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The Buffalo Commons as Regional Metaphor and Geographic Method



[Draft, Accepted by GEOGRAPHICAL REVIEW]

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Regional metaphor offers an effective means to pursue a traditionally central task of geography — understanding and creating alternative futures for regions. It can give geographers feasible approaches to constructing a sense of a region’s future, engaging the public in the task, and influencing public policy. Regional metaphor provides a way to make thinking about regions and the probable changes in them accessible to wide, often opposed portions of the public whom geographers may not otherwise reach. Many contemporary geographical techniques — for instance, GIS, deconstruction, or statistical inference — frequently distance the discipline from important lay regional audiences. Thus we urge geographers to make more use of regional metaphor. The terms of the metaphor must connect with the region, but at the same time it has to be open-ended, multifaceted, ambiguous. To show how regional metaphor can work, our argument first draws on our participant-observer experience in devising the Buffalo Commons metaphor for the Great Plains. We then suggest the implications of the metaphor for other U.S. regions and for the practice of geography.

The Great Plains as a regional story

In 1987 we published an article in *Planning*, a magazine for urban planners, in which we reviewed the past and prospects of one of the nation’s major regions, the Great Plains (Popper and Popper 1987). We recorded the Plains’ boom-and-bust history and suggested that a new path lay about a generation ahead: a large-scale land restoration project that we called the Buffalo Commons.

Lying between the Rockies and the tallgrass prairies of the Midwest and South, the Great Plains extend over large parts of ten states, from Montana and North Dakota in the north to Texas and New Mexico in the south, and into Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta in Canada. The Plains produce significant quantities of cattle, wheat, cotton, sheep, coal, oil, natural gas and metals. They are America’s steppes— windswept, nearly treeless and largely semiarid. Their expanse is mostly rural; the region’s 1990 total population of 6.5 million —barely that of Georgia— scatters across about a sixth of the United States.

The Plains have inspired extraordinary literature and art evocative of their physical distinctiveness and the difficulties human settlement encounters there. Walt Whitman wrote in 1879, “One wants new words in writing about these plains, and all the inland American West— the terms, *far, large, vast, &c.*, are insufficient” (Stovall 1963, 218, emphasis in original). The painter Thomas Hart Benton wrote in 1937, “Cozy-minded people hate the brute magnitude of the plains country. For me the great plains have a releasing effect. I like the way they make human beings appear as the little bugs they really are. Human effort is seen there in all its painful futility. The universe is stripped to dirt and air, to wind, dust, clouds, and the white sun” (quoted in

Raban 1996, 60). Kathleen Norris’ *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography begins*: “The High Plains, the beginning

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of the desert West, often act as a crucible for those who inhabit them. Like Jacob's angel, the region requires that you wrestle with it before it bestows a blessing" (Norris 1993, 1).

Americans' perception of the Plains has varied over time. Early-19th-century textbooks called them a desert; late-19th-century promoters and settlers regarded them as a potential garden, a regional component of the nation's Manifest Destiny. With the 1930s Dust Bowl, they became a national problem; then they faded from the national consciousness. According to Cronon (1992), historians have treated the region's past as a narrative of inexorable progress or inevitable decline.

In 1987 we read the region's history as showing a basic cyclical pattern that in effect combined growth and decline: population ebbed and flowed into and out of the region. Periods of high rainfall and federally subsidized settlement initially induce a boom, next overgrazing and overplowing erode the soil and lower the water table; a bust ensues, with heavy depopulation, especially in the region's most rural areas. Two such economic/environmental cycles have already occurred.

The first began with the 1862 Homestead Act that gave a pioneer family 160 acres of free federal land if it could farm it for five years. The cycle reached its zenith in the atypical heavy-rain years of the 1870s. Its nadir hit in the 1890s with widespread starvation and large convoys of fully loaded wagon trains headed east, out of the Plains. The second upswing began in the early 1900s with new homesteading laws that allowed settlers up to 640 acres of free federal land. It reached its height during World War I when American wheat replaced European production lost to the battlefields. It bottomed in the 1930s with the Great Depression, drought, the Dust Bowl, the abolition of homesteading, and John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* Okies driving, hitchhiking, or rail-hopping west to California. As a cumulative result of the two cycles, many deep-rural Plains towns and counties had their largest populations in 1930 or 1920 or even 1890 and have declined steadily ever since.

In 1987 we suggested that a third great cycle was well into its bust phase. The top of the cycle, from the 1940s to 1970s, had featured first the introduction of large-scale federal agricultural subsidies and then energy-development ones. But the mid-1980s found large parts of the Plains' farm, ranch, energy and mining economies in near-depression as the national economy, federal policies and global markets shifted. Population losses had accelerated; young people in particular had left. Soil erosion approached Dust Bowl era rates. The Ogallala Aquifer, the source of agricultural and urban groundwater for much of the southern two-thirds of the Plains, was dropping fast. The Interior Department's Bureau of Reclamation no longer built the big dam and irrigation projects that underwrote large chunks of Plains economic development. We imagined that public policy for the Plains would eventually have to respond to all these third-cycle pressures by creating a huge reserve, the Buffalo Commons.

The Buffalo Commons as a possible future

We conceived the Buffalo Commons in part as a literary device, a metaphor that would resolve the narrative conflicts —past, present and most important, future— of the Plains. In land-use terms, the Buffalo Commons was an umbrella phrase for a large-scale, long-term restoration project to counter the effects of the three cycles. We wrote that in about a generation, after the far end of the third cycle had depopulated much more of the Plains, the federal government would step in as the vacated land's owner of last resort —much as it had in the 1930s to create the region's distinctive category of public lands, the National Grasslands. The Buffalo Commons would not mean buffalo on every acre; but where Plains land uses were not working well either environmentally or economically, replacement land uses that treated the land more lightly would become inevitable. The federal government would oversee the replacement, and the new land uses would fall between intensive cultivation/extraction and pure wilderness. The Buffalo Commons used metaphor as a way to give form and words to the unknowable future.

Plains media picked up the metaphor of the Buffalo Commons and made it part of a discussion on the region's prospects (for the first media report, see Olson 1988). This appropriation at first surprised us, but also taught us metaphor's power as a method to describe and navigate regional change. The media interest brought us invitations. We spoke at a range of forums: chautauquas, college colloquia, meetings of broadcasters and publishers, good government groups, farmers, ranchers, clergy, landscape architects, planners, range managers, environmentalists, agricultural economists, and businesspeople. We spoke in college classrooms, high school auditoriums, civic centers, cafes, parks, and barns. We received and answered piles of mail.

As we traveled the Plains, it became clear that we did not control the meaning of our metaphor, nor did anyone else. For some the Buffalo Commons was only about bison, for others about wildlife in general, for others about raising cattle to more closely mimic bison behavior. The metaphor might mean getting the people out of the region, encouraging their coexistence with wildlife, or promoting economic development based on wildlife. People variously interpreted the metaphor as a general assault on their way of life, an evocation of a fabled past, a vision of a feasible future, or a distillation of what they were already doing. Many Plains people intensely disliked the commons portion of the metaphor, associating it with collectivism and lack of choice, but even so the strength of their reaction helped achieve some community-building.

As the Buffalo Commons term came into widespread use (for recent examples, see Graham 1997, O'Driscoll 1997, Robbins 1997, and Olson 1998), it provoked exploration by many people and organizations, each with their own interpretations, their own heroes and villains. In effect, they discussed what underlay the term and developed their own narrative line to give the metaphor its meaning. Such discussions built on the ambiguity of the metaphor and helped foster accord between groups or individuals who were otherwise deeply divided. For example, Native Americans and white ranchers and farmers could agree that people should not be uprooted involuntarily from their homes and way of life. Energy interests and cattle ranchers knew in their bones that the Plains problems sprang from farm subsidies. For many Plains people, federal intervention harmed their region and kept it in a semi-colonized state; the Buffalo Commons represented simply the latest example of potential federal hubris. Sometimes the one point a group could agree on was that they did not like the Buffalo Commons, but at least that gave them a starting point. From there, they took up the metaphor and pushed it into the future by elaborating on the values and choices they wished to attain and avoid.

We have called this overall approach soft-edged planning, to distinguish it from hard-edged—more rule-bound—planning (Popper and Popper 1996). Story and metaphor work as process, engendering new layers of understanding as they get diffused. They loop back as discussion grows and meaning gets amplified and modified. In this process, the Buffalo Commons has grown to have concreteness and specificity. The question is no longer why or whether the Buffalo Commons will occur, but how.

The emergence of the Buffalo Commons

Since 1987, we have elaborated the Buffalo Commons metaphor to incorporate the emerging land uses consistent with it (Popper and Popper 1994). It now appears that the Buffalo Commons is materializing more quickly and with less federal intervention than we had anticipated; the formation is particularly rapid in the northern Plains. In the last decade public-land herds increased markedly. On private lands a noticeable number of ranchers switched to buffalo and prospered financially and ecologically. Membership in the National Bison Association, a membership group for buffalo professionals has risen steadily; so has membership in the organization's state and regional chapters, especially in the Plains.

Plains Indians have formed the InterTribal Bison Cooperative, a consortium of 44 Native American governments that trains Indian buffalo producers and tribal land managers and takes other steps to reinvigorate buffalo's historically central place in their cultures. The buffalo count on Indian land has at least tripled since 1992 (Popper and Popper 1998).

North Dakota's governor, Edward Schafer, sees buffalo production and buffalo tourism as vital to the state's growth; reversing long-standing practice, the state's bank and other Plains banks now lend to buffalo ranchers, and North Dakota's agricultural extension service offers them technical assistance. They have established a marketing cooperative and a slaughtering-processing facility specially for buffalo and plan another, which the state is encouraging. In 1996 its agriculture commissioner, Sarah Vogel, told the *New York Times* that North Dakota will someday have more buffalo than cattle (Brooke 1996).

Alberta and Saskatchewan offer their buffalo ranchers technical help. Montana State University has created a Center for Bison Studies to do research on buffalo and aid buffalo enterprises. Ten tribal colleges in Nebraska and the Dakotas will soon offer Native Americans foundation supported programs in bison education and management (Anonymous 1997).

Federal agencies have begun taking Buffalo Commons steps. The Forest Service is considering allowing buffalo to graze on more of its National Grasslands in the Dakotas, Montana, and Wyoming (Robbins 1997). Saskatchewan has created Grasslands National Park, which will eventually encompass 350

square miles but is already open to visitors. In 1992 the U.S. Interior Department began the Great Plains Partnership, a wildlife protection effort by federal agencies, state governments, and their Canadian and Mexican counterparts. The Clinton Administration expanded the program and assigned the Environmental Protection Agency to lead it. Beginning in the early 1990s, the Nature Conservancy, the country's leading land preservation organization, greatly expanded its buy-ups on the Plains, often restoring native plant and animal species on them.

Our metaphor stimulated other work on the Plains' Buffalo Commons future. For example, Anne Matthews' *Where the Buffalo Roam*, which focuses on our work and the reaction to it (Matthews 1992), was one of four finalists for the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction. Rancher Lawrence Brown, who lives in Buffalo, South Dakota, wrote a book about his youth entitled *Buffalo Commons Memoirs* (Brown 1995) and since 1993 has published a bimonthly newsletter, *From the Deep Plains* (another phrase taken from our work) that attempts to find alternatives to the Buffalo Commons (Brown 1993-present) Ernest Callenbach's *Bring Back the Buffalo! A Sustainable Future for America's Great Plains* and Daniel Licht's *Ecology and Economics of the Great Plains* support the Buffalo Commons and suggest new ways to achieve it (Callenbach 1995, Licht 1997). Local environmental groups—for instance, South Dakota's Sierra Club chapter (Rebbeck 1997) and Bring Back the Bison in Evanston, Wyoming (www.evanstonwy.com/bb-bison)—lobby for buffalo. "A community's greatest gift is the evolving history of its people, their stories, their symbols, their enduring sagas ..." reads the cover for the Buffalo Commons Storytelling Festival held in May 1997 in McCook, Nebraska. *The Buffalo Commons*, a novel by Western writer Richard Wheeler, has appeared (Wheeler 1998). The Buffalo Commons metaphor has had practical effects.

Metaphor as a tool of regional imagination

Many fields find that metaphor provides a means to connect with and understand a messy world. As a literary device, it is at least as allusive as programmatic. It interprets and enlarges meanings. It creates—in a literary fashion—a place apart, space for reflection. It works especially well in times of great change, disorder, or disjunction.

Geographer Anne Buttimer writes, "A treasure of insight can be unlocked via metaphorical rather than literal or rational thinking ... because metaphor performs a poetic as well as conservative function in ordinary language, preserving as well as creating knowledge about actual and potential connections between different realms of reality" (Buttimer 1993, 78). She finds that choices of metaphors reveal values and show how one sees the world. Metaphors are thus useful both to create and explain meaning.

Similarly, anthropologist Victor Turner argues that metaphors engender an alternative space for the society where what was previously enforced and expected can transmute into something new (Turner 1985). Metaphors operate "as a species of liminal monster ... whose combination of familiar and unfamiliar features or unfamiliar combinations of familiar features provokes us into thought, provides us with new perspectives ... the implications, suggestions, and supporting values entwined with their literal use enable us to see a new subject matter in a new way" (Turner 1974, 31)

David Abram, ecologist, philosopher, and magician, details human alienation from nature and place, tracing it back to the substitution of a symbolic alphabet for direct experience as a first step in homogenizing space. The magical quality that once resided in the world moved into language. The only hope of reconnecting to place lies in using stories and vibrant language: "Our task, rather, is that of taking up the written word, with all its potency, and patiently, carefully, writing language back into the land. Our craft is that of releasing the budded, earthly intelligence of our words, freeing them to respond to the speech of the things themselves ... It is the practice of spinning stories that have the rhythm and lilt of the local landscape, tales for the tongue that want to be told, again and again, sliding off the digital screen and slipping off the lettered page to inhabit these coastal forests, those desert canyons, those whispering grasslands and valleys and swamps" (Abram 1996, 273-274, emphasis in original). Contemporary industrial society is inundated by writing and information. Metaphor helps order and evaluate them quickly and efficiently because it requires the reader/listener to rapidly confer meaning on the words. The choices belong both to the deviser of the metaphor and its interpreters.

Hagerstrand (1995) writes that the geographers' task in understanding the experience of place requires a language that is largely missing. He sees place as composed of a practical reality so well known that it is taken for granted and thus not articulated—so individualized that communicating it becomes problematic.

Metaphor aids in elucidating shared experience of place or region if it does what Buttimer, Turner, and Abram describe, giving insight to diverse realms of reality and new interpretations of experience.

When we first wrote in 1987, rural Great Plains people were negotiating a change they would have preferred not to face. They could see and feel the personal, family, and community pressures, but these raised sensitivities and fears of loss. Writing from South Dakota, Kathleen Norris asks, "How do we tell the truth in a small town? Is it possible to write it? ... We don't tend to see truth as something that could set us free because it means embracing pain, acknowledging our differences and conflicts, taking our real situation into account" (Norris 1993, 79) Emily Dickinson suggests a way to get around the problem:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant-

Success in Circuit lies (Johnson 1961, 248)

Metaphor provides both Truth and Circuit, indirection and distance, reality and alterations of it. At the same time metaphor offers resolution of the conflicts between them. Robert Frost described metaphor as "saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another" (Cox and Lathem 1966, 24).

The Buffalo Commons as a regional metaphor

Our work drew on several forms of Circuit in addition to metaphor itself: our own geographic distance, our long-term perspective, our interdisciplinary approach. As a result, we could afford to imagine and ponder possible futures that might only gradually take shape. We did not have to find someone to take over the local grain elevator or cafe. We did not have to produce policies to deal with falling cattle prices or shifting government incentives. Instead we had the intellectual luxury of disinterestedly weighing the pressures on land, soil, water, and community and envisioning where they might eventually lead. Thus we wrote of the Buffalo Commons as emerging after another generation if present trends continued. Some critics and supporters saw the Buffalo Commons as a formal plan that purposefully laid out the location of particular land uses, but it was inevitably never much more than a metaphor.

The metaphor's two words are deliberately simple and emotive, yet challenging. Buffalo had served as symbol and sustenance for both Native American and Euroamerican populations in the Plains. Buffalo shaped the landscape with their migrations, trampling and rolling, loosening soil, bringing along other wildlife. Migrating across the Plains, they presented a visual point on the horizon that broke up the meeting of earth and sky. They signified the landscape and culture of the Plains. Their fate served as a warning. Because they were nearly eliminated in the late nineteenth century, they raise questions of durability and desire: do we as a society want to maintain the past? How much do we need to change the present? Can we even stop the ongoing changes? Can we recapture what has changed? The buffalo also evoke the question of our responsibilities to other species—for example, on what terms is it possible to increase the number of buffalo? In the process might they become too much like cattle? The metaphor uses the word "buffalo" rather than the more accurate "bison" because it is more familiar to the public and taps more allusions—buffalo as wildlife, myth, and merchandise. The complexity of Plains experience with bison lends life to the metaphor and increases its suggestiveness for the Plains' future.

The word "commons" connotes the need to treat land as a common property resource, much as we do air or water. It simultaneously refers to environmental issues and social ones—for example, how do we prevent soil erosion not only on our own land, but also on neighboring holdings? What are the responsibilities and relationships across generations and species? Americans are thought to believe that small-town and agrarian society is better, more neighborly, and more communal than life elsewhere. Yet the rural Plains have endured long-running population loss and decline of services. Cutbacks and consolidations in schools, other government operations, professional services, and churches undermine traditional beliefs. How does one remake such places to ensure or reinvigorate communities? How can the places get past the silence and denial Kathleen Norris describes to tackle the real problems? The solution has to emphasize shared problems and prospects—that is, commonality.

The Buffalo Commons provided a metaphor for re-envisioning settlement practices on the Plains. As a metaphor it was meant to evoke the characteristic and the intrinsic so as to clarify what to preserve and build upon. We drew the metaphor from a narrative about how the region was shaped. The metaphor crystallized a regional story and became usable for the future; metaphor helped move story past nostalgia to make understanding of place a cutting edge means for adaptation. The adaptation grew out of the

challenge inherent in a metaphor that simultaneously suggested change, alluded to a history in revision, and had several possible interpretations that themselves had an uneasy relationship with each other.

Moreover, the Buffalo Commons does not rule out some potential Plains measures—for instance, better irrigation methods, alternative crops, or more telecommuting; instead it coexists with them. In fact, it can coexist with other metaphors, including ones that will emerge in the future. But it has been exciting to watch our metaphor spring to life and leave our control. We see a growing recognition that the idea makes environmental, economic, and perhaps most important, imaginative sense—that it suggests plausible options for many places, choices other than casinos, prisons, hazardous waste, agribusiness, or continued long-term decline. We confidently expect the Buffalo Commons to keep acquiring the muscle of reality.

Buffalo Commons approaches elsewhere

Geographers might well serve other regions by devising usable metaphors for them. The economic and environmental trends that have forced rethinking on the Great Plains affect other parts of America. A large number of farming, mining, timber, and manufacturing communities have lost or are losing their agricultural, extractive or manufacturing base; technological change, market shifts, environmental consequences, and increasing globalism, remove jobs, investment, tax bases, and people. Like the Plains, such places face the question: what now? We suggest that each region can use its own metaphors to aid its adjustments. To work effectively, such metaphors need to derive their terms from a regional narrative that is recognizable but not definitive. Ambiguity is important in that it draws attention to the characteristics of a region, yet allows a wide range of responses.

Many rural regions are potential candidates: the Lower Mississippi Delta, central Appalachia, the Upper Midwest, northern New England, the western portions of the Corn Belt, the Pacific Northwest, and central Alaska. West Virginia coal, Minnesota iron, Illinois and Louisiana farm, and Michigan automobile towns and their surrounding areas have recorded serious population and economic losses, as shown by their gap-toothed blocks and deserted buildings, whether empty storefronts, car dealerships, barns, breakers, or factories. Such places often experience environmental degradation as well—dropping water tables, say, or mounting slag heaps—that make the regions less desirable and complicate their future possibilities. Too often the regions' images connote waste or decay. They need to find and develop metaphors that capture what has sustained the regions, not what holds them back. The metaphors have to incorporate potentially positive images in order to work as bases for their regions, future.

The rural Pacific Northwest, for instance, has many similarities to the Great Plains. Logging has faltered and its communities declined because of timber depletion; competition from other American wooded regions (notably the Southeast) and abroad; tightened federal environmental restrictions on the region's national forests; and environmentalist urgings for even tighter restrictions. Logger-environmentalist violence has occurred. The Interior Department's Great Plains Partnership was created in 1992 largely because former Kansas governor Mike Hayden, then an assistant Interior secretary, worried that a Northwest-style

“train wreck” would recur on the Plains (Herndon 1994). Adept metaphorical use of the Northwest's symbolic animal, the salmon, could aid the region's transition. Like buffalo in the Plains, the salmon offers its region simultaneous commercial, wildlife, and mythic possibilities. Like buffalo, the salmon appeals to whites and Indians, but in different ways. Like buffalo, the salmon as metaphor suggests changes in regional extractive practices—altered logging practices, say, or restored stream flows—that could yield increased economic and environmental benefits. The salmon represents an integral part of the rural Northwest's story, but it has not been incorporated into a metaphor for regional debate.

Other rural and small-town places previously dependent on natural resources have begun to adopt preservation- or restoration based economic development similar to some Buffalo Commons measures, but not always Buffalo Commons-style metaphors. Tiny northern Maine logging towns tie their future to snowmobile recreation (Kifner 1997). Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, offers heritage tourism in its steel mills, coal mines, and blue-collar neighborhoods (Brant 1996). New York State and the federal government have begun a \$131 million initiative to foster shops, housing, marinas, restaurants, trails, and horse-drawn barge-boat tourism along the 524-mile stretch of the old Erie Canal. The project is expected to create 5,000 jobs and represents the biggest economic development project in upstate New York in decades, one of the largest public-works projects there since the Canal itself (Williams 1997). Yet none of these

measures seem to have much inspired the public. The Erie Canal project, by far the most ambitious of them, explicitly taps the region's historical roots for its name, but could perhaps use more ambiguity to stimulate discussion of what it is trying to achieve and how it might work. Such discussion, as with the Buffalo Commons, could productively raise possibilities well beyond its planners' invention.

In 1995 New York City author and photographer Camilo Jose Vergara suggested that 12 crumbling square blocks of downtown Detroit be preserved as a monument to the high period of early modern American capitalism (Vergara 1995). The blocks consist of skyscrapers built in the 1920s as offices, department stores, or hotels, but now are thinly occupied, vacant, or boarded up. Vergara's response to the decline (more precisely, the suburbanization) of Detroit's automobile industry — an industry that in its heyday gave the city more tall buildings than anywhere besides New York and Chicago — was to celebrate it as archaeology. "I propose that as a tonic for our imagination," he wrote, "as a call for renewal, as a place within our national memory, a dozen city blocks of pre-Depression skyscrapers be stabilized and left standing as ruins: an American Acropolis. We could transform the nearly 100 troubled buildings into a grand national park of play and wonder" (Vergara, quoted in Bennet, 1995, 22). As the *New York Times* noted, in practice Vergara's Motor City Acropolis already exists, though neither the city government nor tourists have yet discovered it. Vergara argues, 'People need to say, "Damn it, this used to be a symbol of failure, but damn it, this is now something sublime' (ibid., 22).

It will be interesting to see if Vergara's concept begets any projects. Like the Buffalo Commons, it pulls back from previous attempts at mastery. Instead of large-scale manipulation and drastic refashioning of land-use patterns, it strives to minimize further human impacts, to restore and conserve the most evocative portions of the past. Again like the Buffalo Commons, it starts with a seemingly negative premise—the current conundrum of apparently inevitable decline—and refashions it as a solution. To work as a regional metaphor, however, it may need to allude to something distinctive to Detroit in order to generate experimentation in places and uses beyond a single district of grand ruins.

Detroit is one of the many large old cities in the Northeast and Midwest that have declined since World War II, as much of their more affluent populations left for the suburbs or the Sunbelt. Nearly all these cities have lower populations today than they did in 1950. Boston and Buffalo actually have lower populations than they did in 1900. The main outlier to this trend is New York City, whose postwar population has held almost constant because of immigration, in recent decades primarily from Asia and Latin America. Moreover, the Northeast-Midwest decliner cities would have fallen even further were it not for their own Third World immigration. Before World War II, when all these cities were growing because of European and domestic immigration, the nation had a metaphor to describe the resulting diverse neighborhoods and the national culture they created: the Melting Pot.

The metaphor came from a pro-immigration 1908 Broadway hit play of that name written about the United States by Israel Zangwill, an English novelist, dramatist, and Zionist leader (Zangwill 1914). The metaphor conveyed the ambivalence many Americans, old and new, felt about the controversial immigration of the period; they liked the growth it produced, but worried—often in a racist manner—about its sources and outcome. Even Zangwill, in a 1914 afterword to his play, wrote that "the process of American amalgamation is not assimilation or simple surrender to the dominant type, as is popularly supposed, but an all-round give-and-take by which the final type may be enriched or impoverished" (Zangwill 1914, 203). At the same time, the metaphor captured the unruly but on the whole optimistic vision Americans had of themselves and their futures. In the last two generations the country has largely abandoned the Melting Pot without finding as powerful a new urban or national metaphor to replace it. The consequence has often been considerable discouragement about our cities, our latest immigrants, and our collective prospects. The nation badly needs a contemporary metaphor comparable to the Melting Pot.

The Buffalo Commons and geographical practice

"Regions," writes Marie Price, "are the most common spatial abstractions geographers can create... Having the ability to form mental and textual images of places, to make people see a place anew, is one of the most important contributions geographers make." In her analysis of Venezuela's awareness of its Andean region, she shows that "Regional depictions, crafted with care, affirm the power of narrative description lauded by Yi-Fu Tuan as that 'magical idea that mere words can call places into being,' (Price 1996, 334 and 352, quoting Tuan 1991, 691). Our Buffalo Commons experience convinces us of the usefulness of metaphor as a method to extract meaning from region and enable the public creation of

practical new meaning.

Regions are the concepts and constructs of geographers, but they too often leave to others the invention of metaphors that end up defining regions for the general public. Zangwill offers one example, among many others. The writer Marjory Stoneman Douglas' metaphor of the "river of grass" formed the nation's consciousness of the Florida Everglades (Douglas 1947). The *Chicago Tribune* and its publisher, Colonel Robert McCormick, effectively promoted metropolitan Chicago as Chicagoland from the 1920s through the 1950s. The metaphor of Silicon Valley for the computer-driven San Francisco Peninsula originated in 1971 as the title of a trade press article on the growth of the semiconductor industry in the overall Bay Area (Hoeffler 1971). Since the 1770s Appalachia has at different times been metaphorically portrayed as an Edenic wilderness; a barrier to settlement further west; a frontier to conquer in its own right; a labor battleground, especially in the 1920s-1930s coal wars and current community-organizing struggles; and a site of national moral renewal, most recently in the 1960s heyday of the War on Poverty, VISTA, and the Appalachian Regional Commission (Batteau 1990).

Geographers, especially postmodern cultural geographers, have become quite interested in metaphor (Barnes and Duncan 1992, Cosgrove and Daniels 1993, Cresswell 1997, Duncan and Ley 1993, Smith and Katz 1993) They extract metaphors from landscape, which they see as a text whose form expresses un verbalized intention derived from prior contests (Demeritt 1994). Duncan and Ley write that metaphor is a "dialogue between one's data —other places and other people— and the researcher who is embedded within a particular intellectual and institutional context" (Duncan and Ley 1993, 3). Postmodern cultural geographers analyze the language used to describe landscape; for example, Cosgrove and Domosh (1993) approve the shift of the field's metaphors from gendered and mechanistic ones to those derived from the arts.

Postmodern geographers tend to deconstruct metaphors and regions, to disassemble them into their component parts. Their work uncovers how metaphor is used and misused, shifts over time, and operates to naturalize power relationships and values. They might question, for instance, whom the *Chicago Tribune's* promotion of Chicagoland serves or what experience Silicon Valley omits. These geographers might conclude that promotional boosterisms devised as parts of advertising campaigns may be metaphors, but not ones likely to evoke long-term, controversial, or penetrating discussion. Deconstruction tends to critique existing metaphors.

By contrast, our Buffalo Commons work seeks to construct a new regional metaphor with complexity and generativity, as a term with its own life —ambiguous, edgy, annoying to some, admirable to others. A vital part of developing such a metaphor requires sending it out into the larger world and seeing how it fares there, beyond the influence of its authors. Its terms should be accessible to a wide public who themselves produce different interpretations and actions in response to a common term. Constructing metaphors, when it works, can mean that organizations like the InterTribal Bison Cooperative, the Forest Service, the Nature Conservancy, and individual buffalo ranchers bring the Buffalo Commons to life in part because we named it years earlier. The metaphor allows them all to share in a concept while each gives it their own specific meaning.

The construction approach to regional metaphor thus democratizes and energizes landscape creation precisely because it easily escapes its authors, especially if it gets picked up and used. The authorial inability to tightly manage metaphor's meaning —a result of metaphor's inherent openness to interpretation— is essential. Our work has been most effective when least controlling. We never planned to intervene in the life of the Great Plains. When we first proposed the Buffalo Commons, many people responded to the idea as though we had the power to make it happen (we actually got letters asking where we were planning to locate a fence around the ten- state area), and they resisted. As our lack of power became clear, the resistance diminished, and the emergence of the Buffalo Commons became more likely. The different interpretations have resulted in a more varied, flexible, diverse Buffalo Commons than we could have imagined ourselves. We believe that this approach can be effective in other regions. Further efforts at regional metaphor should help geographers understand more precisely how it works as a method —what is needed for the terms of the metaphor to make them adoptable and adaptable.

South Dakota rancher-writer Linda Hasselstrom. reflects the best Plains tradition —down-to-earth, thoughtful, useful, literate. In *Going Over East* she eloquently portrays the quotidian life of her home place

and ponders its meanings as she moves cattle, passing through gates from pasture to pasture. She writes, "It's easy to romanticize and distort the West; our history invites it." She understands that tendency, but refrains: "Broad generalities and shallow theories confuse and anger me. Reality hinges on practicality, on knowledge that has daily use" (Hasselstrom 1987, 104 and 105). Her stance challenges geography, for conceptualizing a region requires generalities and theories. Regional metaphor offers a method to deepen them, bring them closer to a public that can then make them practical.

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Great Plains Restoration Council (GPRC) works to restore and protect our shattered prairies and plains through developing youth leaders in [Ecological Health](#). Protecting wild nature is a matter of public health, and participating in its hands-on recovery offers therapeutic modalities for many social and physical ills.