

FINDING THE GREAT PLAINS PEOPLE IN THE “BUFFALO COMMONS” PROPOSAL

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that Frank and Deborah Popper's 1987 "Buffalo Commons" proposal urged an exchange of the "plow" for the "buffalo" as the dominant metaphor of Great Plains life. A close textual analysis of the proposal reveals that it constituted the Great Plains "people" through use of Wander's third persona, and ultimately attempted to promote a collective identity that was starkly opposed to how the current residents viewed themselves, effectively seeking to *deconstitute* their identity. This mismatch is posited as part of the reason the proposal was received so negatively and continues to be a controversial subject today.

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I also thank my wife, Hannah Tellmann, who was never afraid to circle a paragraph and write “this doesn’t make sense.”

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Grandma B, who taught me that, aside from the love of the Lord,
there is no greater treasure than education.

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CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

What is the Buffalo Commons?

In 1987, Deborah and Frank Popper published an article in the magazine *Planning* that proposed a new vision for life on the Great Plains. In it, they argued that the way in which the U.S. had attempted to settle and make economic use of the Great Plains region was fundamentally flawed. Rather than continuing the recurrent boom-and-bust cycle of government-supported agriculture, they proposed, parts of the region should depopulate and eventually be returned to a pre-European state of the “Buffalo Commons” (Popper & Popper, 1987). Their proposal quickly made it beyond the pages of *Planning* and was met with outrage by many in the Great Plains. Whether their work was meant to be a serious land-use proposal, an academic think piece, or a deliberate stirring-up of controversy depends on which commentary one reads, but regardless of their intention, the Poppers did not predict the widespread and long-lasting debate that their short piece would cause (Matthews, 1992; Popper & Popper, 1999). Even today, their proposal continues raising questions—and emotions—about the current and future role of the Great Plains region in the social, political, and economic landscape of the United States.

The questions and uncertainties prompted by the Buffalo Commons proposal conflicted with long-held ideas of regional identity that Great Plains people had composed for themselves. As Umberger (2002) pointed out, much of the Buffalo Commons controversy revolved around competing conceptions of the identities of both the residents of the Great Plains and of the Poppers themselves. Matthews (1992) argued that the Buffalo Commons proposal prompted revolutionary-like hostility by people often dependent on how outsiders defined them. At the time, critics of the proposal insisted that the Poppers and their “east-coast” perspectives had no relevance to Great Plains people. The Poppers argued that critics misunderstood their proposal:

“Our most extreme critics actually believed that we advocated forced depopulation, seizure of private property, and economic shutdown of most or all of the Great Plains” (Popper & Popper, 1994, p. 93).

In short, the often-criticized Buffalo Commons proposal challenged Great Plains people to redefine their identity according to values and attitudes about land use, as well as their historical role in the settling of the United States. Today, tensions around regional identity continue in the Great Plains through voices for and against oil development, economic diversification, and economic challenges created by declining commodity prices for both energy and agricultural products. As such, the identities of Great Plains people are presently and continuously influenced by outside corporate, industrial, and economic interests in much the same way as they were 30 years ago and throughout much of the region’s post-European-contact history.

The Poppers and their Respondents

When the Poppers published their proposal, Frank Popper was the chair of the urban studies department at Rutgers University, where Deborah Popper was a graduate student in geography. Prior to the unexpected attention to their Buffalo Commons proposal, Frank Popper’s publications dealt primarily with other land use issues, particularly “locally unwanted land uses” (Popper F. J., 1985), as well as how to manage urban decay and rural land policy and poverty. As in his later work on the Great Plains, his writing sought to reconcile land use motivated by individual desire versus use informed by consideration of sustainability and long-term consequences.

Given the Poppers’ research interests, *Planning* served as a suitable publication outlet for their ideas. Frank Popper had been published in the magazine multiple times before their

landmark proposal, and both he and Deborah have been published in it several times since.

Planning is a monthly magazine published by the American Planning Association, an organization of planning professionals in the United States. The organization describes itself on its website as “helping planners shape the course of planning by providing safer and healthier communities, a better commute, greater choice of housing, and places of lasting value” (American Planning Association, 2017). A cursory review of article titles from the last eight years indicates that the magazine is chiefly concerned with planning in small and large urban areas, but that repurposing and renewal of areas in decline is also a frequent subject.

The proposal’s journey from the pages of a professional magazine to the public consciousness is somewhat obscure, but has been traced by multiple authors to North Dakota, where either a city planner mentioned it to a reporter (Margolis, 1993), or a staffer in North Dakota Governor George Sinner’s office happened upon the piece and circulated it among his or her coworkers (Matthews, 1992). Soon, Governor George Sinner was mentioning it in political speeches as evidence of how poorly eastern academics understood the region (Margolis, 1993). Politicians in other Great Plains states took up the strain, and both the Poppers’ offices and those of regional newspapers saw a swell of letters from residents, economic planners, and public figures largely, though not exclusively, in opposition to the idea of a Buffalo Commons. Kansas Governor Mike Hayden, for example, was particularly forceful in his denouncement, saying “Tell the Poppers that America’s Great Plains do not equal the Sahara....Why not seal off declining urban areas as well, and preserve them as museums of 20th-century architecture?” (Matthews, 1990, p. 9). The Poppers did not shy away from the attention, and came to spend years accepting invitations to speak about and debate their work across the Great Plains (Matthews, 1992).

Despite this enthusiasm for speaking engagements, the Poppers' identity as "eastern academics" did little to ingratiate them with the people of the Great Plains. As Associated Press writer Mike Feinsilber put it: "If Deborah Epstein Popper and Frank Popper weren't from New Jersey, it might be easier to win converts to their notion that the Great Plains ought to be emptied of people and given back to the buffalo and the tall grasses" (1989). Their academic credentials meant little in a region whose residents embraced the agricultural yeoman as their primary symbol, an identity that prized pastoral traits like friendliness, independence, morality, modesty, and working the land over (perceived) urban sensibilities (Shortridge, 1988). Also problematic was a cultural divide between the Great Plains and the East that Shortridge traced back to the financial crisis of the 1890s, which saw widespread defaults on loans from eastern financiers to Plains settlers. Hard feelings resulted on both sides, and still persist as an undercurrent in contemporary issues: "Easterners saw plainsmen as irresponsible; plainsmen viewed easterners as heartless exploiters" (Shortridge, 1988, p. 216).

Reasons for the Proposal and for this Study

Basis and development of Buffalo Commons

According to Matthews (1992), who spent a year with the Poppers as they toured the Great Plains to promote and defend the Buffalo Commons, their interest in the Great Plains came largely from a feeling of disgust and hopelessness at the environmental prospects of their part of the country—New Jersey. "I'm interested in the American West because change still feels possible there, unlike the bleak and difficult East" (p. 12), Matthews recounted Frank Popper explaining as he looked over the skyline visible from the roof of the building that housed his office at Rutgers. The Great Plains could still be saved, if only policy there could avoid the type of mistakes that had become irreversible in other parts of the country. However, as evidenced by

responses like those mentioned above, most Great Plains voices had little interest in the salvation that the Poppers offered.

In response to the hostility against proposing the need for “reimagining” residents’ relationship to the region, the Poppers refined their work over the next decade and explained that the Buffalo Commons was a *metaphor*, a new perspective for Great Plains community planners to reimagine the region (Popper & Popper, 1994). Rather than a specific program to save the Great Plains from “inevitable disaster” (Popper & Popper, 1987, p.12), they now saw the Buffalo Commons as a regional metaphor that could support a number of business, development, and conservation decisions. The Poppers claimed that the region’s history, narratives, literature, and art reflects a “basic cyclical pattern that in effect combined growth and decline” (Popper & Popper, 1999), a pattern that could be averted through embracing the metaphor they now proposed. While invoking metaphor made their proposal more broadly applicable and more difficult to outright oppose, it also introduced a degree of ambiguity. What exactly were the Poppers now suggesting? This ambiguity, the Poppers claimed, was one of the strengths of the metaphor, allowing others to find their own meaning in it (Popper & Popper, 1999). Over time, the metaphorical conception of the Buffalo Commons became so prominent that Bollier (2012) argued that its ambiguity “helped foster accord between groups of individuals who were otherwise deeply divided” (para. 8) and “provoked a highly valuable social conversation about the shared future of people, the land and other forms of life” (para. 9).

Benefits of this study

While the Poppers’ proposal generated a great deal of public and political opinion, academic analysis of the text *as rhetorical discourse* is scant. The limited discussions that do exist have largely focused on the media’s coverage of the proposal (Umberger, 2002), individual

reactions to it (Rees, 2005), or the technical land-use metrics cited by the Poppers (DeBres & Guizlo, 1992; DeBres & Kromm, 1993). So far, the proposal has not received treatment as a rhetorical text in its own right, a “discourse that makes complete statements, draws conclusions, points out implications, and suggests evaluations” (Campbell & Burkholder, 1997, p. 12). This study addresses this absence by examining the rhetoric of the Buffalo Commons proposal and extracting its constitutive and ideological functions. After this analysis, these characteristics are compared to local responses, and the resulting implications for the identity of a Great Plains “people.”

The Great Plains is certainly not the only region in North America that faces uncomfortable questions about the intersection of geography and regional identity. In his book *American Nations*, Woodard (2011) chronicled the history of what he identifies as 11 American “nations”—regional identities formed by history, place, and attitudes—as well as their ongoing conflicts with each other and how these conflicts shape the American state. McClay (2014) pursued this attachment to place on a more individual level, writing that “there is no evading the fact that we human beings have a profound need for ‘thereness’” (p. 2), and that anything that disrupts our constructed sense of place causes significant psychological and emotional stress. I propose that the Buffalo Commons proposal and response is an example of this sort of disruption. By studying the Buffalo Commons, we gain a greater understanding of how these regional identities are formed, enter into conflict with each other, and respond to challenges. This understanding will in turn inform future conversations about identity and geography in other parts of North America and the world.

While the Buffalo Commons proposal is at the time of this writing almost 30 years old, references to it are still surprisingly frequent, indicating its continued relevance. As recently as

July 2016, McCook, Nebraska has branded itself the “Capital of the Buffalo Commons” as a defiant rejection of the idea of a dwindling prairie. Beyond matters of regional pride, questions of what to do about a boom/bust economy have recently become salient again. Much of the Great Plains (particularly western North Dakota, the site of a much-discussed and recently stymied oil boom), finds itself again on the probable backend of a boom/bust cycle predicated by the decline of externally controlled commodity prices. As eyes again turn to the economic situation of the Great Plains, plans for stabilizing a volatile economy will come to the fore, along with discussions of what it means to be a resident of the area.

This study brings focus to how rhetors influence—intentionally or not—the formation of regional identity through metaphorical discourse framed by geography, place, and space. Some effects of the Poppers’ ideas on Great Plains residents are well known: They were met largely with ire and derision at the time, and continue to be invoked as strawmen in relation to narratives of successful economic growth. What’s less clear are the implications of this effect for the larger ongoing negotiation of identity by the people of the Great Plains. By most accounts (e.g. Umberger, Reese, and the Poppers themselves), the Poppers never intended Great Plains residents to be the audience for their piece, or for it to be interpreted as a serious land-use proposal with any real force. However, their story stands as a reminder that rhetors don’t always get to choose their audience.

This analysis will also help the field better understand the nature, limits, and extension of constitutive rhetoric with metaphors of place, space, and geography. The Great Plains region has ambiguous boundaries, no formal political affiliation, and broad cultural roots, but, within the context of the Buffalo Commons controversy, is often cast as the home of a single “people.” How the Poppers’ proposal contributed to this constitution is an important piece of the larger

picture of how rhetoric creates a “people” where there were none before. Through this analysis, I examine the Poppers’ rhetoric to identify how they constitute an idea of the Great Plains as a people in relation to place and space. Starting from here will help us understand why the Poppers’ proposal had such a cultural impact, and how it, as well as similar external forces, continues to affect the constitution of Great Plains identity.

Methods

My critical perspective in this analysis can most closely be described as dramatistic. As Campbell and Burkholder (1997) describe it, a dramatistic perspective "stresses the importance of language-based identification that calls into being recognition of commonalities among individuals and groups" and "is particularly attuned to the aesthetic, ethical, and ideological dimensions of using symbols" (p. 97). Taking a primarily dramatistic perspective allows this analysis to focus on the structure and form of the Buffalo Commons proposal, as well as the symbols within that structure and how they interact to produce identification and division.

Theoretical basis

This project focuses on two rhetorical constructs relevant to the Buffalo Commons proposal. The first is the constitution of rhetorical identity as prompted by the Buffalo Commons. The second is how metaphors present within the Buffalo Commons proposal influence the formation of the collective identity of Great Plains people, or in the words of White (1985), “the art of constituting character, community, and culture in language” (p. 37).

The heart of the Buffalo Commons controversy lies at the intersection of identity and geography. Prior work on the constitutive nature of rhetoric (Charland, 1987; McGee, 1975) provides tools to analyze how identity is brought into being through discourse. In the case considered here, competing rhetorics offer conflicting ideas of identity. Similarly, metaphor

brings geography into the realm of the rhetorical. By using these theories in analytical concert, this project explores the constitutive rhetorical relationship between identity and geography, and its facilitation of metaphoric rhetorical theory.

Rhetorically constituting a people is inextricably bound up in the idea of ideology. For to substantiate a people, the rhetor creates “not a description of *reality*, but rather a political *myth*” (McGee, 1975, p. 241). The success or failure of constituting a people depends on how masses of persons respond to the suggested myth. Charland (1987) further suggested that constitutive rhetoric works through a series of ideological effects, ultimately resulting in a transhistorical collective subject bound to fulfill a particular destiny. Given this close association with ideology, this analysis incorporates aspects of ideological criticism. This method, according to Foss (2009), is chiefly concerned with the “beliefs, values, and assumptions” that an artifact suggests beyond the surface (p. 209). The Buffalo Commons proposal is plainly value-laden in terms of the social benefits of land use, historical practices, and the concept of a “people.” By applying a degree of ideological criticism, this analysis brings these beliefs and values to the fore, with particular emphasis on how those ideologies are used to construct a people of the current residents of the Great Plains.

Analytical methods

The Poppers have written extensively about the Buffalo Commons since their original proposal. While this analysis takes into account the subsequent development of the Poppers’ work, it is the original publication that caused the most controversy and that continued to be discussed for years to come by both opposing and supporting parties. For this reason, I focus on the original appearance of the Buffalo Commons proposal, formally titled “The Great Plains: From Dust to Dust.” After analyzing the proposal itself, I examine responses from local residents

in the form of letters to the editor, editorials, and opinion pieces in local and regional newspapers across the Great Plains. Including such responses expands this analysis's perspective of Great Plains identity beyond the merely academic. Perhaps more so than literary and academic work, these responses provide a more immediate and visceral perspective of the feelings and reactions of those who opposed the Poppers' work. I have selected newspaper artifacts primarily by availability, using both physical and Internet-accessible archives to seek responses from almost all of the Great Plains states, ranging in time from immediately after the Poppers' work became public to less than a year prior to this writing. I continued collecting examples until I reached a sort of thematic saturation, in which no significantly new ideas were evident in further responses. By including artifacts from both sides of the controversy, this analysis will present as complete as possible a picture of the tensions over Great Plains identity prompted by the Buffalo Commons idea, as well as insight into how the Buffalo Commons has and continues to influence the ongoing negotiation of Great Plains identity.

This study primarily uses close textual analysis, along with aspects of metaphorical and ideological analysis, to explore the rhetorical construction of identity in and prompted by the Buffalo Commons proposal. Campbell and Burkholder (1997) describe a four-stage method of rhetorical criticism consisting of descriptive analysis, historical-contextual analysis, selection of a critical perspective, and evaluation. While not presented as a linear progression through each of the four stages, I have employed a similar method, describing the elements of the Poppers' work, putting that work into the social-historical context of the region and of the controversy that ensued after the proposal's publication, selecting an appropriate critical perspective, and finally reaching an evaluative stage that allows us to learn more about the nature of rhetoric and identity through the Buffalo Commons.

In the initial descriptive analysis stage, I strive to heed Campbell and Burkholder's (1997) exhortation to "consider a rhetorical act on its own terms, not to approach it with prejudgments and prior assumptions" (p. 18). I first conduct a descriptive analysis of the Buffalo Commons proposal text itself, with attention toward purpose, persona, audience, tone, structure, and support (Campbell & Burkholder, 1997). Given the proto-analysis occasioned by the preparatory research and the goals of this study, in this part of the process I also identify themes, references, and associations with (1) identity and (2) metaphors associated with place and space.

The second stage of the analytical process places the text within the appropriate historical-cultural context by extending the exploration of supporting materials, commentaries, and responses that have been previewed here. I give primary consideration to those materials that deal directly with the question of identity and metaphor, especially those that highlight the contested nature of such concepts within the Buffalo Commons conversation. This part of the analysis also takes into account extrinsic elements that affected the generation and refinement of the Poppers' rhetorical choices, including characteristics of the Poppers themselves, their expected and actual audiences for their work, reactions to the proposal, and regional-economic factors.

As detailed at the beginning of this chapter, I take a dramatic perspective in my analysis. This selection is the result of careful and thorough analysis in the first and second stages (Campbell & Burkholder, 1997). This stage of the process is inherently reflective, and inevitably involves the critic's interests and biases. However, Campbell and Burkholder remind us that "Good criticism ... is not purely and simply the subjective reaction of a critic to a rhetorical act" (p. 74). It is still incumbent upon the critic to clearly justify his or her methods, analysis, and conclusions. Choosing the appropriate critical perspective frames the conclusions

this analysis reaches regarding the intersection of geography and rhetorically constituted identity on the Great Plains, as well as its implications on larger questions of how we use symbols to influence one another.

Ethical considerations and limitations

The primary ethical dimension of this analysis is academic integrity, especially given my admitted close attachment to the Great Plains, having been born and raised in the region. In his chapter on ideographic criticism, Lee (2009) makes clear that “The ideological predispositions of the critic will always influence the nature of the criticism” (p. 313). While this is a fact unavoidable, this analysis makes every possible effort to construct a clear argument that is supported by the text, as well as a clear justification for the theoretical perspective employed in arriving at the argument. This is accomplished not by ignoring or suppressing the author’s background and biases, but rather acknowledging them and considering how they affect my analysis.

CHAPTER TWO. LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to analyze the Buffalo Commons proposal as rhetoric, it is important to understand the context surrounding it as a proposal, then as a metaphor, and the public reaction to it broadly. The following chapter provides this context by looking at prior academic work on the proposal, key aspects of Great Plains identity, relevant concepts in the rhetorical construction of “peoples” and identities, and the intimate connection between metaphor and geography.

Prior Academic Work on the Buffalo Commons

Disagreement over how to characterize the great grassy expanse in the middle of our country long predates the Buffalo Commons controversy. Foundational myths of the Great Plains—as either desert or as garden, go back to the early days of American settlement. Prior to the Civil War, the area was reputed by many to be a vast desert, an obstacle to be endured as settlers traveled to significantly more promising and infinitely more accommodating regions west of the Rocky Mountains. In the years after the Civil War, as the major railroads encouraged settlement to advance their own business interests, a view of the Great Plains as the garden of the world, hungry for the plow, was enthusiastically advanced (Allen, 1985). However, these myths have been contested at all points in history. As Allen warned us, “To claim the universal acceptance, at any given time, of stereotyped images of the Great Plains is to ignore—as the holders of those myths themselves ignored—the presence of a considerable array of data to the contrary” (p. 208).

The Poppers drew from the contested nature of the Great Plains settlement in proposing a new vision of the future of the region. Once their proposal moved beyond the pages of *Planning* and into the public conversation, it was received negatively by residents and politicians of the Great Plains. Recognizing that the news media played as much a role as the proposal itself in the

ensuing controversy, Umberger (2002) examined the role of the media in both communicating and creating the story of conflict over the Buffalo Commons proposal. Her analysis suggested that newspapers characterized the Great Plains people as “yokels, pioneers, or experts, defending the Great Plains as garden” (p. 103), standing in opposition to the Poppers as eastern academics who were determined to force their ivory-tower ideas upon them. Umberger began to explore how the creation of these stock character roles for the Great Plains people severely limits the action that they are able to take in the narrative. In this way, the identity created for the Great Plains people by the newspapers becomes real in its effect on their agency. Umberger also incorporated, albeit lightly, the idea of political myths into her analysis, noting that the conflict was often cast as those who believed in the Great Plains as garden on one side, versus those who believed in the Great Plains as desert on the other.

Taking a different approach to a similar question, Rees (2005) combined interviews with the Poppers, examination of their Buffalo Commons work, and interviews with Nebraska residents about their memories and lingering feelings about the Buffalo Commons proposal. Like Umberger, Rees’ work presents a nuanced struggle between competing ideas of the Great Plains region and its relationship to outside academics. As in print media accounts, her interviews revealed that much of the Buffalo Commons controversy had to do with what it meant to be a Great Plains people. Rees noted that some residents felt “the Buffalo Commons proposal was, at least on the surface, in conflict with a sense of region held by its residents” (p. 168).

Rees’s work provides valuable insight into the proposal’s reception by one Nebraska town, but is limited in that it treats the situation as if it was purely a case of residents’ emotional, ideological reaction to an essentially objective proposal that told a quantitatively undeniable story of decline. Rees described the Poppers’ work as a “pointed, hardheaded, and unrelenting”

proposal that used “specific quantitative measures” to “save the region” (p. 170). By framing the interaction of competing definitions as simply whether or not the residents were “realistic about their past and the possibilities for their futures” (p. 170), the piece looks at only part of a larger story.

While Umberger and Rees represent the only immediately available *rhetorical* analyses of the Buffalo Commons controversy, a variety of other scholars have approached the Poppers’ work from different viewpoints, both in the years directly following the original proposal and more recently. Notably, many of these analyses (DeBres & Guizlo, 1992; DeBres & Kromm, 1993; Dudley, 1990; Harrington, 2009) interpreted the Buffalo Commons as a literal land-use proposal, having either been written before the Poppers further developed their ideas or simply not taking the metaphorical maturation of the proposal into account. While these explorations vary in tone and character, a number of the same criticisms and lauds appear across multiple examples.

DeBres and Guizlo (1992), writing only five years after the Buffalo Commons proposal was published, were pointed in their criticism, accusing the Poppers of making “somewhat facile assumptions” (p. 165) and having a “tendency for sweeping generalizations” (p. 168). Specifically, the authors charged the Poppers with favoring vivid language over careful description in painting a picture of the Great Plains, choosing particular words and examples that presented a bleak picture. They, along with later authors (Harrington, 2009), also criticize the Poppers’ methodology, claiming that the variables they used to identify land-use distress (population loss, population density, age, poverty, and construction investment) are not land-use metrics. By using socio-economic indicators as a substitute for land-use indicators, these critics say, the Buffalo Commons proposal exhibits an urban-growth bias. Finally, DeBres and Guizlo

claim that the Poppers failed to recognize the possible implications of their proposal for the residents of the Great Plains.

However, even those authors most strident in their negative evaluation of the Buffalo Commons proposal acknowledged that it has served a useful function in alerting the region to environmental, ecological, and social problems (DeBres & Guizlo, 1992; DeBres & Kromm, 1993). Dudley (1990) went so far as to call the proposal “a serendipitous example of using rational planning to solve a natural resource problem” (p. 120). Similarly, Price (2010) called the Poppers’ creation of a regional metaphor a “powerful example of how regional constructions can provide a spatial framework within which to understand and address complex problems” (p. 461).

The Great Plains

Before beginning a discussion of the Great Plains, we encounter a problem of geographic definition. Where, and by extension *who*, are we talking about when we say “the Great Plains?” Though many Great Plains residents, especially on the central and northern Plains, may casually consider themselves to be a part of the “Midwest,” discussing Great Plains identity requires a careful distinction between the two regions, while admitting that they overlap. The eastern border of the Great Plains is notoriously difficult to pin down (Frazier, 1989). Most writers looking specifically at the Great Plains region (including the Poppers) use Webb’s (1931) definition, which begins at roughly the 98th parallel and extends to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Webb’s geographic criteria for inclusion are three characteristics of the land: flat, treeless, and semi-arid.

It is appropriate to start with geography when discussing Great Plains identity for, perhaps more than any other American region, the identity of this region’s residents is

unavoidably attached to the land. Woodard (2011), who considers the Great Plains to be part of a larger region extending almost to the west coast, wrote “[This region] is the only one where environmental factors truly trumped ethnic ones” (p. 12). The severity and remoteness of the region “effectively destroyed” those who tried to apply the lifestyles of eastern America. This difficulty meant that only large-scale government and corporate ventures could effectively settle the land, leading to the region’s identity as an “internal colony, exploited and despoiled for the benefit of the seaboard [regions]” (p. 12). Even today, the region struggles to ameliorate the tension between by-the-bootstraps individualism and dependence on corporate and government largesse.

Especially among those who approach the Great Plains and the Midwest from a literary perspective (Cella, 2015; Quantic, 1995; Pichaske, 2006), identity and sense of place is constructed both according and in opposition to the wide, harsh space of the surrounding landscape. The reality of unforgiving conditions leaves little room for high-minded philosophy or subtle discussion of beauty. As Quantic described it, “philosophical speculations on good and evil, social niceties, and class distinctions are insignificant against the reality of a landscape created from [empty] space” (p. 168). Instead, the Great Plains focus is on *character*. So important is the character that comes from making a life on the Plains that Cella (2015) described the sense of place as a “crucible” that approximates a religious conversion experience. Heroes in Plains literature are not those who conquer the land, but those who adapt to it.

This idea of *ascetic adaptation* also features prominently in more rhetorical, historical, and ethnographic explorations of the region (Webb, 1931; Gilbreath, 2012; Opie, 1998). Having to endure climatic extremes, isolation, and the ever-present specter of poverty are seen not just as hazards of living on the Plains, but as the very things that make up the identity of its residents.

The innovation necessary for survival and sustained human settlement becomes characteristic of the region itself (Webb, 1931). Any admission of failure or abandoning of a homestead is seen as both unpatriotic and sinful (Opie, 1998). This unwillingness to consider alternatives, according to Gilbreath (2012), has prevented many shrinking communities in the region from taking advantage of development opportunities presented by outside interests.

Across inquiry methods, a final prominent theme in Great Plains identity is *opposition to outsiders*. From the beginning of European settlement on the Plains, the region has never truly been self-determining. Driven by eastern powers interested in shaping the future of the country, fulfilling Manifest Destiny, and finding somewhere to put less desirable citizens, the railroads and federal and state governments encouraged people from throughout the east coast and Europe to settle the Great Plains, often using wildly inaccurate descriptions of the area (Emmons, 1971). Even after settlement, settlers on the Plains were at the mercy of eastern-owned railroads and mills for their livelihood, fostering resentment which occasionally boiled over in fits of populism. As a result of what Shortridge (1984) calls an “inferiority complex,” many aspects of Plains identity (safety, community, hard work) are constructed in order to draw contrast with outsiders, particularly easterners and city-dwellers (Pichaske, 2006).

Peoples and Identities

Earlier in this piece, I cited Charland and McGee to support this analysis’s use of ideological criticism. Their work is equally important to lay the foundation for the exploration of the Great Plains identities proposed by the Poppers and their opponents. In speaking about a people, a rhetor may not just be speaking *of* that people, but actually calling them, as a “people,” into existence. In his seminal analysis of the rhetoric of the Quebec sovereignty movement, Charland (1987) showed how addressing an audience as “a people” legitimizes them rhetorically.

By speaking of a people where there was none before, the rhetor can make that people real by addressing them, for to be addressed there must be someone to address. In this way, the existence of a rhetorical subject is already a rhetorical effect. Importantly, the existence of the addressed people doesn't just extend forward from the point at which the rhetor calls them into being, but exists as a "transhistorical" subject inserted into an already ongoing narrative. This existence in a narrative allows the rhetor to propose an action that the people must take in order to fulfill the trajectory of their history.

Charland's work builds on McGee (1975), who explored how appeals to "the people" are, in reality, the creation of political myth. As McGee described it, such a myth can be fleeting: "...they are conjured into objective reality, remain so long as the rhetoric which defined them has force, and in the end wilt away, becoming once again merely a collection of individuals" (p. 242). While these myths remain in force, they exist in competition with all other myths that conflict with them. From this vantage point, we may view the Buffalo Commons proponents and opponents as champions of competing myths, both of which carry different implications for the people created by the myth. "Indeed, 'the people' *are* the social and political myths they accept," wrote McGee (p. 247). But one cannot arrive at a clear view of a people by analyzing a single myth; rather the rhetorician can best form an image of a people by analyzing the tensions created by competing myths.

While McGee and Charland adequately demonstrate that audiences in the form of "peoples" can be called into being by a rhetor, other scholars' work suggests that it is not just the addressed, the audience, who can be brought into being using only words. Black (1970) wrote that, while we have long taken it for granted that the existence of a discourse implies an author, less attention has been paid to the fact that a discourse also implies an auditor. Called by Black

“the second persona,” this implied auditor is “a model of what the rhetor would have his real auditor become” (Black, 1970, p. 113). This perspective can help us work with the unintentional nature of the Buffalo Commons proposal. Published in a somewhat obscure professional magazine, the Poppers likely didn’t intend to be speaking to the people in the region they were writing about. But insight into their implied auditor can yield insight into the effects of being disseminated among non-ideal auditors. Importantly, Black said that this implied auditor can be linked to a particular ideology, which can provide the tools to make judgments about the discourse.

The Buffalo Commons proposal spends much more time talking about the landscape of the Great Plains than it does about the people who dwell therein. However, this relative silence can itself speak volumes. Wander (1984) contributed yet another persona to the list of audiences that can be invoked by a discourse. His “third persona” includes “audiences not present, audiences rejected or negated through the speech and/or the speaking situation” (p. 369). Whether or not this audience was originally present or even addressed by the speaker is irrelevant; they exist, said Wander “in the silences of a text” (p. 375). Through analyzing the audiences implied, even constituted, by their conspicuous absence in a text, we can further understand the rhetor’s view of their audience’s identity.

Metaphor, Identity, Place, and Geography

Stated simply, metaphor is stating one thing in terms of another. In his work to explicate a procedure for identifying metaphors, Steen (2002) wrote, "When identifying a metaphor as metaphor, the question is whether it is possible at all to construct a nonliteral comparison statement, analogy and mapping between two domains conceptualized as two different domains. If it is, then the expression ought to be included as metaphorical" (p. 25). Osborn (1967)

encouraged rhetoricians in particular to identify metaphors, since "...a fresh and sensitive look at the figurative language of a speech, focusing especially upon its metaphors, might yield a product rich and useful as some similar ventures in literary criticism" (p. 348). Prompted by the Poppers' later encouragement to view the Buffalo Commons proposal as metaphoric, and by the belief that metaphors allow the rhetor to identify concepts in terms favorable to them (Ivie, 1987), this analysis deliberately identifies and explicates the metaphors in its selected text.

Identifying metaphors is vital to understanding how a discourse relates to its audience, especially when the meaning of the metaphors is contested. Butterworth (2007) reminds us of this in his essay exploring George W. Bush's use of the Iraqi Olympic soccer team as a symbol of America's beneficence in bringing "freedom and democracy" as part of a traditional sports/war metaphor. Players on the Iraqi team protested this appropriation of their success, and ultimately the metaphor "did little to legitimize democracy in Iraq or to enrich it in the United States" (p. 388). The success or failure of a metaphor depends, at least in part, on acceptance of the metaphor by those invoked in the discourse.

Ivie (1987) proposes a basic method of identifying key metaphors within a text. A critic must become familiar with the text and context, followed by close readings of the text in order to identify figurative vehicles used by the speaker. Multiple close readings are paramount, as "each reading yields previously overlooked vehicles as the critic becomes more sensitized to figurative terms disguised initially by their seemingly literal usage" (p. 167). Identified vehicles are then grouped according to metaphorical concept before the concepts can be analyzed for patterns guiding the speaker's use of the term.

The most important development of the Buffalo Commons proposal—its maturation into metaphor—is also one of its most challenging aspects. Viewing the Buffalo Commons as

metaphor can make criticism more difficult. As Booth (1978) explained: “Metaphor has by now been defined in so many ways that there is no human expression ... that would not be metaphoric in *someone’s* definition” (p. 50). Indeed, the Poppers seem to cite any development that involves buffalo as evidence that their metaphor has taken hold, from the growth of buffalo ranching operations to businesses using “buffalo” in their names (Popper & Popper, 1999). In light of such ambiguity, how can one possibly hope to evaluate the rhetorical function of such a metaphor?

Clearly, the Buffalo Commons as metaphor is not a simple metaphor in the same way that a statement such as “my boss is a tyrant” is. Rather than a single statement that corresponds to a single other statement or small group of associations, it is a contextual current which runs throughout the text. Werth (1994) called such metaphors “extended metaphors.” These metaphors create “a text-world ... a conceptual space, containing all the information necessary to participate in a given discourse” (p. 90). Vital to this way of viewing metaphor is the notion that metaphors go beyond just the tenor and the vehicle, but that the combination of the literal and figurative creates a new third way of seeing the discourse. This is the clearest way to view the Poppers’ use of metaphor, as it allows the discourse to be simultaneously viewed from more than one perspective, opening itself up to multiple interpretations, all of which may still be true to the rhetor’s intention in the text-world they’ve created. Oswald and Rihs (2014) argued that extended metaphors are particularly well-suited to crafting persuasive political arguments, as the metaphor, through repetition and instantiation in different ways, comes to provide evidence for its own legitimacy. In short, by creating a collection of examples that are drawn from the initial metaphor, those examples point back to the plausibility of the metaphor itself.

While the use of extended metaphor can be ambiguous and far-reaching, it is by no means inscrutable. Booth (1978) provided some clarity to the use of metaphors, extended or

otherwise, by encouraging critics to examine the intent and purpose of the speaker behind the metaphor. He explained that “the metaphors we care for most are always embedded in metaphoric structures that finally both depend on and constitute selves and societies” (p. 63). That is to say, all metaphors create an identity both for the society in which the metaphor exists and for the rhetors themselves, while simultaneously being dependent on those identities for the metaphor’s meaning. By asking what sort of self and what sort of society a metaphor is proposing, we gain insight into both the metaphor itself and the rhetor. Osborne (1967) explained how archetypal metaphors seek to activate “basic motivational energies” of an audience, bending those energies toward acting on a speaker’s recommendations (p. 116). In particular, light-dark metaphors can be used to create a sense of inevitability about the subject at hand, encouraging the audience to conclude that a particular outcome is inevitable unless (or only if) they act on the speaker’s position. The Poppers’ Buffalo Commons metaphor is clearly predicated on this sort of inevitability, suggesting a particular group of approaches necessary to avoid otherwise-unavoidable and cyclical disaster.

In addition to creating identities and motivations for an audience, metaphors applied to geography influence the social meaning of the land itself. In his exploration of natural spaces as texts, Schmitt (2012) wrote “The language used to describe a place and the memories or legends recounted surrounding that place can shape meanings and emotions of the place for an individual and a group in a kind of linguistic place-construction” (p. 29). If we, like Schmitt, consider natural environments as “readable, fluid texts in their own right” (p. 32), then the Poppers’ work becomes not merely a metaphor to encourage land management practices, but an attempt to shape a people’s understanding of the land’s history and their relationship to it, and thus the identity of the people themselves. Collective identities are built on a foundation of moral

propositions that, among other things, define what is desirable and undesirable (Schopflin, 2010). One of the most powerful ways to establish such propositions is through the use of metaphors that suggest a timeless connection to the natural way of the world, such as blood, kinship, and the land. While Schopflin is somewhat dismissive, saying that such metaphors are “profoundly suggestive, but are, in reality, only metaphors” (p. 53), the foregoing discussion clearly demonstrates that no metaphors are ever “only” metaphors. This analysis focuses on these constitutions of speaker, audience, land, and collectives to explore what the metaphor of the Buffalo Commons means for the identity of the Great Plains people.

CHAPTER THREE. ANALYSIS

My primary method in this study is close textual analysis. This method of analysis allows the critic to “focus on the rhetorical action embodied in particular discourses” (Leff, 1986, p. 378) by focusing on the significance of the rhetorical elements of the text itself. Advocated and applied by critics such as Leff (1988) and Lucas (1988; 1990), a “close reading” of a text can “reveal and explicate the precise, often hidden, mechanisms that give a particular text artistic unity and rhetorical effect” (Burghardt, 2010, p. 199). Critics using this method “linger over words, verbal images, elements of style, sentences, argument patterns, and entire paragraphs and larger discursive units with the text to explore their significance on multiple levels” (Jasinski, 2001, p. 93).

As the following sections show, a close examination of the rhetors’ choices related to structure, audience, persona, and metaphor provides a detailed familiarity with the text/context and initially offers insight into why the proposal was so ill-received. I supplement the close-textual analysis with assistance from two rhetorical interpretive frames: ideographic analysis as prompted by Black (1970) and Wander (1984), and metaphoric analysis. I use the three ideological effects of constitutive rhetoric as proposed by Charland (1987) to better explicate the function of constitutive rhetoric within the proposal.

My close-textual analysis proceeds in two primary steps: First I conduct a descriptive analysis that details rhetorical elements in the Buffalo Commons proposal and how these elements function to shape rhetorical appeal. As I detail below, this descriptive analysis reveals the symbolic potential of two prominent themes related to constitutive identity and its metaphoric significance. Second, the focus on identity and metaphor that emerges from the descriptive analysis guides my discussion of viewing the Buffalo Commons proposal as an

example of constitutive rhetoric, and how this example both affirms and challenges the model originally proposed by Charland.

Descriptive Analysis

Structure

Broadly speaking, the Buffalo Commons proposal uses a combination of *historical-chronological* and *problem-solution* structures to advance its rhetorical ends. In doing so, it brings particular emphasis to the development and increasing intractability of the Great Plains problem and the need to discover a solution, using a common problem-solution structure found in many rhetorical appeals (Campbell & Burkholder, 1997). The Poppers' work has been characterized by some reviewers (Matthews, 1992; Rees, 2005) as coldly academic and analytical. These authors attribute this data-driven approach as the reason behind much of the negative response from Plainsfolk. But a close examination suggests that the proposal reads less like an academic treatise and more like an indictment of the crimes of the Great Plains people.

Roughly the first half of the piece is spent recounting the post-European history of the region. This shared history is a repeated abuse and overuse of the Plains' resources, as the settlers and their descendants ignore obvious signs from the land and from history. This idea of cyclical boom-and-bust is introduced as the organizing principle of Plains history early on in the essay: "Federally subsidized settlement and cultivation repeatedly led to overgrazing and over-plowing (sodbusting, in Plains terms)" (p. 12). The authors then describe how each successive generation repeats the same mistakes: "the Dust Bowl in 1934 ... was the ecological consequence of earlier decades of too-assertive agriculture" (p. 12). Not only do the participants in this history repeatedly damage the environment, but they refuse to learn lessons about the consequences, as in a passage describing the 1970s: "The lessons of the 1930s were forgotten as agricultural

commodity prices rose rapidly. Plains farmers and ranchers once again chopped down their windbreaks, planted from fencepost to fencepost, and sodbusted in the classic 1880s-1910s manner" (p. 14). The indictment is brought to a head and summarized in the proposal's 27th paragraph:

Responding to nationally based market imperatives, they have overgrazed and overplowed the land and overdrawn the water. Responding to the usually increasing federal subsidies, they have overused the natural resources the subsidies provided. They never created a truly stable agriculture or found reliable conservation devices. In some places, private owners supplemented agriculture with inherently unstable energy and mineral development. (p. 16)

Notable in the above excerpt is the repeated use of the word "they." Through repetition of this word, the authors make clear that, whatever else can be said about them, the Great Plains people are not 'in the room,' are not a part of the conversation at hand. The first two sentences allow that outside forces affected the decisions they made in these situations: they responded to market imperatives and the availability of federal subsidies. The next two sentences, however, provide no such opportunity to share the blame. The long history of settling the Great Plains has led only to unstable institutions that attempt to extract from the land more than it can offer.

Following the narrative-culminating charges, the Poppers move into the proposed solution to the Great Plains. Notably, this solution does not actively involve those whom they've just cast as a group that shares a history. Instead, the solution is to embrace this group's inevitable decline. Only then can "the nation" begin the process of erasing the sins of the Great Plains people and earning redemption for the nation as a whole: "The overall desertion will largely run its course. At that point, the only way to keep the Plains from turning into an utter

wasteland, an American Empty Quarter, will be for the federal government to step in and buy the land—in short, to deprivatize it.” (p. 16). The essay ends by leaving no question as to the value of the history of the Great Plains: "By creating the Buffalo Commons, the federal government will, however belatedly, turn the social costs of space—the curse of the shortgrass immensity—to more social benefit than the unsuccessfully privatized Plains have ever offered" (p. 18). This final line indicates that the Great Plains are currently, and have always been since European settlement, of little to no social benefit.

Persona

The persona of the rhetor is carefully constructed “for strategic purposes, much as an actor assumes a role or character in a play” (Campbell & Burkholder, 1997, p. 21). Guided by this view of the rhetor within the text not as an unmediated image of a naïve author, but as an intentional part of a larger persuasive strategy, we learn much about the rhetors’ methods and goals through careful analysis of who they portray themselves to be.

Throughout the piece, the Poppers adopt a persona of a transhistorical, clear-eyed narrator. They are not only able to see where the participants in the historical narrative they recount went wrong, but are also able to place themselves in that time period and explain why the residents of the Great Plains should have known better, why negative outcomes were plainly predictable, and what was an illusion versus what was reality. This is evident when they speak of boom-bust cycles: “When nature and the economy turned hostile *again* [emphasis added], many of the farmers and ranchers were driven out—and the cycle began anew” (p. 12). The essay is filled with examples but rather light on citations. While the authors use dozens of historical and contemporary examples, they cite specific outside sources only six times. This large degree of independence from exterior support, especially for some of the more sweeping claims, like “The

only federal measure that appears effective is a 1985 law that makes it easier for farmers and ranchers to declare bankruptcy” (p. 15), in itself creates support for the *expert* persona of the transhistorical, clear-eyed narrator. The authors don’t need to cite historical authorities because they *are* historical authorities.

The persona created in the text also serves as a sort of voice-for-the-nation, bringing the responsibility for creating a solution to the problems caused by the Plains to the consciousness of all Americans who want to make things right. In a noticeable shift from the first half of the piece, which recounts the misdeeds and sins of the past, the Poppers adopt more inclusive language when they begin segueing into their proposal. What was previously a tale of others' inability to recognize cycles and consequences now becomes "our national experience on the Plains" (p. 16). Two paragraphs later, the authors speak for the nation again: "As a nation, we have never realized that the federally subsidized privatization that worked so well to settle most of the land west of the Appalachians is ineffective on the Plains" (p. 16).

Further buttressing the national, transhistorical persona created by the rhetors is the tone they adopt, designed to give the impression that they are intimately familiar with the Great Plains as a region, yet sufficiently detached and objective to evaluate its situation fairly and without the mist of sentiment. This detachment is most evident when the authors seem underwhelmed by the drama of struggles on the Plains, even while making the case that things are as bad as they have ever been: "After the trauma of the Dust Bowl, much of the recent history of the Plains seems anti-climactic" (p. 14). Also telling is the clinical nature with which they frame their very brief discussion of the human element of Plains decline: "Farm bankruptcy and foreclosure rates are higher in the Plains than in other rural areas, as are many of the indices of resulting psychological stress: family violence, suicide, mental illness" (p. 15). What a more sympathetic,

less objective narrator might term "human impact," this persona instead calls "indices of resulting psychological stress," a decidedly sterile turn of phrase. Assumedly, a more sympathetic narrator would not be able to assess the "brute fact" (p. 16) of the situation as this one can.

Audience

Given the quite specific audience of the publication *Planning*, it is reasonable to expect that the immediate audience comprised urban planners and geographers. However, the text offers itself to a much wider audience, particularly in the latter half of the work. The evaluator that the authors are writing for is a national audience (as demonstrated in the "voice for the nation" discussion above) concerned chiefly with national social benefit. As they transition from a recounting of the sins of the Plains to the path of redemption from those sins, the Poppers write, "Our national experience on the Plains represents a spectacular variant on the tragedy of the commons" (p. 16). Not only is the audience *informed* of this history, but we have *experienced* it as members of the nation.

Just as important as *who* the audience is, is what the authors are offering the audience: a form of redemption. After going to great lengths to establish the Great Plains people as someone else—as a "they," the Poppers then propose that, whoever has done this, the responsibility for correcting it lies with the people of the United States as a whole. Indeed, such is the only place where the ability lies, for they have shown that history has proven the Great Plains residents' impotency when it comes to any sort of long-term conservation. This then, is the Poppers' *second persona*, or their ideal auditor (Black, 1970): a national group interested in redeeming at least part of the sordid history of United States settlement. This chance at redemption includes our history with native peoples: "The federal government might settle these and other

longstanding Plains Indian land claims by giving or selling the tribes chunks of the new commons" (p. 18), and the overly individualist arc of our development and its effect on the social benefits and cost of geographical space.

Moreover, the frequent use of the pronoun "they" detailed above clearly indicates that the audience is not meant to identify with the people of the Great Plains. The solution proposed is predicated not on any agency that "they" might exercise, but on their inevitable decline. This is evident when the authors describe the process of establishing the commons:

If the federal government intervenes late rather than early—after the desertion instead of before it—the buy-back task will, ironically, be easier. The farmers and ranchers will already have abandoned large chunks of land, making it simpler for the government to reassemble the commons (and to persuade the holdouts to sell). (p. 17)

"After *they* are gone," the proposal seems to say, "we can begin to fix things."

It is the intersection of these three aspects—audience, structure, and persona—that forms the primary thrust of the text. To the question, *who is doing what to whom?* we can answer that *a voice for the nation is bringing forward an indictment of, and solution to, the sins/crimes of the Great Plains people.* But this indictment is read without its object in the room. The “people” of the Great Plains, who have been so thoroughly established as a people by the binding together of the residents in a common historical narrative and through transhistorical identification with their past selves, are actively excluded from the discourse.

Theoretical Analysis

My descriptive analysis of this text compels a focus on identity as a rhetorical construct. The chronological structure that the rhetors have selected focuses on the actions and consequences of a particular group of people, who, though they are thinly spread over an area of

millions of square miles, are clearly considered to share a common identity. The persona that the rhetors themselves adopt, that of a clear-eyed, transhistorical narrator, implicates this people in crimes against the land and ecosystem. Since this persona also presents itself as a voice for the *nation*, these crimes are also read to be against the nation at large. All of this suggests an unpleasant identity for the Great Plains people. Recall from the literature review that this group of people is notoriously concerned with character. Thus, we do well to more closely examine how the rhetors of this piece construct an identity for those excluded from their audience.

This focus on identity provides us with a base on which to further examine the theoretical structure of the Buffalo Commons proposal. I focus on metaphor in order to better understand the “text-world” (Werth, 1994) that the Poppers created. In defining this text-world, we gain a vocabulary and perspective necessary to evaluate the ideology advanced by the Poppers, and how that ideology interacts with Plains people’s view of themselves. In the sections that follow, I will highlight the importance and function of metaphor in the text, turning first to the metaphor of the plow, and then to the metaphor of the buffalo. Following that discussion, I will demonstrate how the Buffalo Commons proposal functions as an example of constitutive rhetoric, though with important differences from Charland’s genre-defining example. This chapter will close with a synthesis of the descriptive and theoretical analyses.

Metaphor

As previewed in earlier chapters, metaphor eventually comes to play a key role in the Poppers’ understanding of the purpose and function of their work. But the Poppers’ original essay on first read, is, as Ivie warned, “disguised” by seemingly exclusive literality. The word “metaphor” is never used and, while the authors are given to occasional bursts of poetic language (e.g. “endlessly windswept” (p. 12)), the metaphors within are not obvious. However, a careful

examination of the text reveals that metaphors are not only present, but are key to our understanding of the Buffalo Commons proposal. My metaphoric analysis of the Buffalo Commons proposal essentially follows Ivie's formula, engaging in close reading to identify metaphoric uses, and then grouping those uses into metaphorical concepts in order to further investigate their role in the Poppers' discourse. By conducting multiple close readings aided by the theoretical and methodological foundation described above, and looking specifically for terms that are used in a nonliteral or more-than-literal sense, I have identified two significant metaphorical concepts in the proposal. The Plains-identity metaphors of the *plow* and of the *buffalo* invite further consideration.

The Poppers return to the image of the plow again and again, particularly in the first half of their piece, when they are making the case against the history and current state of the Plains. Its figurative usage is indicated both by the pervasiveness of the image throughout the piece and the central focal role it plays in the consequences of Plains agriculture. As the authors use it, the plow is a synecdoche of the settlers' agricultural practices as whole, and a symbol of what hasn't and can't work on the Plains. Synecdoche and metaphor are both common rhetorical tropes, major stylistic elements in the language of discourse. The plow is the means by which settlers attempted to exercise their will over the land again and again, to increasing failure each time. Vehicles that cluster into the "plow" concept include "rip," "assert," "sodbust," "merciless," and "destroy."

When the Poppers describe the use of the plow, it is in violent or destructive terms. This implement, ostensibly designed to bring life and productivity, instead destroys the life that is there for short-term profit, leading to long-term disaster. Consider this passage: "The shortgrass Plains soil in places was destroyed by ... cultivation of corn, wheat, and cotton. When drought

hit with its merciless cyclical, the land had no defenses" (p. 12). While cultivation does yield crops, its ultimate effect is to strip the land of its defenses. Elsewhere, the rhetors use violent verbs to describe the action of the plow. Settlers "rip through the shortgrass with their steel plows" (p. 16), and repeatedly "overplow" and cultivate erodible soils that should never have been disturbed.

The plow represents the assertion of the Great Plains settlers' will over, and in opposition to, the Great Plains itself. Coming from a traditional European system of agriculture, it is the only way in which the newcomers know how to extract benefit from their environment, and comes to stand for their foolishness and refusal to adapt properly to their surroundings. This foolish greed is evident in the description of the Plains' response to rising commodity prices: "Plains farmers and ranchers once again chopped down their windbreaks, planted from fencepost to fencepost, and sodbusted in the classic 1880s-1910s manner. This time, though, the scale was much larger, often tens of thousands of acres at a time" (p. 14). (I return to the word "sodbust" in more detail below.) In doing so, the farmers ignored what their predecessors should have learned from "decades of too-assertive agriculture" [emphasis added] (p. 12) which led directly to the 1930s Dust Bowl. This use of the word "assertive" stands in sharp contrast to the word's only other use in the piece: "Even if large pieces of the commons can be assembled quickly, it will be at least 20 to 30 years before the vegetation and wildlife *reassert* themselves in the semiarid Plains settings..." [emphasis added] (p. 17). This sentence illustrates that the assertion of the Plains people's will, via the plow, is in direct opposition to the Plains' own will. Given the damage caused by the plow to the land, and the unreliable, fleeting benefit it brings to the farmers who depend on it, the plow on the Plains is a metaphor for the foolishness and futility of insisting on one's will over that of the land itself.

The rhetors in this piece have a favorite word when it comes to describing the action of the plow: "sodbusting." Of the four times that the word is used in the proposal, two of them are inserted parenthetically, apparently for biting effect: "Federally subsidized settlement and cultivation repeatedly led to overgrazing and over-plowing (*sodbusting*, in Plains terms)" [emphasis added] (p. 12). And again: "...a national conservation reserve where farmers and rancher are paid not to cultivate erodible soil (that is, not to *sod-bust*)--seem to have little impact on the Plains" [emphasis added] (p. 15). Others (DeBres & Guizlo, 1992) have pointed out that the Poppers use the term "sodbusting" somewhat incorrectly, as they seem to apply it to any instance of overplowing, when the word specifically refers to the first plowing of prairie soil that has never been plowed before (Schob, 1973). The combination of this adjustment in definition and explicitly labeling it a "Plains term," has an important effect: For the local vernacular to have its own word for over-cultivation clearly indicates that the destructive action itself is wrapped up in the culture of the area. In this way, the plow ultimately comes to be a metaphor for the current way of life on the Great Plains: A destructive and failing attempt to make a way of life work that never has and never will.

The buffalo metaphor, of course, eventually comes to be the metaphor most closely associated with the Buffalo Commons proposal. It is perhaps then surprising that its presence in the original proposal is much less blatant than in later iterations. But when we are prompted by the Poppers' later work to look for the metaphor, it becomes significant as a counter-metaphor constructed in opposition to the metaphor of the plow. Vehicles that cluster into the "buffalo" concept include "go the way of the buffalo," "desertion," "reassemble," "reassert," "recreate," and "reestablish."

The word "buffalo" first appears a little more than halfway through the piece, when comparing the way in which the Native Americans had used the land to how the new settlers used it: "[A Pawnee chief] mourned a stretch of land where the Indians had hunted buffalo for millennia. It grew crops for a few years, then went into the Dust Bowl; farmers abandoned it" (p. 16). Here, the buffalo depict a more harmonious, stable relationship with the land, one that had worked for millennia and assumedly could have worked for millennia more. In contrast, the steel plows of the settlers created a relationship that turned disastrous after only "a few years."

Later, the Poppers reveal the vital interaction of these two metaphors: "The rural Plains will be virtually deserted. A vast, beautiful characteristically American place *will go the way of the buffalo* that once roamed it in herds of millions" [emphasis added] (p. 16). As a metaphor, the Buffalo has much in common with its literal vehicle: It is the "proper" mode of the Great Plains, but it has been pushed to near extinction by competing land uses/metaphors. The example just cited uses only the decline aspect of the metaphor. The interaction is curious, in that what will pave the way for the reemergence of the proper buffalo-centric use of the plains is for the people of the plow to "go the way of the buffalo." In order for the buffalo to increase and take back what they've lost from the plow, the plow must decrease as the buffalo have been doing for the past two centuries. The buffalo comes to stand for more than the beast itself, but instead for an entire relationship to the land, one that embraces the land as it is, instead of forcing it to become something else, as the plow does.

Constitutive Rhetoric

The preceding section of this analysis identified "plow" and "buffalo" as primary and opposed metaphors for the identity of the Great Plains people. When considering these metaphors in the context of the Buffalo Commons proposal, we are confronted with a curious

and challenging case of constitutive rhetoric. In the Poppers' sweeping narrative of the past and present of the Great Plains, no meaningful distinction is made between, for instance, the rancher in New Mexico and the farmer in North Dakota. All are considered as occupying the same textual position in the narrative, a people who have struggled to survive in a landscape that can't accommodate them, continually turning to methods that they should know won't work. Thus, their struggle through history is one struggle: "A measure of agricultural prosperity returned during World War II and after, although the Plains remained a poor region, falling further behind most of the rest of the country and continuing to suffer depopulation" (p. 14). This struggle continues in the present: "Plains farmers and ranchers have always operated under conditions that their counterparts elsewhere would have found intolerable, and now they are worse" (p. 14-15). By creating a *collective subject* (or in this case, *object*, as will be shown later), the rhetors here accomplish what Charland (1987) deemed the "first ideological effect" of constitutive rhetoric (p. 139). One cannot tell the story of a Great Plains people without bringing that people into being, for as Charland posits, "In telling the story of a *peuple*, a *peuple* comes to be" [sic] (p. 140).

Continuing the case for the Buffalo Commons proposal as an instance of constitutive rhetoric, the Poppers clearly consider the current residents of the Great Plains to be, in Burke's words, *consubstantial* with the residents from the past. Return again to the indictment discussed earlier in this chapter:

"Responding to nationally based market imperatives, they have overgrazed and overplowed the land and overdrawn the water. Responding to the usually increasing federal subsidies, they have overused the natural resources the subsidies provided. They never created a truly stable agriculture or found reliable conservation devices. In some

places, private owners supplemented agriculture with inherently unstable energy and mineral development."

No distinction is made between the settlers of yesteryear and the farmers and ranchers of the present day. "They" refers to Great Plains residents past and present, making the story of the farmer in 1987 a part of the same story that also includes the rancher in 1880. Another example: "The lessons of the 1930s were forgotten as agricultural commodity prices rose rapidly. Plains farmers and ranchers once again chopped down their windbreaks, planted from fencepost to fencepost, and sodbusted in the classic 1880s-1910s manner." Though the price rise the authors are referencing occurs in the 1970s, the collective *transhistorical* subject of the Plains people ignore the lessons of their forebears from both the 1930s and the 1880s. Because they are one continuous subject, they should have a collective memory of such things. Again, we find a clear parallel in Charland who wrote "This positing of a transhistorical subject is the *second ideological effect* of constitutive rhetoric" (p. 140). In the Buffalo Commons proposal, geography and mistakes in relation to geography serve as the link between the past and present, just as ancestry served in Charland's exploration of the *Peuple Quebecois*. Thus, the Great Plains people are not only a collective entity, but a *transhistorical* entity, reaching both into the past and into the future.

The fit of Charland's first two ideological effects as discussed above is easy to see. Viewing this proposal as constitutive rhetoric becomes more challenging when we consider Charland's third and final ideological effect of constitutive rhetoric: "the illusion of freedom" (p. 141). When Charland wrote about Quebec, the instance of constitutive rhetoric he considered urged the *Peuple Quebecois* to vote for their own sovereignty and thus bring about the only possible conclusion to their long historical narrative as a collective subject. The choice to do so

is illusory in that to not do so is to reject the narrative entirely. Just as the text constitutes them as a people, so too it reveals what is necessary to fulfill their identity as that people. The Buffalo Commons proposal, on the other hand, offers no such action to its constituted collective. The narrative culmination of the story of their identity is decline, to give up the identity constituted for them through this discourse.

But if the rhetors offer not even the illusion of freedom, how can we call this a case of constitutive rhetoric? I submit that this is because the "people" constituted in the Buffalo Commons proposal have been constituted not as the *subject* of a transhistorical narrative, but as its *object*. As such, they have no perceived agency to affect their destiny. In fact, their story can be read as a long tale of those without agency desperately trying to exercise agency despite repeated demonstrations that such agency is impossible. To be sure, the Great Plains people are still a "people" in the McGee sense of a political myth made real. But the Poppers call them into being via Wander's third persona, as opposed to Black's second. In the narrative of the Great Plains, the land is the subject, the people merely object. The decline of the Great Plains people is inevitable; the only choice that needs to be made is by the rest of the nation, on behalf of the Great Plains land as subject, and that choice is how long to keep attempting to delay the inevitable.

By combining metaphor and constitutive rhetoric, we reach an appropriate critical frame with which to understand the relationship between the Buffalo Commons proposal and Great Plains identity. The essay invokes a Great Plains people composed of a transhistorical collective object that extends from the first Homestead Act settlers to the present-day residents of the Great Plains. The metaphor for their current identity is that of the plow: They seek to extract value and sustenance from the land by changing it. The plow performs this transformation through violence

against the land in search of profit, a profit that, in the harsh environment of the Great Plains, cannot last long. This is the only way in which the plow can relate to the land. As an implement and as an identity, it only knows how to do what it has always done. But this identity is ultimately futile. No matter how much the Poppers' Plains people cultivate and irrigate, they can never truly change the land. Like the plow in the face of the aridity and fragility of the Plains, they are impotent at best, and increasingly destructive at worst.

Thus, the inevitable consummation of the Great Plains people, the destiny that the trajectory of their history leads toward, is decline. Because the triumph of the plow is impossible, what must eventually happen is an exchange of identity metaphors—the plow for the buffalo. The buffalo derives value from the land on the land's terms, never seeking to enforce its will, but instead moving on when things get tough and returning when the land and the climate allow. The buffalo identity is the yielding of the people to the land, instead of the land to the people. As a symbol it is inherently accusatory, forcing remembrance of the slaughter that came along with the American push west. To acquiesce to the Buffalo metaphor is to accept a certain poetic justice, to fulfill one's identity by acknowledging the impossibility of exercising agency and allowing one's current identity to "go the way of the buffalo."

CHAPTER FOUR. DISCUSSION

The forgoing analysis has identified how the Poppers use structure, audience, and persona to advance their Buffalo Commons proposal. The interaction of these rhetorical characteristics gives rise to two objects of theoretical interest: The proposal as an example of constitutive rhetoric, and the opposed metaphors of the buffalo and the plow. Ultimately, the analysis frames the Buffalo Commons proposal as constituting a Great Plains people and urging them (though not directly) to fulfill their transhistorical identity by exchanging the metaphor of the plow for the metaphor of the buffalo, in effect 'letting go' of their identity as a collective people. The following chapter explores how these ideas of identity and metaphor interact with those already held by the people of the Plains, as evidenced by responses published in newspapers throughout the region. It proceeds by first examining how the Poppers' vision conflicted with long-held ideas of Great Plains identity, then explores the tensions presented by the plow as metaphor and what this can tell us about the power of constitutive rhetoric to *deconstitute* identities. The chapter closes by considering the legacy of the Buffalo Commons proposal as it has matured and persisted to our present day.

Conflicting Visions of Great Plains Identity

As indicated in the literature review, Great Plains identity, values, and even architecture are derived directly from the land (Cella, 2015; Quantic, 1995; Pichaske, 2006). The Poppers are by no means the first to recognize that existence on the Great Plains is determined primarily by one's ability to 'get along' with the land and the climate. However, their work is significant because it suggests that there is a fundamental mismatch between the desires of the Great Plains people and the capability of the land to deliver and sustain those desires. In an environment in

which so much is derived from the land, both literally and metaphorically, such an assertion cannot avoid becoming entangled in a complex web of emotion, history, and identity.

Interestingly, the Poppers and Great Plains proponents don't differ significantly in how they characterize the land. Like the Poppers, respondents to the Buffalo Commons proposal characterized the land as harsh and unforgiving. In the *Galveston Daily News*, syndicated columnist Robert Walters asked local residents “about living in the vast expanse of the Great Plains that stretches from here to the Rocky Mountains.” These residents acknowledged, “It’s probably a harder life” (1988). While much has been written about whether it’s more appropriate to characterize the Great Plains as a “desert” or as a “garden,” (Allen, 1985; Emmons, 1971), the difference of opinions regarding how to characterize the Great Plains region seems to be primarily in degree, not in kind. Both sides agree that the region is arid to semi-arid, and that agriculture in the region is not as easy as agriculture elsewhere. Jim Harbiger, former Kansas state conservationist, provides an example of this attitude in his interview in *The Salina Journal*:

We have a violent condition to live with ... You’re never going to be able to treat it so you won’t have another disaster. But you can minimize the disasters, keeping in mind we’re the breadbasket of the world. We have to provide food if the world wants to continue to eat. (Mowery-Denning, 1997)

Even the state motto of Kansas, “Ad astra per aspera (to the stars through difficulties)” (Kansas Historical Society, 2017), acknowledges that the Plains are a difficult place in which to succeed. But this inhospitable nature has become one of the defining features of life, people, and institutions of the region, rather than something to decry or deny.

Where the characterization of the land diverges is in describing the residents' relationship to it. As detailed in my analysis, the Poppers describe the relationship as essentially an abusive

one, in which the Great Plains people continue extracting more than the land can sustain. This is in sharp contrast to how respondents describe the relationship. Frequent words that occur are "stewards" or those who "know the land" as in this excerpt from a letter to the Fargo Forum:

As we gloat at the ominous task of privatization of the former Communist world, how can we at the same time snicker at our own "family farms?" [sic] Farms with people who know the land, don't charge overtime, and actually enjoy the challenges of a rural lifestyle? This high-handed negligence for the very agricultural institutions from which our country was born may become a haunting irony. (Gardner & Gardner, 1992)

The article featuring Harbiger, quoted earlier, expressed similar sentiment about residents' relationship to the land:

He believes farmers have a responsibility to care for their land so future generations can share in its bounty...."The Great Plains area was in grass before it was broken out, but that was then and this is now. To return it to grass would be a waste," Harbiger said. (Mowery-Denning, 1997).

These excerpts provide evidence that those on the Great Plains view their relationship with the land as essentially positive, and that they see no conflict with this view and modern agriculture practices. The authority of their conclusion rests on the fact that the farmers there depend on the land for their livelihood, and are therefore the best-equipped to make judgments concerning its welfare.

The creation of this positive identity in such inhospitable conditions is made possible only by one key aspect of Great Plains identity: adaptability. The Poppers' thesis is based upon the very absence of this trait. In their conception, a *refusal* to adapt has caused the problems on the Plains; European settlers insisted and continue to insist on applying their agriculture and

methods of settlement that worked so well 'out east' to a region that cannot, has not, and will not accommodate it. As shown in my analysis, they document again and again the Plains people's inability or refusal to adapt appropriately to the conditions on the Plains. The eschewing of change and adaptation forms the basis on which their ultimate indictment is built.

However, the Poppers may not have realized just how vital the idea of agency and adaptability is to the Great Plains people's conception of themselves. Several respondents brought up this trait as the primary idea that the Poppers failed to factor into their analysis. These writers used different words, including "people power," "cooperation," and "ingenuity," but in every instance they spoke of the ability to persevere despite trying conditions. For example, The Albuquerque Journal wrote,

New Mexico's East Side [sic] straddles the Great Plains and shares all of its windblown, drought-seared woes. But there are hardy men and women who farm and ranch there, who love it and probably won't leave it, despite [the Popper's] dire predictions.... "The author grossly underestimates the ingenuity and adaptability of the people of the Plains states," said Frank DuBois, director of the New Mexico Department of Agriculture. (Moffatt, 1989)

This faith in the Plains people's persistence is one of the most common themes throughout resident responses to the proposal, both as an inherent characteristic of the individuals who live here: "Generally, people out here tend to be somewhat less troublesome than those packed in close quarters in barren urban settings" (Gilles, 1988), and as an organizing principle for official action: "...creative and collaborative initiatives can revitalize the rural Plains" (Beddow, 1993). Most of all, though, this adaptability and perseverance is described as characteristic of the small communities on the plains:

With studies like Popper's [sic], Saterlee said there is a human element that political scientists don't take into consideration in making projections. "There is a social element that you can't put in your computer: neighborhoods, school spirit, community spirit," he said. "If these things are worth it to you, you make trade-offs. You pay more taxes or become more efficient, or consolidate." (Argus-Leader, 1989)

These examples illustrate just how differently the Great Plains writers envision their adaptability than the Poppers. This emphasis on adaptability allows them to acknowledge the challenges involved with living on the Plains without surrendering to them. While the Poppers point to the settlers' attempts to assert their agency as the reason that settlement of the Plains isn't working, the residents' letters examined here point to the settlers' agency as the reason that settlement hasn't yet failed.

The Plow as a Symbol

These differing views on the effects of Plains' agency can be seen most clearly in the conflict over the plow metaphor. As the Poppers use it, the plow is a symbol of the destruction wrought by Plains settlers as they attempted to change the land to suit their needs and habits. But it both fails to bring the prosperity and productivity that the settlers seek, and strips the land of its defenses, leading to environmental disaster like the Dust Bowl. To the Poppers, the plow is a mistake and the tool of crimes against the land.

But on the Plains, the plow has long served as a popular and pervasive cultural symbol. Four of the 10 Great Plains states (Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Kansas) feature the plow on their respective great seals. According to official descriptions, its inclusion symbolizes "natural resources" (State of South Dakota, 2017), "agricultural wealth" (State of Montana, 2017), and "agriculture as the basis of the future prosperity of the state" (Kansas

Historical Society, 2017). The repeated occurrence of the plow as an officially-sanctioned symbol of several of these states shows both its pervasiveness and its prominence. The associations are overwhelmingly positive, and plainly situate the plow as an instrument of wealth and prosperity.

The plow is also a frequent object of nostalgia in the rural regions addressed by the Poppers. In many gardens and farmyards (including the one on which I was raised), old livestock-pulled plows are used as decorative focal points, indicating the humble past of the place, even as modern machinery lumbers by, having long replaced the now-relic. In farmyards and historical societies across the Great Plains, plows serve as a symbol of the struggles and perseverance of the settlers who came before (Peterson, 1991). While Plains residents may acknowledge that their lives now are often hard and beset by challenges, the presence of the plow reminds them that the lives of those who came before them were far harder. Through being a symbol of the past, the plow is also a symbol of progress. Through its successful use, the plow made itself no longer useful. What is to the Poppers a symbol of how the Plains people refused to create a workable future, is to the Plains people a symbol of how far into the future they've come.

This, then, leaves us with a curious situation: The Poppers and their opponents both agree that life on the Plains has always been difficult, and that the plow is an important symbol of how the settlers reacted to the difficulty. But from there, as discussed above, the ideas diverge diametrically. One envisions an identity of destruction as the result of a wanton striving for prosperity, and the other envisions an identity of modest prosperity as the result of patience, resilience, and hard work. The two identities are incompatible, and herein lies the tragedy of the commons proposal. In basing their proposal on an identity so irreconcilable with how the Plains people have come to know themselves, the Poppers' admirable environmental and social goals

were perhaps doomed from the start. Though they frame their exchange of the plow metaphor for the buffalo metaphor as merely a prediction of decline based on demographic and climatic data, their prediction cannot help but also be an invocation of that identity. Whether they were right or wrong no longer becomes the issue. Taking their proposal as anything other than an attack required accepting an historical identity exactly contrary to that which so much of the region depends on for collective self-knowledge.

This analysis begins to reveal the power of constitutive rhetoric to *deconstitute* a “people.” The Poppers’ rhetoric clearly includes all three ideological effects of constitutive rhetoric identified by Charland (1987), but complicates the third effect in that it proposed a fulfillment of a transhistorical collective identity that could be accomplished only through the nullification of the identity established by the first two ideological effects. In doing so, the proposal leaves its negated audience, the Great Plains people, in a place of unresolvable tension. If they accept their collective identity, they must fulfill it by acquiescing to the proposal’s entreaty to decline and end their story. If they reject their collective identity, they disavow the basis on which their objections could be mounted: That they have a history, knowledge, and experience that goes beyond the ability of an outsider to analyze. In short, the Buffalo Commons proposal gives them no option for resolution that allows the Great Plains people to maintain their identity. In creating a rhetorical environment in which the identity of the constituted collective cannot survive, it effectively *deconstitutes* the “people” it has called into being.

The Legacy of the Buffalo Commons

In the three decades that have passed since the Poppers published their proposal, reactions on both sides have softened considerably. Even those who were initially among the most strident in their opposition now recognize the prescience of much of what the Poppers were

saying. Lauren Donovan, a North Dakota reporter who proudly coined the term "Popperscock" to describe the proposal in the early nineties, had clearly experienced something of a change of heart in a 2016 interview, now crediting the Poppers for alerting the Great Plains people to the reality of their situation: "We have to thank them when we look back for holding up a mirror. It wasn't like we were seeing somebody we didn't recognize, but we needed to take a good hard look and they helped" (Wyndham, 2017). Mike Hayden, former governor of Kansas who at the time gained notoriety for his harsh words against the proposal, has similarly changed his tune, as indicated by a 2009 interview in *The Wichita Eagle*: "How do we bring a vital economy to life in northwest Kansas? ... The model we're now following has failed. Buffalo Commons makes more sense every year" (*The Wichita Eagle*, 2009). While neither of these examples stands as a glowing embrace of the original proposal, they do illustrate how opponent attitudes have changed.

In fact, we would be hard-pressed to find *anyone* still encouraging the Buffalo Commons in its original 1987 form, as not even the Poppers hold to that position. Throughout the 90's and early 00's, they moderated their original proposal, eventually focusing more on the buffalo as a "charismatic megafauna" and metaphor for regional development, rather than the nuts and bolts of returning the region to greater national "social benefit." The ambiguity of the metaphor's purpose has granted the Poppers a broad definition of its success. Citing increasing numbers of buffalo, acres of land in private conservancies, and a broad array of businesses and organizations bearing some form of the name "Buffalo Commons," the Poppers describe their proposal as leading to an awakening, understanding, and gradual acceptance of what they call "the Permanent Issue of Euroamerican Plains land history ... that is, deep-seated settlement insecurity and a reluctance to face it" (Popper & Popper, 2006, p. 3).

But it doesn't take much digging to find a still-present current of resentment toward the Buffalo Commons among many. McCook, Nebraska, mentioned early in this analysis, seems to take particular pleasure in defying the Poppers, though they were never the type of community the Poppers envisioned dying off. Their annual "Buffalo Commons Storytelling Festival" is so named in defiance of, rather than embrace, of the Poppers' metaphor. The Omaha World-Herald called the festival "a symbol of an area that is thumbing its collective nose at the idea that settling the vast prairies of North America was one big mistake" (Hammel, 2016, p. 4). The term "Buffalo Commons" appears with some regularity in letters to the editor of regional newspapers, often not in specific reference to the Poppers' ideas, but rather as a warning of the dire consequences associated with policies that will encourage the decline of the region, as in a letter to the editor in the Bismarck Tribune titled "Without trust, we may become a buffalo commons," warning against cutting public spending (Lein, 1993), or in an editorial by The Hutchinson News warning that "rural America desperately needs to diversify its economy lest it become a 'Buffalo Commons'" (The Hutchinson News, 2014). Despite the Poppers' positivity, the legacy of the Buffalo Commons is ambiguous at best, and undeniably contains lingering bitterness.

CHAPTER FIVE. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Today, as in 1987, the Great Plains region continues a complex negotiation of identity. As the Poppers predicted, boom-and-bust has continued to be the standard mode of operation for many Prairie economies. My home state of North Dakota was, until rather recently, proudly weathering the prolonged effects of the Great Recession with seeming equanimity due to revenues from an unprecedented boom in oil extraction. But now, just as in past booms, both agricultural and energy commodity prices have taken a sharp and prolonged downturn, plunging the state into financial emergency. Billion-dollar surpluses have disappeared seemingly overnight, and the state's leadership is now promoting double-digit cuts just to continue providing basic services. Though perhaps not as dramatically as in North Dakota, other Plains states are facing similar pressures and making similar cuts (Lowry & Woodall, 2017; Stoddard & Nohr, 2016; Office of Gov. Dennis Daugaard, 2017).

This continued economic uncertainty cannot help but be mirrored by uncertainty around questions of regional identity. When high agriculture and energy prices helped Plains states do well as almost all other states faced severe budget shortfalls after the financial crisis, it was taken as evidence of the superiority of Plains values of hard work, humility, and perseverance through tough times. Now that the roles have been somewhat reversed, it throws into question the significance of these intimate identifiers. If our identity as a region isn't based off of the success of our effort, what is left? Does our identity stem from a glorious though difficult history? Are we defined only in comparison to outsiders? Can the region ever overcome our pernicious "inferiority complex" (Shortridge, 1984) that keeps it psychologically as well as economically a colony of eastern centers of gravity? This analysis examines just one example of this complex

and ongoing negotiation of Great Plains identity, and through it we can begin to chart a course for the future of a Plains "people."

Contemporary Issues

Contemporary events provide numerous opportunities for rhetoricians to examine identity-forming discourses on the Plains. Most visible at present is the ongoing controversy of the Dakota Access Pipeline, which has become a difficult-to-parse web of Native American, environmental, local landowner, corporate, and national interests, all competing for a particular interpretation of the pipeline construction process, from its initial sighting to the activities of protestors and law enforcement. Woven through these competing narratives are notions of different fulfillments of identity. The movement has energized tribes across the continent to participate in the protests, and is seen by many as the fulfillment of a long historical arc of the tribes reasserting their rights that have been for so long infringed by American interlopers. Conversely, corporate interests and sympathetic residents of the state characterize efforts to build the pipeline as the fulfillment of the American tradition of private landowners to do what they will with the land, as well as the earned wages of passing through the bureaucratic process necessary to make such projects come to fruition. Proponents point to the pipeline as consistent with an identity based on respect for the land, as they advance figures pointing to the reduced number of trucks and trains required to transport the oil to market, as well as advances made in pipeline safety. The similarity of these positions to those that appear in the Buffalo Commons controversy is notable, and presents a natural extension this line of research.

In order to escape the challenges and uncertainty posed by commodity-dependent economies, several if not all of the Great Plains states are championing efforts to diversify their economic base and attract new industries. In these states, where agricultural and extractive

industries are enshrined by historical identity and official symbolism, the increasing importance of alternative industries represents a threat to long-held orthodoxy, which may necessarily require a renegotiation of regional identity. As agriculture and energy become a smaller proportion of a region's overall economy, which is the successful outcome of any economic diversification scheme, can regional identities continue to be based on transhistorical figures of their settler-selves? As the connection between history and the present becomes more tenuous, and the connection and dependency on the land more abstract, the Great Plains may grow to view themselves in as-yet unanticipated ways, drawing on different versions of their historical selves.

Historical Opportunities

In addition to contemporary issues, the region's past holds great opportunity to learn more about the discursive formation of regional identity. Much of the historical background of this study is informed by “boomer literature” (Emmons, 1971), which drove hundreds of thousands of people to settle the Plains from the eastern United States, Europe, and beyond. While some of their historical effect is taken into account in this analysis, they are worthy of further rhetorical consideration in their own right. Historians can tell us much about the content and real-world effect of these persuasive efforts, but it will take rhetoricians to examine how they constituted new identities for those who chose to leave everything and pursue their lives on the recently 'acquired' Great American Desert/Garden. Scholars who examine this literature can learn more about identity by looking at the audiences constituted by Plains promotional material, and what that constitution meant for settlers before leaving their homes and after arriving on the Plains. European-American history on the Plains may begin with settlement and the long, sad history of wrenching the land from indigenous people's hands, but those that came were not history-less,

nor were they without already-constituted identity. The discourses that led people to the Plains may be some of the most impactful, for better or for worse, in American history.

Even more pressing, and many times more challenging, are efforts to explore the rhetorical constitution of Native American identity. Particularly in the face of past and present European-American invasive rhetorics, Native American rhetorics are chronically undertreated in academia. Further exploration of Native American rhetoric before, during, and after European-American colonization on the Plains holds promise to generate insight into ongoing identity challenges, including in contemporary examples such as the Dakota Access Pipeline discussed above. Of particular interest is that even discussions about the future of the Great Plains that decry the region's imperialist past tend to be crippling Eurocentric. The Poppers, while citing their proposal as a way to settle longstanding conflicts with Native American land claims, still clearly consider the United States government to be the 'proper' owner of the land. Redeeming the misdeeds of the Plains' past seems only to preclude the privatization of the Plains, but doesn't extend beyond its federalization. In this way, the interest of Native Americans are used to bolster a plan to redeem the United States' mistakes, but only so far as is convenient. Similarly, Plains residents who during the Buffalo Commons controversy protested 'outsider' influence on their way of living on the land pointed to the case of the Native Americans as the original example of forces from 'out east' who didn't approve of the current inhabitants' land use. These outside forces pushed the current residents and their culture out to make room for a way of life more acceptable to those in power. Plans such as the Buffalo Commons, they said, are simply a repetition of this mistake. Again, the case of Native Americans is used not to redress their grievances, but to bolster the case of the current occupants. This aspect of Plains history and

discourse deserves further exploration, especially in how it shapes ongoing conversations about history, the region's future, and identity.

Environmental and Conservation Rhetoric

This analysis also provides cautions for and insight into potential limitations for future environmental and conservation rhetoric. Despite the Poppers' claims to success in providing a "regional metaphor" for future development (Popper & Popper, 1999), "Buffalo Commons" is still a largely negative phrase on the Great Plains, as discussed in the preceding chapter. One wonders what might have been accomplished if the Poppers' initial proposal had been as relatively gentle and metaphorical as it came to be in its later versions. The Poppers may share some of this curiosity, as they've expressed some mild regret over their initial rhetorical decisions. In a 2016 interview, Frank Popper stated, "I've got to say, this is something I've only realized recently. If the roles were reversed, I'd be against us" (Wyndham, 2017, para. 117). As it was, the tensions and conflict caused by the proposal's initial reception, owing to its incompatibility with how the Plains people viewed themselves, may have prevented many of its sensible, even necessary, environmental concerns from coming to fruition. Contemporary editorials provide examples of present-day attempts at conservation programs being pejoratively called "another buffalo commons," indicating its uncertain-at-best reputation. Rhetors who don't take into account the possible effects of their characterizations of affected audiences, whether or not they are part of the *intended* audience, may do harm to future attempts to benefit the land and its people.

A more positive example of conservation discourse may be found in the case of the Roosevelt-era shelterbelt project. The initial plan, no less colossal and controversial than the Buffalo Commons, called for a 1,300 mile long, 100-mile wide manmade forest that would cut

through the entire midsection of the country (Orth, 2007). Those tasked with making a version of this plan a reality had to contend with the difficulty of gaining buy-in from the people of the region. As Orth wrote, "When foresters began planting the Plains they learned not only to grow trees, they were learning a new way of thinking: cooperative conservation" (p. 334). Ultimately, public pressure led to compromising on technical characteristics of the project, which in some ways ultimately improved the results that the project sought. Future work should further examine how conservation rhetoric can be conducted in concert with the public and local residents, to minimize hostility toward attempts to do right by the land and to increase the probability of environmentally beneficial outcomes.

Constitutive Rhetoric

The key insight generated by this analysis is the ability of constitutive rhetoric to *deconstitute* identity. In the conclusion to his 1987 article on constitutive rhetoric, Charland reminded us "Because ideology forms the ground for any rhetorical situation, a theory of ideological rhetoric must be mindful not only of arguments and ideographs, but of the very nature of the subjects that rhetoric both addresses and leads to come to be" (p. 148). Through this analysis, I suggest that this characterization of ideological rhetoric must be extended to include those that the rhetoric would lead to *cease to be*. In proposing fulfillments of identity that lead to the annulment of a collective identity, rhetoric holds the power to erase as well as to create. When rhetoric constitutes a "people" as the *object* of a discourse but not its subject, it contains the power to set that object aside, to insist it become something else, or to ignore it entirely. Future research should further investigate this ability of rhetoric to change or nullify identity. As collective narratives around the world become increasingly knit together with the super-narrative

of globalism, it will become increasingly necessary to understand how discourses can lead, intentionally or not, to the dissolution of identities.

Finally, this analysis and others like it should be taken as a call for rhetors to take responsibility for the audiences invoked through their discourse. Calling an audience into being may seem abstract to those not particularly concerned with rhetorical theory, but the effect is very real, and shouldn't be taken lightly. I suspect that, when envisioning their "daring proposal" for the future the Great Plains, the Poppers didn't intentionally set out to challenge the identity of a people, or to propose their dissolution. But, as this analysis has demonstrated, these elements form the rhetorical underpinnings of their writing. As with many rhetorical characteristics, it may be impossible to determine to what extent this affected the intended and unintended audiences of this discourse, but I believe my analysis shows that it is likely the root of much of the animosity that immediately followed, and that has never completely dissolved. Identity is complex, simultaneously delicate and resilient, and becomes even more so when it is so closely associated with a geography and landscape whose history is as controversial as that of the Great Plains. The Poppers clearly understood that we cannot simply bend the land to our own desires without taking into account what the land can bear. If future rhetors of geography begin to understand the same about identity, we may finally begin to amend the missteps of our past, both geographical and rhetorical.

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