerequisite for that slow travel he recommends as knowledge of place. This definition of writing roundly endorses Heat-Moon's original one for his book, a giant "topographic map of words" that continually suggests cartography and narration as reciprocal languages of representation.

Writing and mapping go hand in hand and yet they do not, because the outcome of writing, those "unexpected encounters," denies the analogy and exposes difference. *PrairyErth* has it both ways, urging the reciprocity of cartography and narration while conceding the manifold distinctions between them. Immediately after drawing that pair of maps that emphasize cartography's progression into abstraction, we are told, "To [the quads] attach this old Indian story," a parable exposing the ludicrous limitations of white American factual knowledge and the superiority of Native American mystical knowledge (16). The "red man's" poetic answers to the three "white" questions about geography and demography expose the latter's knowledge claims as facile and wrongheaded. Attaching the Native American parable to what I've been calling the book's initial parables of cartography means simultaneously granting and denying the analogy. By placing this "old Indian story" next to his maps early in the book, Heat-Moon introduces his preferred epistemology: one deriving from Native American traditions, among other sources, that locate the self within a landscape rather than superimpose the self onto it—the history of cartogra-

phy and the Western American narrative of conquest. After all, Roniger Hill, near Chase County's geographical center, displays "three stone markers" half a century old that "honor Indian remains . . . unearthed atop the ridge" (14). And the writer, owning his mixed Osage heritage, admits "some old compass in the blood" draws him repeatedly to the hill. Story, whether Osage legends or the density of anecdote offered by white Chase Countians, transcends grids such that we steadily shift from geographer Tuan's view "from above" to "the side view," from "space" to "place."<sup>14</sup>

To "attach this old Indian story" to our maps is to accept this book's ultimately playful artifice, the "map of words" (my emphasis). This story subverts rather than glosses the maps as if cartography and narration were mutually exclusive, rather than complementary, domains. We usually do not speak of "drawing words" any more than we "write maps," yet Heat-Moon pretends, and asks us to pretend, that we do. Rewriting Heat-Moon, "thinking of . . . what's under [grids], their depths and their light and darkness" (15) means *not* "thinking of grids." The pretense teases the space between these domains so that we more fully read—that is, know, or enter—this particular landscape. In another sense the "Indian story's" poetry does match the enthusiasm accompanying our hands-on lessons in mapping and naming, and Heat-Moon's original Gulliverian discovery of his scheme. Such knowledge mocks the exclusive claims implicit in such knowledge as a Chase County census or a Chamber of Commerce inventory (17). It also reminds us that maps, however disciplined and calibrated their contents and however intimate their scale, remain shorthand for knowledge of place rather than the knowledge itself. And that knowledge is, if anything, the Native American's more than the white American's. The book's exuberant playfulness recognizes this tendency: a guidebook, it parodies and transcends the genre of guidebooks in sponsoring our "deep" knowledge of Chase County.

Pretending that we draw words, as if our lead pencil "is a vehicle across the map of paper," is like following the writer's instructions and pretending that his page of print becomes the raw material of our first maps. That is, pretending that narration and cartography are more similar than different as modes of representation enables Heat-Moon to teach his recommended epistemology. For example, midway through the book he fuses a metaphor from Impressionism with a couple of others to define his "map of words" in terms of Native American traditions of communal memory, declaring, "my words serving as daubs that may allow you to enter a kind of dreamtime where you can pass across [Osage Hill]. . . . To American Indians who believe that the past is to a people as dreams are to a person, stories are the communal snaggings of generations, the nets that keep people from free-falling toward pointlessness . . . and they are also the knots of matter that help people into dreamtime, where the listener, the traveler, can imagine he sees links between smithereens; from that hallucination, everything that we value arises" (336). An analogy with "pointillist spots of ink" locates his unfolding story—his mass of black dots that compose letters and, ultimately, meanings—in "that great reticulum, our past" (336). As meaning-making creatures, we avoid the void by connecting "daubs" or "smithereens," discerning those "nets" of story. The lead pencil or ink and paper that make maps or print also represent the warm breath of oral traditions, whether Osage stories or anecdotes told by the approximately ten percent of Chase County's population Heat-Moon estimates he interviews. Voices redeem time and print links voices—as do, in a far more abstract manner, maps.

In *PrairyErth*, Heat-Moon completes his grid, his ironic scrutiny of it, and his discussion of the similarities yet differences between cartography and narration simultaneously, as we catch our breath on the threshold of "Circlings," the book's final short section.

Reading through these quadrangles, we not only weave a Native American blanket or read "like a Japanese" or dig a series of test plots. We also feel as if we're plowing a 640-acre section acre by acre. The experience of reading these seventy-six chapters—two in "Crossings" and "Circlings," respectively, and six in each quad—echoes, however faintly, the agricultural rhythms of working a section. Thus it imitates conspicuous consequences of the 1785 Land Ordinance and 1862 Homestead Act, particularly the settlement patterns marked by 640-acre sections or 160-acre quarter sections in regions such as the Great Plains. This book's hyperbolic imitation of grid and section climaxes when Heat-Moon teasingly abandons them. He creates an elaborately formal if not fearful symmetry in order to disrupt it, since a "renegade chapter" called "Until Black Hole XTK [Unknown To Come] Yields Its Light," the final chapter in the final, southwest quad, "doesn't exist" (598). Furthermore, when we shortly reach "Circlings" opening page (601), we discover it listed as "XIII," as if it were a renegade quad existing beyond the grid we've drawn and painstaking pursued.

A renegade chapter or quad divorces finally the pretended marriage between mapping and writing that this big book studies. Entering into the spirit of the writer's play, we draw a pair of maps in his beginning, then pretend we co-author (e.g., 326-27) this intensive travel. That "old Indian story" we must "attach" to the maps is a cautionary tale, reminding us that maps signify the same elaborate game we play with Heat-Moon: one that assumes "thinking of grids" occasions "what's under them," and that drawing words and writing maps are valid expressions of substantially similar acts. They are not similar. Yet this game, where we are cast as equal players with the writer, affords us the fullest possible "side view" of Chase County landscapes as geographer Tuan defines it. A "map of words" is not a map, after all, but neither, it could be argued, is the book's icon—our second map:

a character existing before and apart from names, whose formal severity and austerity resembles that stratospheric, jet window perception of Chase County. The icon, a gray tic-tac-toe grid, underlines the inherent abstraction of mapping, its mostly white space reminding us of maps' formal limits as representational shorthand. The white space advertises the vast spaces between maps and what they represent. To the extent that many Americans take maps too seriously, or tend to confuse maps and mapped, assuming the former tantamount to the latter, *PrairyErth's* parables of cartography as a whole tell an essential cautionary tale.

Participatory cartography entails filling in the icon's white space and charting *terra incognita*, following the writer's lead and traveling "by leg and butt" and "lead pencil," which sponsor "dreamtime": all of which forays into charting eventuate in that reverential "local expertise" recommended by Barry Lopez.<sup>15</sup> That our charting is mostly vicarious and metaphorical does not lessen its value as prompts toward local expertise. If the icon's mostly white space and rigid design signify the abstraction of cartography, its opposite, solid black space symbolizes the density and detailed texturing that is narration. In "Black Hole XTK" the writer toys with the idea of solid black space, the chapter's meaning, and the book's future: "I like the idea because then the topic would be here, and all I—or you—would have to do sometime is remove the portion of ink that isn't the topic to let the chapter stand revealed, the way a stone sculptor chips away only what isn't his sculpture" (598-99). The game of co-authorship, or participatory cartography, climaxes when, closing his non-chapter-as-chapter, Heat-Moon declares, "Have a go at it yourself. Perhaps, I having failed, you are to be its author:" (599)—that colon prompting our page turn to "an entirely black page," "a Tristramian answer" that is page 600. Like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Heat-Moon speculates about his emblem, defining it indirectly as

"the kind of opening a Native American weaver leaves in a blanket for the spirit in the design to find release and travel on beyond" (599).

The book as blanket, with this "renegade chapter" as deliberate "opening" in the design, again defines the optimal knowledge of place, one premised upon that combination of "local expertise" and humility deriving from long occupation and dedicated to preserving tallgrass prairie, not destroying it. But the book is also this solid black page 600, a graphic idea Heat-Moon borrows from Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1765), where, like an unengraved tombstone, it symbolizes monumental, irreversible death.<sup>16</sup> For Heat-Moon, the solid black page, like a block from a Flint Hills quarry, suggests potential art. The writer's medium, the totality of "pointillist spots of ink," exists here in raw form, as if the page represents, in microcosm, the book's "deep map." The black page, from which we write the chapter that doesn't yet "exist," completes the book's design and climaxes the game of co-authorship. An empty white page, which the icon recalls, evokes the beginnings of mapping and writing (440), as if they are the same; an empty black page evokes the beginning of writing as if it is opposite mapping. These expressions of emptiness in turn represent the epistemological challenge of any landscape, which the human being initially perceives as *terra incognita*. *PrairyErth* recommends we take from the black to fill in the white. In the process of constructing "a deep map"—"of words" we change emptiness to fullness just as *terra incognita* gradually modulates into "habitation." The "daubs" of writing that contain "the communal snaggings of generations . . . the knots of matter" map the invisible landscape which constitutes knowledge of place. This book's parables of cartography use the simplest materials of writing and mapping, and straightforward symbolic oppositions between black and white, to articulate convergences and divergences between these domains.

So *PrairyErth* teaches us to draw maps but never to forget what maps are not. Maps, perhaps more than narrative, want constant revision to the extent that, as *moments* of representing any landscape, they immediately and inevitably lag behind the living thing they purport to represent. As a descendent of Emerson's sermons in "Nature," *PrairyErth* recommends we map and name our worlds, then constantly fill in our maps and revise our chosen quadrangles. We must continuously abandon them, then take them up again, and only thus can we apply this book as a complex course in orienteering. Its exhausting heft reminds us that knowledge of place, as Barry Lopez states, comes slowly, the result of great effort. Such work is offset by Heat-Moon's play, his good-natured teasing, as if, descending into each of his twelve quadrangles in turn, we've embarked on a great lark. If Heat-Moon has cast us as Thoreau's student and Whitman's "Comrade," we emerge in "Circlings," the book's dramatization of its writer-reader collaboration, as Heat-Moon's friend, comically known as "the venerable Tashmoo." Heat-Moon tells us to put down the maps for the final time as we vicariously trek with him from the north-central portion of Chase County southwestwards, "hunting the idea of a trail" (609) and reenacting the route of Chase County's earliest inhabitants, in defiance of roads and section lines and grids.

This mock-heroic backpack trip across part of Chase County takes us from our two maps, the icon and the map of our right hand, to the land's skin. If the essay of place tells the tale of descent, of immersion, the writer, who has been labeled "a two-bit mystic," requests we put our maps down for more intimate travel: abandon cartography and attempt to enter history. Ultimately we enact what we've pretended to co-author, and walking the word map confirms that older epistemology of being in place known to Native Americans. Heat-Moon parodically closes *PrairyErth* by literalizing its extended homily

on "habitanche," or entering the land. For example, the pair take rest in "my first buffalo wallow," parodically acting as buffalo where none have lain for 125 years or longer:

*When you realize what it is, then you know for certain the buffalo were right here on their backs, rolling. Then, God, am I sitting deep. He lay back, rolled like a bison, paused as they do, looked upward. I don't see anything except sky. I feel the earth, but I don't see it.*

—Coronado, when he was close by hunting Quivira, reportedly said something like that.

*We think of ground being at the bottom, but this ground is in the middle, or, nothing less than at the bottom of the top. I could be floating.*

We pulled out some raisins and peanut butter and flour tortillas, and ate lying down.

*How do you know when the prairie is in you?*

—When you see a tree as an eyesore. (612)

This comedy in the newfound buffalo wallow simultaneously makes light of and fulfills the goal of union, as do Heat-Moon's and Tashmoo's closing one-liner and redefinition of ground level. In fact, the process of becoming grounded in this vestigial survival of tallgrass prairie carries enormous environmental and ethical obligations, the writer has suggested all along. Rolling like a vanished buffalo in this "big circle," lying amidst this pocket of tallgrass prairie, parodically defines "habitanche." It is the goal of the book's travel and its most essential scene, Heat-Moon's imitation of Whitman's well-known definition of self, who "lean[s] and loafe[s] at my ease observing a spear of summer grass," in *Song of Myself*.<sup>17</sup> All of *PrairyErth's* talk about mapping attempts to increase that topographic scale such that we feel as rooted as the writer, because Chase County proves not only a figurative center of our Wests and Easts, but its Flint Hills constitute our scene of origins:

[W]e will eat and build with grasses but not worship them, will see them as metaphor but not divinity; it is this separation, I think, that can create such unease when we confront the prairie. Gods may rise from oceans and clouds, but I've heard of none rising from grasses, and this is peculiar because, unlike oceans or heavens, grasslands so evidently die and are reborn, and because, although less evidently, they are the place where our kind was made (198).

In her study of Great Plains fiction, Diane D. Quantic reviews the pervasive metaphor of the prairie as ocean, calling it an "archetypal symbol." She points out that both prairie and ocean "can give a bountiful harvest," yet "both can destroy": "Both present a featureless face of indifference, a sense of eternal possibility, or annihilating isolation that can lead to madness." With prairie, the presence or absence of water determines all else.<sup>18</sup>

I have been contending that Heat-Moon, like any essayist of place, advocates an essentially religious view of landscape: one that construes the land as divine, one whose expertise is marked by humility. This preferred epistemology is familiar ground, and Heat-Moon's local expression of it springs from his long view of those earlier inhabitants whom he asks, particularly in his closing, that we re-imagine and imitate. *PrairyErth* is dedicated to overcoming this more recently developed notion of "separation," or alienation. If one Western cartographic trend of the past two centuries, the square survey, manifests alienation, Heat-Moon paradoxically borrows from it to counter this alienation by locating us inside that "old Indian story" near his beginning. To recover a belief in connection is to discover anew our human lineage and construe the prairie, like the ocean, as the matrix of all life. Heat-Moon calls that buffalo wallow "another palimpsest" (612), and the metaphor captures the history of a landscape as successive generations of human activity written on its surfaces. In a recent article, Kent C.

Ryden quotes folklorist Henry Glassie, who also calls landscapes "'a palimpsest, the people's own manuscript, their handmade history book. . . . The land is art as Waldo Emerson exactly defined it: a blending of nature and will.'" <sup>19</sup> "Palimpsest" also serves as emblem of *PrairyErth*, Heat-Moon's "nutshell." Both the "disk" of tallgrass and the left of pages represent textures or parchments for reinscription and re-signification. And the latter begins as the blank white page of cartography and blank black page of narrative. In fact our foundational pair of maps are palimpsests, drawn over the already existing page of words. Perhaps the major ethical value of palimpsests is that they illustrate patterns of recycling, of repeated use. This green "topographic map of words" teaches us to use maps for a kind of religious knowledge, one that constantly promotes preservation; as a sacred offering it poses as a successful example, insofar as its 1991 publication helped influence the federal decision six years later to preserve part of these tallgrass Flint Hills in our National Park System. In the geologic future "the ancient Nemahas" could rise and "come again into the sun" (13) like so many giants; in the immediate future, travelers in middle America can search out their own palimpsests amidst these preserved pockets of its visual essence.

#### NOTES

1. Yi-Fu Tuan, "Thought and Landscape: The Eye and the Mind's Eye," in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*, ed. D. W. Meinig. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 90.

2. In her review of the book, Mary Warner Marion makes this point, stating that *PrairyErth* "show[s] that the land and its history are interwoven physical and psychic spaces, powerfully recoverable through human imagination." *The Christian Science Monitor*, 16 October 1991, 17.

3. All text quotations are taken from W. L. Heat-Moon, *PrairyErth*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991). Further citations to *PrairyErth* are given in parentheses in the text.

4. Michael Kowalewski, "Writing in Place: The New American Regionalism," *American Literary History* 6, no. 1 (spring 1994): 181.

5. Rick Bass, *The Sky, the Stars, the Wilderness* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

6. Barry Lopez, "The American Geographies," in *The Orion Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (autumn 1989): 52-61. See also Lopez's earlier essay, "Landscape and Narrative," in his collection, *Crossing Open Ground* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), pp. 61-71.

7. Paul Theroux, "The Wizard of Kansas," review of *PrairyErth*, by W. L. Heat-Moon, *New York Times Book Review*, 27 October 1991, 25-26.

8. James Fenimore Cooper, *The Prairie* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1950).

9. Kent C. Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape: Folklore, Writing, and the Sense of Place* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993), pp. 40, 285.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

11. In this context, Barbara Johnstone speaks for Heat-Moon and many essayists of place in reminding us of the fundamental connection between place and story: "A person is at home in a place when the place evokes stories and, conversely, stories can serve to create places." Quoted in Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape*, (note 9 above), p. 42.

12. Apropos of this stereotype, Diane D. Quantic observes that "Great Plains novelists . . . focus on the minimum to reveal the deeper significance of the apparently empty setting": "Like the land itself, the intricate design [of prairie fiction] seems too simple to be noticed, but each tiny detail reaches into the past to reveal the common design." See Diane Quantic, *The Nature of the Place: A Study of Great Plains Fiction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), pp. 165, 169.

13. In "Landmarks of Home in the Pacific Northwest," Jan C. Dawson reviews, as one point of departure, the frequency with which nature

writers and essayists of place employ the "home" metaphor, her first endnote citing seventeen writers, beginning with Gary Snyder in *Earth house hold*. See Dawson, "Landmarks," in *ISLE* 2, no. 2 (winter 1996): 1-23.

14. Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape* (note 9 above), pp. 240, 261. Certainly the publication of *PrairyErth* in 1991, with its attention on Kansas's Flint Hills as "the last remaining grand expanse of tallgrass prairie in America" (12), influenced the federal decision to incorporate part of the area in the US National Park System in 1996. As an act of preservation, the book helped inspire "real" preservation. Too, the book as a definition and celebration of place has inspired at least a couple of local tours based in Cottonwood City, Kansas.

15. See Lopez, "The American Geographies" (note 6 above).

16. Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1925), p. 25. Sterne ends book I, chapter XII with a verbal and graphic obituary to the character, Yorick: "Alas, poor Yorick!"

17. Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," in *Leaves of Grass*, eds. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), p. 28, line 5.

18. Quantic does not discuss the fundamental contrast between prairie and ocean that Heat-Moon emphasizes. See Quantic, *The Nature of the Place* (note 12 above), pp. 157-78.

19. Quoted in Ryden, "Landscape with Figures: Nature, Folk Culture, and the Human Ecology of American Environmental Writing," *ISLE* 4, no.1 (spring 1997): 7.