There's Nothing To See Out There

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My serious encounter with the Panhandle of Texas began when my family moved there from Wichita Falls, when I was eleven years old. Driving northwest from Amarillo on what Texans refer to as a "Farm to Market" road, my grandmother, whose eyes were formed in north central Texas, sat looking out the window in silence for a long time, then said, simply, "This is the end of the world."

It is commonplace for those who encounter the Panhandle for the first time to describe it as flat and empty, evoking Biblical imagery of a formless void, a place before place, in the beginning. Because my grandmother's comment informs my encounter with this particular place, I have learned to associate it with ends and to pay attention to observers who attend to nothing that is there more than something that is not. It is quite a different thing to say that there is nothing to see than to say that a place is empty or void. This essay attends to the difference, with assistance from Georgia O'Keeffe, a gifted observer who encountered the Panhandle at the very beginning of her career as an artist, and from two nineteenth century explorers, Edwin James and Randolph Marcy, who—like many who have written about the place—encountered it on their way to someplace else.[1]

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[1] The literature of European encounter is extensive and has been thoroughly documented in John Miller Morris, *El Llano Estacado: Exploration and Imagination on the High Plains of Texas and New Mexico, 1536-1860* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1997).

Place is a difficult philosophical concept.[2] Part of its difficulty resides in our reluctance to dwell in it rather than taking it or passing through it. Taking place and passing through have been dominant metaphors in Panhandle encounters, and they have routinely rendered the place so transparent as to make it invisible. Careful attention to key encounters will help us better understand both *this* place and place.

O'Keeffe's popular image is inextricably connected with New Mexico, but her description of Texas as her "spiritual home" is often quoted. Since "New Mexico" is more likely to evoke Santa Fe than Abiquiu, and since "Texas" is more likely to evoke Dallas or Austin than Amarillo, the image is more problematic than informative. Abiquiu and Amarillo are closer than Dallas or Austin and Santa Fe. Putting them together brings the place O'Keeffe called home into focus. Home is more than a place through which one passes; it is not a place one takes but a place in which one dwells. I propose that we begin by taking O'Keeffe at her word and examine the evidence she left of her dwelling.

I

Born in Wisconsin, educated in Chicago, New York, and Virginia, Georgia O'Keeffe arrived in the Texas Panhandle in her twenties and painted nothing with surprising passion. On her second sojourn there, she wrote "—You understand—there is nothing here—so maybe there is something wrong with me that I am liking it so much."[3] Here I take notice because she does not say the place

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[2] See Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

[3] Georgia O'Keeffe, *Georgia O'Keeffe: Art and Letters* (Boston: New York Graphic Society Books/Little, Brown and Company, 1987), 187.

is empty: choosing her words as carefully as she chooses every image, she says there is nothing here.

Nothing is right. Nothing kept O'Keeffe awake at night when she moved to Canyon to teach at what is now West Texas A&M University:

> Last night couldn't sleep till after four in the morning—I had been out to the canyon all afternoon—till late at night—wonderful color—I wish I could tell you how big—and with the night the colors deeper and darker—cattle on the pastures in the bottom looked like little pinheads—I can understand Pa Dow painting his pretty colored canyons—it must have been a great temptation—no wonder he fell. Then the moon rose right up out of the ground after we got out on the plains again—battered a little where he bumped his head but enormous—There was no wind—it was just big and still—so very big and still—long legged jack rabbits hopping across in front of the light as we passed—A great place to see the night time because there is nothing else—[4]

O'Keeffe's fascination with nothing that makes vision possible is instructive. She refers to her teacher Arthur Dow, so swept away by color on his visit to the West that he failed to see nothing on the way. Before encountering O'Keeffe, Dow had responded to critics who saw his landscapes as "decorative" by setting out to paint "some of the big things of the world." To this end, he visited the Grand Canyon in 1911 and 1912 and produced a series of paintings that O'Keeffe generally dismissed. Dow wrote in 1913 that the Canyon "forces the artist to seek new ways of painting—its own ways. Its record of the world's beginning holds for us the romance of geology."[5]

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[4] Georgia O'Keeffe, *Lovingly, Georgia: The Complete Correspondence of Georgia O'Keeffe & Anita Pollitzer*, ed. Clive Giboire (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 186.

[5] Sharyn R. Udall, *O'Keeffe and Texas* (San Antonio: The Marion Koogler McNay Art

O'Keeffe was as fascinated as Dow by bigness, but her encounter with the Panhandle does not include this element of force as a record of geology's romance. Dow's record of the world's beginning gets lost in colors of formlessness that render particular places void, but O'Keeffe attends relentlessly to the end. This is a key to understanding the difference between passing through and dwelling, between place and empty space. Dow's canyons are decorative because they are detached from place even though they are more representational than abstract. Attention wanders. They are pretty colors that can hang any place. O'Keeffe, on the other hand, paints *this* canyon, *this* light, here. Color tempts Dow to romance; it erupts from O'Keeffe's relentless attention to the end, a symptom of her dwelling here, now, not a record of the world's beginning there, then.

Not once but twice after her arrival, O'Keeffe wrote that "it's a pity to disfigure such wonderful country with people of any kind—".[6] The history of her brief but decisive encounter with the place is one in which people routinely get in the way. People get in the way of a place by rendering the place instrumental, in much the same way as people get in the way of art by rendering it decorative. As centers of tourism, Santa Fe and the Grand Canyon are illustrative: the more tourists, the more difficult it is to encounter either place—and the more each place begins to resemble the places from which tourists come. (Backpackers who go West to escape the noise of the city report constant aircraft noise on even the most remote canyon trails.) For tourists who arrive in either place from the east, O'Keeffe's spiritual home is ideally transparent. If construction work on Interstate 40 brings them to a halt, it makes the place an impediment, not a home.[7]

Museum, 1998), 21,22.

[6] *Georgia O'Keeffe: Art and Letters*, 155.

[7] Cf. Morris's discussion of Spanish attitudes toward the landscape in *El Llano Estacado*, e.g., pp. 59-61.

Dow's understanding of the Grand Canyon as a record of the past contrasts with O'Keeffe's experience of the Plains as a present subject addressing her. Her painting of the place succeeds to the extent that it serves as a medium through which the Plains addresses those who encounter her work. It is not surprising, then, that she conveyed the greetings of the Plains to the correspondents with whom she was close: "The plains," she wrote to Stieglitz, "send you greetings—Big as what comes after living—if there is anything it must be big—and these plains are the biggest thing I know." It seems funny, she writes, "that a week ago it was the mountains I thought the most wonderful—and today it's the plains—I guess it's the feeling of bigness in both that just carries me away—".[8]

It is not insignificant that Dow associates the bigness of his Canyon with a romantic record of the past while O'Keeffe associates the bigness of mountains and plains with what comes after living. A canyon that holds a romantic record waits for an artist to release it to an audience that craves romantic escape. Mountains and plains that send greetings from what comes after living engage artists in living toward them. Living toward them means getting carried away—not toward an audience to whom one releases a record but with others who (as Kandinsky suggested) share an emotion.[9] For an artist on edge in a place without edges, getting in the way and getting carried away signify the centrality of edges

"The plains," O'Keeffe writes to Stieglitz, "—the wonderful great big sky—makes me want to breathe so deep that I'll break—There is so much of it—I want to get outside of it all—I would if I

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[8] *Georgia O'Keeffe: Art and Letters*, 156.

[9] Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. (New York: Dover, 1977). [A republication of the 1914 English translation that appeared under the title *The Art of Spiritual Harmony*. The original German edition, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, was published in 1911.]

could—even if it killed me—".[10] But outside is not possible—not even if one is willing to give one's life for it. We are inside, not in the beginning but in the middle, and "in the middle" is the end of the world.

In her criticism of Dow, O'Keeffe suggests that color tempts the artist out of the middle—and it thus threatens to disconnect the artist and his or her audience from the end. To her friend Anita Pollitzer, O'Keeffe writes of the sky. It "was all grey blue—bunches of clouds—different kinds of clouds—sticking around everywhere and the whole thing—lit up—first in one place—then in another with flashes of lightning—sometimes just sheet lightning—and sometimes sheet lightning with a sharp bright zigzag flashing across it—." Clouds add depth to the flatness of the plain earth, and the sky dominates the scene not only because it is its *biggest* component but also because it is most alive. O'Keeffe continues, "I walked out past the last house—past the last locust tree—and sat on the fence for a long time—looking—just looking at—the lightning—you see there was nothing but sky and flat prairie land—land that seems more like the ocean than anything else I know—There was a wonderful moon. Well I just sat there and had a great time all by myself—Not even many night noises—just the wind—".[11] Nothing but the wind, a fact noted, too, by Butch Hancock and Jo Carol Pierce.[12] O'Keeffe is consistent in talking about nothing that is there rather than something that is not. She attends relentlessly to this place, not another. Her ability to sit there and be by

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[10] *Georgia O'Keeffe: Art and Letters*, 155.

[11] *Lovingly, Georgia*, 183.

[12] Butch Hancock, "The Wind's Dominion," on *Own and Own* (Durham, NC: Sugar Hill Records, 1991), SH-CD-1036; Jo Carol Pierce, "Blue Norther," on *Bad Birls Upset By the Truth* (New Orleans: Monkey Hill Records, 1995), MON8132-2.

herself is a reminder of the association of wind—nothing that is there—and spirit. To be by oneself is precisely the point, and it is not as easy as it sounds.

Wind and sky weave people and place in ways that render color temptation. "It is absurd the way I love this country," O'Keeffe writes to Pollitzer "—Then when I came back—it was funny—roads just shoot across blocks anywhere—all the houses looked alike—and I almost got lost—I had to laugh at myself—I couldn't tell which house was home— I am loving the plains more than ever it seems—and the SKY—Anita you have never seen SKY—it is wonderful—".[13] Not "Anita, you have never seen this sky" or "you have never seen sky like this," but "you have never seen SKY." Even when everything looks alike and it is not possible to tell which house is home, the place makes it possible for the first time to see sky: it is nowhere else. And being nowhere else, it renovates the world: "Tonight I walked into the sunset—to mail some letters—the whole sky—and there is so much of it out here—was just blazing—and grey blue clouds were riding all through the holiness of it—and the ugly little buildings and windmills looked great against it."[14] O'Keeffe learns here that wind is something you can spend the day watching, and that informs her struggle to paint "slits in nothing"—again, the fascination with edges, the fascination that led Hunter Ingalls to place O'Keeffe with the "precisionists" in his notes for an exhibition of her work at the Amarillo Art Center on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Canyon college that was O'Keeffe's base in the Panhandle.[15]

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[13] *Lovingly, Georgia*, 184.

[14] *Ibid.*, 183.

[15] *Georgia O'Keeffe and Her Contemporaries* (Amarillo, Texas: Amarillo Art Center, 1985). An exhibit at the Amarillo Art Center, 7 September-1 December 1985. Notes by Hunter Ingalls.

But how do you paint nothing with precision? How do you attend to edges in the middle of nowhere?

Writing to Elizabeth Stieglitz Davidson, from Canyon, in 1918, O'Keeffe says,

> I dont care about what they say about me—but its amazing to see what is in their heads—thats what riles me so—/ Ive sat here a long time—a dog barking—The night very still—a train way off rumbling and humming Ive heard it a long time—I dont know whether it is coming or going/ I guess its coming/ I dont seem to have anything else to say—except the only thing I had to say even in the beginning and havent said yet/ It is simply—that it looks as though the War is going to last a long time and I dont see how Im going to be able to stand folks It shows them up so queerly so rottenly—so pitifully—and so disgustingly.[16]

O'Keeffe is not the first to note the difficulty of distinguishing coming from going on the plains. People, canyons, and war function as edges that make it plain.

O'Keeffe left, but she called the place her spiritual home.

Appropriately, O'Keeffe reported to Pollitzer in 1916 that she took up *Faust* one afternoon out on the plains; and, seamlessly, she described them: "—The plains are very wonderful now—like green gold and yellow gold and red gold—in patches—and the distance blue and pink and lavender strips and spots—May sound like a Dow canyon but really its wonderful—specially in the evening—".[17] Dow's canyons signified the temptation of color for O'Keeffe and Pollitzer, but this does not mean that O'Keeffe dismissed color—even when she experimented with abstractions in black and white (as she did during her time in Canyon). While color tempted Dow to romance, it erupted from O'Keeffe's relentless attention to ends, to edges formed in dwelling here, now.

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[16] *Lovingly, Georgia*, 167.

[17] *Ibid.*, 209.

Goethe—explicitly in his *Farbenlehre*, implicitly in all his work, including *Faust*—located color in edges.[18] For Goethe, the spectrum does not result from dividing white light into its component parts. It is a product of the encounter of light with edges. Without edges and without encounter, there can be no rainbow. Goethe criticized Newton for theorizing that color is contained in light. It is not contained. It tempts us outside with O'Keeffe in the encounter of light with the edges of the world.

What we need, then, if we are to encounter color, is not formlessness and void, but a place made of edges.[19]

II

The oldest surviving Native American map of this continent, drawn by a captive called Miguel by his captors, includes a depiction of what is now known as the Texas Panhandle. It is the result of an interrogation. Miguel was carried to Mexico City as a witness in the inquiry into the failed Oñate expedition that continues to ripple through the region today. (In Albuquerque, Oñate's name is connected with a development struggle that calls to mind yet again the unsettling character of settling.) The map signifies the region by means of settlements and roads. People live in the middle of nowhere before the Spanish arrive, connected by well traveled roads: between them, they make a place that the Oñate expedition simply could not see.[20]

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[18] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970).

[19] It is important to note here that "flatness" cuts across the senses. Depth and texture may be experienced as spatial dimensions of light or sound as well as of touch.

[20] Mark Warhus, *Another America: Native American Maps and the History of Our Land* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997), 24-32.

Miguel, even better than O'Keeffe, understood people getting in the way.

Edwin James, a medical doctor born in Vermont in 1796 who served as botanist, geologist, and surgeon on the 1819-1820 Stephen H. Long Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains authorized by Secretary of War John C. Calhoun during the Monroe administration—the expedition that first mapped what is now the Texas Panhandle into the Great American Desert, was a careful observer who meticulously documented the expedition of which he was a part, so it is especially interesting to note what he does *not* see. Shortly after crossing what is now the Texas/Oklahoma border, he writes:

> In speaking of a country, whose geography is so little known, as that of the region southwest of the Arkansa, we feel the want of ascertained and fixed points of reference. Were we to designate the locality of a mineral or any other interesting object, as twenty or thirty days' journey from the Rocky Mountains, we should do nearly all in our power; yet this sort of information would probably be thought vague and useless. The smaller rivers of this region have as yet received no names from white hunters; if they have names among the Indians these are unknown to us. There are no mountains, hills, or other remarkable objects, to serve as points of *reckoning*, nearer than the Rocky Mountains and the Arkansa. The river itself, which we supposed to be the Red river of Natchitiches, is a permanent land mark, but it is a line, and aids us only in one direction in our attempts to designate locality.[21]

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[21] Edwin James, *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains, Performed in the Years 1819 and '20, by order of the Hon. J.C. Calhoun, Sec'y of War, Under the Command of Major Stephen H. Long. From the Notes of Major Long, Mr. T. Say, and other gentlemen of the exploring party. Compiled by Edwin James, Botanist and Geologist for the Expedition*. Volume II.

By this time, it has dawned on him that the river they have been following is not the Red—at least not the one they had in mind.[22] That he does not name it should not be taken as an indication that it has no name, only that he is lost. The map he draws is a blank space bounded by the Rocky Mountains (to the Northwest), the Arkansas River (to the Northeast), and the Red River (to the Southeast), traversed by a straight line (the Canadian) that, because it is uncrossed and unmarked, cannot designate any local coordinate. The Canadian has become a straight, unmarked line at least in part because its orientation has diverged from the one James assigned to it when he first encountered it in eastern New Mexico.

James is writing from the middle of the Antelope Hills on the Canadian River just east of the Texas/Oklahoma border, and he is writing after several days of travel through the Canadian River breaks on the Texas side of the border. Randolph Marcy's description of the region—moving in the opposite direction, from east to west—suggests that this is anything but an unmarked landscape.

Marcy led an 1849 expedition from Fort Smith, Arkansas to Santa Fe, New Mexico to map a route along the Canadian River across Oklahoma and the Texas Panhandle for gold seekers on the way to California. He later also explored the headwaters of the Wichita and Red Rivers in the Panhandle and South Plains.[23] Marcy writes of the country west of present day Weatherford,

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(Philadelphia: H.C. Carey and I. Lea, 1823), 128.

[22] As Morrison notes in *El Llano Estacado*, this confusion occurred with regularity.

[23] Randolph B. Marcy, *Marcy & the Gold Seekers: The Journal of Captain R.B. Marcy, with an Account of the Gold Rush over the Southern Route*, ed. Grant Foreman (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939). By the time Marcy arrived, the place was already well mapped linguistically if not graphically by those who lived in it (Comanche and Kiowa) or visited it regularly (Comancheros).

Oklahoma (24 May) that "gypsum is found in great quantities: in many places the surface of the earth is covered with a white incrustation of decomposed gypsum, and frequently large blocks were seen, in which there were all varieties, from beautiful transparent selenite to common 'plaster of Paris,' gradually merging from opaque to pure transparent. The fibrous varieties were also found frequently."[24] In present day Roger Mills County, Oklahoma, Marcy writes (29 May) of "a formation of gypsum and blue limestone ledges, in which we discovered petrifications of oysters and mussels," which he notes are "the first fossils we have seen upon our road." Wood and grass, he writes, were abundant where he and his party camped on a branch of the Little Washita. He describes country "much broken by hills and ravines, which appear to have been thrown up without the slightest reference to finish or utility" and writes that "the only place along near our route where a natural wagon road can be found is directly upon the crest of the Divide. From a high ridge near our camp we can see the Antelope, or Boundary mounds, far to the west."[25] Describing the Antelope Hills themselves, Marcy writes (31 May) "These hills are about one hundred and fifty feet high, of porous sandstone, and appear to be the result of volcanic action. They rise almost perpendicularly from the smooth prairie, are flat upon the top, and present every indication of having been raised out of the earth by volcanic agency."[26]

James' comments about the absence of landmarks by which to reckon location have been echoed by many travelers who have experienced the Panhandle (and the Plains) as flat. But the comments themselves locate James and disclose his orientation. The Rocky Mountains count (particularly for an expedition that had them as its "end"), as do the Arkansas and Red Rivers—both

[24] *Ibid.*, 216.

[25] *Ibid.*, 218.

[26] *Ibid.*, 219.

familiar western landmarks from the perspective of those who lived in the United States at the time of the Long expedition. What is "between" comes into view only with relation to the end or the beginning, and James has no sense of how the landscape described by Marcy relates to either. Striking though the landscape may be (and it *is* striking in James's account as well), it leaves no mark for these travelers. Flatness—which may be the most important and pervasive metaphor applied by visitors to the Panhandle and Plains—is a function of dislocation; it disappears in the cultivation of *local* vision.[27]

The cultivation of local vision cannot be separated from the creation of locales, social and political acts involving memory and selection of stories to pass on.

III

The 1870 census counted no United States citizens in northwest Texas; by 1880, there were 3,175. The 1870 census was both a unilateral declaration of emptiness and the moment at which "citification" of the Panhandle began to *count* from the perspective of the United States. A survey of Master's theses written on the history and economics of the Texas Panhandle at institutions ranging from North Texas State and West Texas State Teacher's Colleges to the University of Southern California in the 1940s and 1950s reveals a consensus that "civilization" could not begin

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[27] Singer/songwriter Butch Hancock, who grew up on the South Plains, has said that the place is so flat you can see fifty miles in any direction—and if you stand on a tuna can, you can see a hundred. There is *texture* in this comment, connected with Hancock's music and his photography—not the flatness contained in "God, is it flat!" from someone who has only passed through.

until the “Indian problem” was solved. These sources are in substantial agreement that the “solution” to the Indian “problem” was a military campaign waged by economic means that paved the way for occupation. The Panhandle was surrounded on three sides by military installations which became bases from which to launch attacks that escalated as whites moved into the area to establish buffalo hunting as a “business.”[28] This “business” quickly decimated the buffalo population, destroying the economic base of the native inhabitants in tandem with a winter military campaign of running engagement and harassment (under the command of Generals Sheridan and Sherman) that further disrupted the native communities and destroyed their means of subsistence. This policy effectively established the Panhandle as an economic satellite of Dodge City, Kansas—which at the time was the closest railroad terminus from which to ship buffalo to Kansas City, Chicago, and points east—turning it politically from south and west (New Mexico and Mexico) toward north and east (Dodge City, Kansas City, and Chicago).[29] It also laid the foundation for transforming that satellite status. Decimation of the buffalo population eliminated the rationale for Indian occupation, and the Comanche, Kiowa, and Kiowa Apache moved into Oklahoma or New Mexico, opening the Panhandle for European-American settlement and a shift from buffalo to cattle as the economic mainstay of the place. Ranchers replaced buffalo hunters, and railroads followed ranchers.

It is commonplace among historians to speak of a chain of events that begins with the 1819 Treaty with Spain ceding territory including Texas from the area claimed under the Louisiana

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[28] Jerry T. Barton, *The economic development of the Texas Panhandle*, Thesis (M.A.)—North Texas State College, 1950 (Brownwood, Texas: J.T. Barton, 1950).

[29] Cf. Robert C. Haywood, *Trails South: The Wagon-Road Economy in the Dodge City-Panhandle Region (*Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986).

Purchase; continues with the 1820 Missouri Compromise (which, in addition to prohibiting slavery north of 36 degrees, 30 minutes North latitude, drew a line that would later supersede two rivers to determine the top of the Texas Panhandle); the 1836 secession of Texas from Mexico (motivated at least in part by Mexico's prohibition of slavery, which Anglo settlers saw as essential to the cotton economy); the annexation (or re-annexation) of Texas by the United States in 1845 (which included a reaffirmation of the Missouri Compromise); the organization of the Oregon Territory; the 1850 Compromise legislation that included the Fugitive Slave Law and established the northern and western boundaries of the Panhandle; the 1854 Nebraska-Kansas Bill that effectively repealed the Missouri Compromise and opened the way to the free soil struggle for Kansas (which, in retrospect, resembles a war fought between Massachusetts and Missouri on Kansas territory); the Civil War which lasted from 1861-1865; and the period of Reconstruction from 1865-1877. From beginning to end, this chain is concerned with containment, a fact made clearer if the chain is read carefully in an international context. The battle over annexation of Texas was (and is) often read in terms of its significance for the national struggle over slavery that finally broke into Civil War in the United States. But that struggle itself was an international one, and the activity of British abolitionists in Texas and Mexico had a significant impact on the direction of the annexation debate. Three European powers—England, France, and Spain—all had an interest in Texas independence to the extent that they were concerned with the expansionism of the United States. The organization of the Oregon Territory was an important moment in a long territorial struggle between the United States and England, and the existence of Oregon as a possible free counterbalance to the slave territory of Texas softened opposition to the admission of Texas to the United States.[30]

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[30] Cf. David M. Pletcher. *The Diplomacy of Annexation: Texas, Oregon, and the Mexican War*

Whether the chain is read primarily with a domestic or an international perspective, the Panhandle effectively enters in the middle.

The Panhandle assumed its present political boundaries as the result of an agreement between the state government in Austin and the federal government in Washington negotiated as a compromise by a committee of thirteen Senators (six representing free states and seven representing slave states). The agreement was negotiated as part of the extended legislative battle over westward extension of free and slave territories (meaning that the Panhandle's history is wedded politically to that of Kansas by the drawing of lines to divide slave from free). Some of the most famous speeches in the history of the United States Senate emerged in the process that defined the Panhandle in the decade from the annexation of Texas (1845) through the Nebraska-Kansas Bill (1854). In this debate, John C. Calhoun, Daniel Webster, Charles Sumner, and Henry Clay all envisioned an uneasy coalition of two societies jockeying for position as they incorporated territory to the west. The existence of an Anti-Texas Society in Massachusetts goes hand-in-hand with the later contribution of that Commonwealth to the peopling of Kansas: this is a struggle over occupation of territory as much as a struggle over slavery. Texas, referred to as "an empire for slavery"[31] could tip a precariously negotiated balance growing more precarious every day. At the time of its admission to the union, Texas claimed land far beyond the line established by the Missouri Compromise, but its population (and hence its political power) was concentrated in the eastern half of the state, an area that was thoroughly integrated even before statehood into the cotton economy of the South via the port of Galveston. Its admission as a slave state threatened to

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(Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1973).

[31] Cf. Randolph B. Campbell. *An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989).

cross the line—which explains both why a reaffirmation of the Missouri Compromise was included as part of the legislation admitting Texas to the union and why Texas territorial claims beyond the line of the Missouri Compromise remained problematic until the 1850 compromise legislation that defined the Panhandle's political boundaries.

That the compromise was accepted by the state government in Austin had more to do with the economic incentive proposed by Pearce than with any weakening of pro-slavery sentiment in the legislature. That incentive ($10 million) made it possible for Texas to resolve public debt incurred while it was the Republic of Texas, during the struggle that began with its secession from Mexico and continued until after it joined the United States.

The Panhandle assumed its political shape, then, in the context of extended legislative negotiation concerning the disposition of territory between free and slave states; as a result of an agreement that made it possible for Texas to retire its public debt; and in the context of a protracted war with the Plains Indians (meaning that the Panhandle's history is wedded politically to that of Oklahoma, New Mexico, and the western Plains region by the drawing of lines to designate war fronts). Historically, the Panhandle as we know it is a political entity created as a means by which to isolate that portion of the Plains Indians who refused to withdraw to reservations and as part of the process that opened Kansas to rapid settlement motivated by the conflict between free soil settlers from the east and pro-slavery settlers from Missouri. The Panhandle was a strategic move in two overlapping wars.

The drawing of a line between slave and free placed the Panhandle with the Confederacy. That identification is culturally and psychologically forced (though, once drawn, it was widely and often passionately assumed). The "southern" identification of Missouri (which has a star on the

Confederate flag) is more culturally consistent.[32] The drawing of a war front placed the Panhandle outside the territory controlled by the U.S. Army in its war with the Plains Indians and designated it a battlefield on which that control would be consolidated and extended. The Panhandle drawn in 1850 was defined clearly on three sides (less clearly on the fourth) as a place in which Plains Indians who refused to be confined to reservations could be isolated. The fourth, southern, side marked the Texas frontier with the Comanche[33] and consisted of a line that initially ran from Fort Duncan through San Antonio, Fort Graham, and Fort Worth to Fort Washita (in present-day Oklahoma). The line later moved westward and ran from Fort Davis through Fort Concho to Fort Sill (also in what is now Oklahoma). Isolation was the result of a Federal policy that transformed "infestation" (meaning that the Plains Indians in the Panhandle were "out of place") into quarantine. The Panhandle effectively became a place of quarantine for buffalo as well, though this seems to have been a serendipitous occurrence later adopted into Federal military strategy. The quarantine was held in abeyance while the free/slave conflict escalated to Civil War, then became the focal point for reescalation of the Plains Indian War. As already noted, white buffalo hunters moved into the Panhandle, aided and abetted by the U.S. army in exterminating (harvesting?) buffalo as a strategy for putting the Plains Indians "in their place" and clearing the way for incorporation of the Panhandle into the United States.[34]

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[32] Cf. Frank Wilson Kiel. A Fifteen-Star Texas Flag: A Banner Used at the Time of Secession—February 1861 and March 1861. *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 103/3, 356-365.

[33] Note that the Comanche, too, were recent arrivals. Cf. Thomas W. Kavenaugh. *The Comanches: A History 1706-1875* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).

[34] I choose the term "incorporation" with care for its biological and economic dimensions: it both denotes a process by which something is devoured and a process by which something becomes

Webb maintains that the plains constituted a barrier to the "Cotton Kingdom" but not to the system of individual ownership and "free labor" characteristic of the Northern economy. His analysis presupposes that the struggle leading up to and including the Civil War was a contest of *economic* systems with territorial and cultural repercussions. By 1850, Webb asserts, thoughtful people in both North and South realized that "the Southern economic system had reached its natural confines," the western boundary of which he locates at the ninety-eighth meridian.[35] The question was not whether but how the West would be incorporated into the Northern economy.

Webb pictures the farmer as the means by which territories were transformed into states and passed on into the hands of one of the two competing sections; but he recasts the North/South struggle as an extended process by which South and West are incorporated into the Northern economic system. Webb draws an analogy "between the history of the South and the history of the Great Plains country, between the cotton kingdom and the cattle kingdom, in their relation to the industrial section of the North." Both, he says, took root in natural conditions "especially favorable to the development of each respectively;" but both also depended on the "far off" working of the Industrial Revolution—textile machinery and the cotton gin in the case of the cotton kingdom, the railroad and packing houses in the case of the cattle kingdom. Both "became tributary to the masters of the Industrial Revolution." Both produced "distinctive civilizations," but both were, in time, "completely altered by the force that had developed them."[36]

It is probably more correct to think of these two kingdoms as the advance guard of an occupying force that displaced previous occupants and users of the soil in the establishment of the

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a body.

[35] Walter Prescott Webb. *The Great Plains* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1931), 189.

[36] *Ibid.*, 271,272.

Northern economic system—itself a form of emerging industrial Capitalism, based not on individual ownership and free labor (as Webb assumes) so much as on exploitation of land and labor. The cotton and cattle kingdoms effectively prepared the land for exploitation, functioning as an advance guard for the transformation Webb attributes to farmers.

Webb maintains[37] that the plains confronted the Industrial Revolution as a barrier consisting of four problems—transportation, fencing, water, and farming: "The first was solved by railroads, the second by barbed wire, the third by windmills, and the fourth partly by farm machinery and by a new form of agriculture. Aside from transportation the other problems may be thought of as growing out of agriculture; that is, in this second phase of Plains history the farm may be considered as the unit rather than the range or ranch, which was the unit in the preceding period. Fundamentally, the major problem of agriculture had to do with providing means of utilizing large areas of land."[38]

Webb describes the encounter with the frontier as an encounter with limitlessness that tended to enhance the status of the individual and wear down accretions of civilization. He characterizes the struggle in the "old" world as being a struggle among human beings, while the struggle in the "new" world was a struggle with nature. This plays into the contradictory characterization of the area as simultaneously empty and "infested." The protracted struggle with indigenous inhabitants simply doesn't count. He further describes the frontier as wearing down "old world" civilization to the point that only individuals remain, then "recrystallizing" institutions in a *corporate* form.[39] Webb

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[37] Harris Stone. *Dispersed City of the Plains* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998).

[38] Webb, 1931, 272.

[39] Walter Prescott Webb. *The Great Frontier* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 78. [Reprint of University of Texas edition, 1964. The book was originally copyrighted in 1952.]

highlights the role of government intervention and appropriation of land in this transformation at the same time that he notes its relative invisibility: “Every farmer, every railroad magnate, every holder of patent monopoly or beneficiary of a protective tariff honestly believed that he was earning all he got by the sweat of his brow or equivalent perspiration of his nervous system. It was quite proper to share the wealth as long as it was frontier wealth, as long as the government could furnish it to A without asking anything from B. It will not be easy to lead people to see that the frontier made a shared culture a practical thing.”[40] This raises the fascinating question of when “we” have been willing to accept expropriation and redistribution of land as opposed to when we have seen it as objectionable. There was less opposition to its expropriation from the indigenous peoples of the Americas (characterized here as government furnishing it to A without asking anything from B), than, e.g., to its expropriation from plantation owners during Reconstruction.

In this regard, it is interesting to note the observations of W.B. Parker, who accompanied Marcy on an expedition through “unexplored” Texas in the Summer and Fall of 1854 that was authorized by the Texas legislature to explore “unlocated” territory appropriated “to form a reserve for the settlement of all the Indians within her borders.”[41] Writing at Fort Washita, Parker criticized government policy that practically denied “the capacity of the Indians for civilization by compelling them to hold their lands in common.” He connected the process of civilization with “the power of alienation” of land—that is to say, with the division of land into private property. He contended that “the Indian never can be elevated but by his individual effort, and that thrift,

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[40] *Ibid.*, 135.

[41] W.B. Parker. *Notes Taken During the Expedition Commanded by Captain R.B. Marcy, U.S.A. through Unexplored Texas, in the Summer and Fall of 1854.* (Philadelphia: Hayes & Zell, 1856), 2-3.

prudence, and discipline of character, the real elements of civilization, can never be attained until he has to depend upon himself, a result never to be arrived at so long as his lands are held in common."[42] While participating in an expedition intended to pave the way for another reservation—locating both the land and the Indians who would be compelled to occupy it, Parker's musings prefigure a two-step policy of isolation followed by incorporation: "Let them once be involved in common interests with white men, and a new impulse would be given to them. They would substitute practical life for sensual existence, accumulate wealth where they now barely scratch out a support, and, instead of degraded peasants, would become wealthy agriculturalists."[43]

Whether in the sympathetic version proposed by Parker or the decidedly unsympathetic version imposed by Sheridan in his post-Civil War campaign under Sherman, the Panhandle's future is an agrarian one, and its agrarian future depends on the disappearance of the civilization that occupies it before 1870.

IV

In his discussion of Western Apache language, Keith Basso defines set extension as "the process in which all or part of a lexically coded taxonomy is mapped onto a portion of the environment that has not been previously classified."[44] He notes that "if lexical sets and their associated conceptual domains are viewed as models of how speakers of a language construe the world around them, then set extension can be considered a process whereby old models are used to

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[42] *Ibid.*, 63-64.

[43] *Ibid.*, 63-64.

[44] Keith H. Basso, *Western Apache Language and Culture: Essays in Linguistic Anthropology* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990), 21.

structure fresh experience."[45] The linguistic mapping of the *llano estacado* by Spanish-speaking explorers is an example, as is the transfer of Western toponyms to the region by Comanche immigrants in the eighteenth century.[46] It is interesting that the Spanish linguistic mapping often applies "known" time (the church year) to unknown space—meaning that the name of a place depends on the day upon which the namer reached it, while the Comanche mapping often applies a known place (the ancestral home) to unknown space. The Anglo tendency to name places after people is another significant form of linguistic mapping. (Of course the existence of a town like Oslo on the Texas/Oklahoma border is an indication that Europeans, too, transferred toponyms from the ancestral home to this unknown territory.) These enactments of metaphor illustrate the ability of language to transport both us and the world: it moves us into new territory at the same time that it incorporates new territory into our maps. In the process, it makes the new territory "familiar" in a number of different ways, each of which is associated with its own way of being lost.

Equally important is the way in which fresh experience can restructure old models. More than once, O'Keeffe expressed her irritation at artists who painted northern New Mexico as a New England landscape.[47] Even a cursory tour of Santa Fe galleries confirms that the problem persists.

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[45] *Ibid.*, 22.

[46] Cf. Morris, *El Llano Estacado*; Daniel J. Gelo, "Comanche Land and Ever Has Been": A Native Geography of the Nineteenth-Century Comancheria. *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 103/3, 273-307.

[47] A more homely example is the struggle of residents in semi-arid places like Amarillo or Albuquerque to maintain yards.

On the other hand, placing O'Keeffe's New York paintings next to her early paintings of light on the plains offers breathtaking evidence that the Texas Panhandle can shed new light on New York.

Basso notes that "the most salient characteristic of metaphor" is "an apparent violation of linguistic rules" in the form of a proposition that is "logically false" or (citing Rudolf Carnap) "conceptually absurd." He also cites Walker Percy, who wrote that a metaphor "asserts of one thing that it is something else" and is therefore inevitably "wrong." It is at the same time also "right" because "semantic disobedience notwithstanding, the proposition it expresses can be construed as containing a truth."[48] One of the ways in which metaphor expands the world is by systematically *violating* boundaries. For metaphor to be encountered as anything other than untruth or absurdity depends on "an ability to discern some element of plausibility or truth in a statement that asserts an implausibility or falsehood." Basso is convinced that "if we can characterize this ability—or, more precisely, if we can determine how the concepts that underlie the interpretation of metaphor are formed—we will have learned something interesting about metaphor itself. We will also have learned something interesting about cultural symbols and the way they work to impose order and meaning on that elusive entity sometimes known as the 'real world'."[49]

More than an element of plausibility contained in an assertion of falsehood, encountering the world is a true assertion that is inevitably wrong: the world is always something else.

Basso's discussion focuses on the association of "wisdom" and "place." One of his Apache teachers tells him, "The land is always stalking people. The land makes people live right. The land looks after us. The land looks after people."[50] Nineteenth-century Anglo explorers often describe

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[48] Basso, 55,56.

[49] *Ibid.*, 58.

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the land in terms of cultivation or its possibility, which suggests an image of people looking after land; and Webb's description of the farmer's role in exploitation of the land also reverses the subject-object order. Basso describes Western Apache historical narratives as intimately connected with descriptive place names. When the narratives are "shot" at individuals who have engaged in some transgressive behavior, the hearer becomes connected with the *place* of the story, and the place then "stalks" the hearer. Nick Thompson's description of stalking with stories concludes with, "The names of all these places are good. They make you remember how to live right, so you want to replace yourself again."[51]

This raises two questions: What happens to someone who does not know the names of these places? and What would it mean to know names of places that were "bad"?

Both questions have to do with orientation—placing unfamiliar territory and finding one's place in the world—as well as with memory and culture. Much of Basso's discussion concerns processes by which places are named and names are passed on. Those who forget names or do not know them are lost (remember James and the Antelope Hills). The people who teach Basso about naming—particularly those who accompany him on his project of "mapping" territory in accordance with Western Apache place names (*learning* the names) do not present the process as optional: one does not choose to be stalked, and people cannot escape the land that stalks them. Basso speaks of "appropriating" the land, but it would be more appropriate to think of the land possessing its people: "space" is transformed into "place" by "dwelling." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, drawing on Paul Valéry, envisions the blue of the sky "thinking itself within me" and describes the body as "the fabric into which all objects are woven."[52] Basso recalls Camus' assertion that "sense of place" is

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[51] Basso, 124, 125.

[52] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. Colin Smith (New York:

something one does—an action—rather than simply something one thinks. But it is also something one undergoes, a *passion*.

J.J. Gibson and George Lakoff both take up Merleau-Ponty's image of embodiment—Lakoff in his critique of objectivism and Gibson in his description of perceptual systems. Lakoff, drawing on Hilary Putnam, maintains that "Meaning cannot be characterized by the way symbols are associated with things in the world."[53] The problem "has to do with viewing a language as separate from its interpretation... Models of reality are *our* models and we might as well own up to it and make the best of it. People do not just manipulate meaningless symbols; they use symbols *because* they already mean something, and reasoning with those symbols takes account of that meaning."[54] Objectivism's mistake consists in what Putnam calls its "externalist" perspective—attempting to stand "outside reality" to "find a unique correct way to understand" it.[55] Recall O'Keeffe's desire to get outside it all—even if it killed her. But, as noted earlier, outside is not possible even for one willing to lay down her life for it. It is the temptation to outside, not outside as such, that matters most.

There is an old story of an argument between Schopenhauer and Goethe. Schopenhauer had been a champion of Goethe's theory of color but ended up "explaining" it in such a way as to render it indistinguishable from Newton's. Color was again safely contained in light. But Goethe insisted that color is not contained and that light is not a lifeless container. Confronted with the admonition

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Humanities Press, 1962), 235.

[53] George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 253.

[54] *Ibid.*, 254, 255.

[55] *Ibid.*, 260.

to see objects in the light before his eyes, Goethe anticipated Gibson by insisting that light is the one thing we surely do not see and that we never simply see objects in light. He anticipated Kandinsky and O'Keeffe by insisting that color is an aspect of light's soul. We are engaged with the world in perceptual systems that *locate* mind: the world thinks itself in us. We come to know the world as objects are woven into our body. We are nothing if light does not see us, and vision is nothing if not the endless struggle to let ourselves be seen.