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THE BUFFALO COMMONS: METAPHOR AS METHOD*

DEBORAH E. POPPER and FRANK J. POPPER

ABSTRACT. By crafting regional metaphors, geographers can help the public to understand and expand regional choices. As a metaphor for the United States' Great Plains, the Buffalo Commons stands for a large-scale, long-term ecological-economic restoration project. It has found an attentive audience in the last thirteen years and is in practice springing to life in the region. Comparable metaphors for other regions dealing with structural change are explored in this essay, using as main examples the Pacific Northwest, Detroit, and big cities generally. Metaphors, we conclude, differ from usual social-science tools because they engage the public in forming policy. The most effective regional metaphors are ambiguous, open-ended, and somewhat disconcerting. *Keywords:* *Buffalo Commons, geographical imagination, Great Plains, regional geography, regional metaphor.*

In the late 1980s we published an article in *Planning*, a journal for urban and regional planners, in which we explored the past and prospects of one of the nation's major regions, the Great Plains (Popper and Popper 1987). We chronicled the Plains' boom-and-bust history and suggested that a new path lay about a generation ahead: a large-scale land-restoration project that we called "the Buffalo Commons." To our surprise, the idea rapidly turned into a highly usable and influential regional metaphor. Its success convinces us that geographers should try to make more use of regional metaphors. To show how, our argument first draws on our experience in devising the Buffalo Commons metaphor for the Great Plains. We then suggest the implications of the metaphor for other U.S. regions and for the wider practice of geography.

THE GREAT PLAINS AS A REGIONAL STORY

The Plains lie between the Rockies and the tallgrass prairies of the Midwest and the South. They extend over large parts of ten states, from Montana and North Dakota in the north to Texas and New Mexico in the south, and into Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta in Canada. The Plains produce significant quantities of cattle, wheat, cotton, sheep, coal, oil, natural gas, and metals. They are America's steppes—wind-swept, nearly treeless, and largely semiarid. Their expanse is mostly rural and

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sparsely settled; the region's 1990 total population of 6.5 million—barely that of Georgia—is scattered across about a sixth of the area of the Lower 48.

The Plains have inspired extraordinary literature and art evocative of their physical distinctiveness and the difficulties that human settlement encounters there. Walt Whitman wrote in 1879, "One wants new words in writing about these plains, and all the inland American West—the terms, *far, large, vast, &c.*, are insufficient" (Whitman 1963, 218; emphasis in the original). The painter Thomas Hart Benton suggested in 1937 that "Cozy-minded people hate the brute magnitude of the plains country. For me the great plains have a releasing effect. I like the way they make human beings appear as the little bugs they really are. Human effort is seen there in all its painful futility. The universe is stripped to dirt and air, to wind, dust, clouds, and the white sun" (quoted in Raban 1996, 60). Kathleen Norris opened her *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* with these words: "The High Plains, the beginning of the desert West, often act as a crucible for those who inhabit them. Like Jacob's angel, the region requires that you wrestle with it before it bestows a blessing" (1993, 1).

The U.S. perception of the Plains has varied over time. Early-nineteenth-century textbooks called them a desert; late-nineteenth-century promoters and settlers regarded them as a potential garden, a regional component of the nation's Manifest Destiny. With the 1930s Dust Bowl, the Plains became a national problem; then they faded from the national consciousness (Opie 1998). According to William Cronon, historians have treated the region's past as a narrative of either inexorable progress or inevitable decline (1992).

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

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

We suggested that a third great cycle was well into its bust phase. The top of the cycle, from the 1940s to the 1970s, had first featured the introduction of large-scale fed-



FIG. 1—The symbolism of Great Plains and Mountain West bison is difficult to argue. A cow bison and her calf near Flathead Lake, Montana, summer 1997. (Photograph by Paul F. Starrs)

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

THE BUFFALO COMMONS AS A POSSIBLE FUTURE

We conceived the Buffalo Commons in part as a literary device, a metaphor that would resolve the narrative conflicts—past, present, and, most important, future—of the Great Plains. In land-use terms, the Buffalo Commons was an umbrella phrase for a large-scale, long-term restoration project to counter the effects of the three cycles. We wrote that in about a generation, after the far end of the third cycle had depopulated much more of the Plains, the federal government would step in as the vacated land's owner of last resort—much as it had in the 1930s to create the region's distinctive category of public lands, the National Grasslands. The Buffalo Commons would not mean bison on every acre; yet where Plains land uses were not working



FIG. 2—The Buffalo Commons in print, November 1999. (Photograph by Deborah E. Popper)

well either environmentally or economically, replacement uses that treated the land more lightly would become inevitable (Figure 1). The federal government would oversee the replacement, and the new land uses would fall between intensive cultivation and extraction on one hand and wilderness on the other. We saw in the Buffalo Commons the potential for a serious but long-term proposal, a public-policy response to deep-seated trends. But we relied on metaphor to give shape and words to the intrinsically unknowable and unpredictable, the Great Plains' future.

Plains media and Plains people responded to the Buffalo Commons and quickly made it part of a discussion on the region's prospects (for the first media report, see Olson 1988) (Figure 2). The media interest brought us invitations. We spoke at a range of forums: chautauquas, college colloquia, meetings of broadcasters and publishers, Rotary Clubs, good-government groups, farmers, ranchers, clergy, landscape architects, planners, range managers, environmentalists, agricultural economists, and businesspeople. We spoke in college classrooms, high school auditoriums, civic centers, city parks, cafés, and barns. We received and answered piles of mail and hundreds of telephone calls.

As we traveled the Plains, it became clear that we did not control the meaning of our idea. Nor did anyone else. This appropriation at first puzzled us, but it also taught us something vital: People treated the Buffalo Commons as proposal and prediction, but they were captured first by the metaphor. Their beliefs about the prediction and proposal depended on their own interpretation of the metaphor. The Buffalo Commons, like all metaphors, was inherently—and, we found, usefully—

ambiguous. This ambiguity allowed different people discussing the Buffalo Commons to develop their own particular narrative lines to give the metaphor meaning specific to them. We found that metaphor can serve as a method to describe and navigate regional change.

For some the Buffalo Commons was only about bison; for others, about wildlife in general; and for yet others, about raising cattle to more closely mimic bison behavior. The metaphor might mean moving people out of the region, encouraging their coexistence with wildlife, or promoting economic development based on wildlife. People variously interpreted the metaphor as a general assault on their way of life, as an evocation of a fabled past, as a vision of a feasible future, or as a distillation of what they were already doing (see, for instance, Springer 1999). Many Plains residents intensely disliked the commons portion of the metaphor, associating it with collectivism and lack of choice, but even so, the strength of their reaction helped achieve some important community building (*Grand Forks Herald* 1999).

As the term “Buffalo Commons” came into widespread use (Graham 1997; O’Driscoll 1997; Robbins 1997; Olson 1998; Springer 1999), it provoked exploration by many individuals and groups, each with distinct interpretations and with its own heroes and villains. Such discussions made the metaphor’s ambiguity a practical asset by helping it foster accord between parties who were otherwise deeply divided. For example, Native Americans and white ranchers and farmers could agree that people should not be uprooted involuntarily from their homes and way of life. Energy interests and cattle ranchers knew in their bones that the Plains problems sprang from farm subsidies. For many Plains people, federal intervention harmed their region and kept it in a semicolonized state; the Buffalo Commons simply provided the latest example of potential federal hubris. Sometimes the one point a group could agree on was that they did not like the Buffalo Commons, but at least that gave them a starting point (Associated Press 1996). From there, they took up the metaphor and pushed it into the future by elaborating on the values and choices they wished to attain or avoid.

We have called this overall approach “soft-edged planning” to distinguish it from hard-edged—that is, more rule-bound—planning (Popper and Popper 1996). Story and metaphor work as process, engendering new layers of understanding and debate as they are diffused. They loop back as discussion grows and meaning is amplified and modified. The process is deeply paradoxical. Precisely because the Buffalo Commons metaphor is inescapably ambiguous, it has created a public dialogue that has given it concreteness and specificity. The Buffalo Commons metaphor has helped both the Buffalo Commons proposal and the Buffalo Commons prediction flourish. The question is no longer why or whether the Buffalo Commons will occur, but how (Figure 3).

THE FORMATION OF THE BUFFALO COMMONS

Since 1987 we have elaborated the Buffalo Commons metaphor to incorporate the many emerging land uses consistent with it (Popper and Popper 1994, 1998). It now ap-

pears that the Buffalo Commons is materializing more quickly, particularly in the northern Plains, and with less federal intervention than we had anticipated. In the last decade public-lands herds of bison increased markedly. On private land a noticeable number of ranchers switched to buffalo and prospered financially and ecologically. Membership in the National Bison Association, a group for buffalo professionals, rose steadily; so has membership in the organization's state and regional chapters, especially in the Plains. The North American Bison Cooperative, headquartered in New Rockford, North Dakota, has established a marketing cooperative and a slaughtering-and-processing facility specially for buffalo and plans two more, including one in Canada.

Plains Indians recently formed the InterTribal Bison Cooperative, a consortium of fifty Native American governments that trains Indian buffalo producers and tribal land managers, promotes Indian buffalo art and artifacts, operates a joint venture with an Indian-owned farming company, and takes other steps to reinvigorate buffalo's historically central place in tribal cultures. Other Native American buffalo cooperatives have begun to appear (Gardner 1998), as have further Native American buffalo-restoration efforts, such as Honor the Earth's Buffalo Commons Project (LaDuke 1998). The buffalo count on Indian land has multiplied at least sixfold since 1992 (Wapato 1999).

North Dakota Governor Edward Schafer sees buffalo production and buffalo tourism as vital to the state's growth. Reversing long-standing practice, the state's bank and other Plains banks now readily lend to buffalo ranchers, and North Dakota's agricultural extension service offers them technical assistance. South Dakota's agricultural department lends for buffalo as well. In 1996 North Dakota's agriculture commissioner, Sarah Vogel, told the *New York Times* that the state will someday have more buffalo than cattle (Brooke 1996). By some estimates buffalo are already the second-leading agricultural commodity in the state (Conley 1999a).

Alberta and Saskatchewan offer their buffalo ranchers technical help. Montana State University has created a Center for Bison Studies to conduct research on buffalo and to aid buffalo enterprises. Ten tribal colleges in Nebraska and the Dakotas offer Native Americans foundation-supported programs in bison education and management (Conley 1999b; Cournoyer 1999).

Federal agencies have begun taking Buffalo Commons steps. The Forest Service is considering management changes to allow more buffalo to graze on its National Grasslands in the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Wyoming (USDA 1999, 1–24). Saskatchewan has created Grasslands National Park, eventually to encompass 350 square miles but already open to visitors. In 1992 the U.S. Department of the Interior began the Great Plains Partnership, a wildlife-protection effort by federal agencies, state governments, and their Canadian and Mexican counterparts. The Clinton administration assigned leadership of an expanded program to the Environmental Protection Agency. Beginning in the early 1990s the Nature Conservancy greatly expanded its buy-ups on the Plains, often restoring native plant and animal species on them. The Sierra Club announced a buy-up campaign for Plains places near the Lewis and Clark Trail (Stegner 2000, 46).



FIG. 3—The Buffalo Commons in the media. Source: *The Forum* [Fargo, N.Dak.], 7 February 1999, SE, 4. (Cartoon by Trygve Olson; reproduced courtesy of Jack Zaleski of *The Forum*)

Our metaphor stimulated other thinking on the Plains' Buffalo Commons future. For example, Anne Matthews's *Where the Buffalo Roam* (1992), which focuses on our work and the reaction to it, was one of four finalists for the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction. The late rancher Lawrence Brown, who lived in Buffalo, South Dakota, wrote a book about his youth entitled *Buffalo Commons Memoirs* (1995) and between 1993 and 1999 published a bimonthly newsletter, *From the Deep Plains* (another phrase taken from our work), which attempted to find alternatives to the Buffalo Commons. James Dickenson's *Home on the Range: A Century on the High Plains* (1995), Robert Manning's *Grassland: The History, Biology, Politics, and Promise of the American Prairie* (1995), Ernest Callenbach's *Bring Back the Buffalo! A Sustainable Future for America's Great Plains* (1996), and Daniel Licht's *Ecology and Economics of the Great Plains* (1997) support the Buffalo Commons and suggest new ways to achieve it.

Environmental groups promote buffalo—examples include South Dakota's Sierra Club chapter (Rebbeck 1997); Bring Back the Bison, in Evanston, Wyoming (formerly at [<http://www.evanstonwy.com/bb-bison>]); and the Great Plains Restoration Council in Denver, which explicitly intends to create the Buffalo Commons ([<http://www.gprc.org/home.html>]). *The Buffalo Commons*, a novel by the Western

writer Richard Wheeler, appeared in 1998; by the end of the book, a few years into the new century, the idea wins out. “A community’s greatest gift is the evolving history of its people, their stories, their symbols, their enduring sagas,” reads the cover for the annual Buffalo Commons Storytelling Festival, first held in 1997 in McCook, Nebraska. The Buffalo Commons metaphor has had practical effects.

METAPHOR AS A TOOL OF IMAGINATION

Scholars in many disciplines find metaphors a means to connect with and understand a messy world. As a literary device, metaphor is at least as allusive as programmatic. It interprets and enlarges meanings. It creates—in a literary fashion—a place apart, space for reflection. It reaches people that more formal approaches may not. It works especially well in times of great change, disorder, or disjunction.

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

From anthropology, the late Victor Turner argued that metaphors engender an alternative space for the society in which what was previously enforced and expected transmutes into something new (1985). Metaphors operate “as a species of liminal monster . . . whose combination of familiar and unfamiliar features or unfamiliar combinations of familiar features provokes us into thought, provides us with new perspectives. . . . The implications, suggestions, and supporting values entwined with their literal use enable us to see a new subject matter in a new way” (1974, 31).

David Abram, ecologist, philosopher, and magician, detailed human alienation from nature and place, tracing it back to the substitution of a symbolic alphabet for direct experience as a first step in homogenizing space. The magical quality that once resided in the world moved into language. The only hope of reconnecting to place lies in using stories and vibrant language:

Our task, rather, is that of *taking up* the written word, with all its potency, and patiently, carefully, writing language back into the land. Our craft is that of releasing the budded, earthly intelligence of our words, freeing them to respond to the speech of the things themselves. . . . It is the practice of spinning stories that have the rhythm and lilt of the local landscape, tales for the tongue that want to be told, again and again, sliding off the digital screen and slipping off the lettered page to inhabit these coastal forests, those desert canyons, those whispering grasslands and valleys and swamps. (Abram 1996, 273–274; emphasis in the original)

Contemporary industrial society is inundated by writing and information. Metaphor helps order and evaluate them quickly and efficiently because it allows the reader or listener to rapidly confer meaning on the words. The choices belong both to the deviser of the metaphor and to its interpreters.

Torsten Hägerstrand wrote that the geographer's task in understanding the experience of place requires a language that is largely missing (1995). He sees place as composed of a practical reality so well known that it is taken for granted and thus not articulated—so individualized that communicating it becomes a problem. Metaphor aids in clarifying and elaborating shared experience of place or region if it does what Buttimer, Turner, and Abram describe, giving insight to diverse realms of reality and new interpretations of experience (for the use of place metaphors in the computer world, see Adams 1997).

When we first wrote of the Buffalo Commons, rural Great Plains people were negotiating a change they would have preferred not to face. They could see and feel the personal, family, and community pressures, but these raised sensitivities and fears of loss. Writing from South Dakota, Kathleen Norris asked, "How do we tell the truth in a small town? Is it possible to write it? . . . We don't tend to see truth as something that could set us free because it means embracing pain, acknowledging our differences and conflicts, taking our real situation into account" (1993, 79). Emily Dickinson suggested a way around the problem: "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant— / Success in Circuit lies" (1961, 248). Metaphor provides both Truth and Circuit, indirection and distance, reality and alterations of it. At the same time, metaphor offers resolution of the conflicts between them. Robert Frost described metaphor as "saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another" (1966, 24).

THE BUFFALO COMMONS AS A REGIONAL METAPHOR

Our work drew on several kinds of Circuit in addition to metaphor itself: our own physical distance from the Plains, our social distance as academics, our interdisciplinary approach, our long-term perspective. We could afford to imagine and ponder possible futures that might only gradually take shape. We did not have to find someone to take over the local grain elevator or café. We did not have to produce policies to deal with falling cattle prices or shifting government incentives. Instead, we had the intellectual luxury of disinterestedly weighing the pressures on land, soil, water, and community and envisioning where they might eventually lead. We wrote of the Buffalo Commons as emerging after another generation if present trends continued. Some critics and supporters saw the Buffalo Commons as a formal plan that purposefully laid out the location of particular land uses, but it remained primarily a metaphor. The Buffalo Commons metaphor overshadowed its accompanying proposal and prediction yet simultaneously promoted them.

The metaphor's two words are deliberately simple and emotive, but challenging. Buffalo had served as symbol and sustenance for both Native American and Euro-American populations in the Plains. Buffalo shaped the landscape with their migrations, trampling, rolling, loosening, and fertilizing soil and bringing along other wildlife. Migrating across the Plains, they presented a visual point on the horizon that broke up the meeting of earth and sky (Figure 4). They signified the landscape and culture of the Plains. Their fate served as a warning. Because they were nearly eliminated in the late nineteenth century, they raise questions of durability and de-



FIG. 4—The Buffalo Commons on the land. Triple Seven Ranch, Hermosa, South Dakota, September 1994. (Photograph by Deborah E. Popper)

sire: Do we as a society want to maintain the past? How much do we need to change the present? Can we even stop the ongoing changes? Can we recapture what has changed? The buffalo also evoke the question of our responsibilities to other species—for example, on what terms is it possible to increase the number of buffalo? In the process would they become too much like cattle?

The metaphor uses the word “buffalo” rather than the technically more accurate “bison” because it is more familiar to the public and taps more allusions—buffalo as wildlife, myth, and merchandise. The complexity of Plains experience with bison lends life to the metaphor and increases its suggestiveness for the Plains’ future.

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

scribes to tackle the real problems? The solution has to emphasize shared problems and prospects—that is, commonality.

The Buffalo Commons provided a metaphor for reenvisioning settlement practices on the Plains. As a metaphor it was meant to evoke the characteristic and the intrinsic in order to clarify what to preserve and build on. We drew the metaphor from a narrative about how the region was shaped. The metaphor crystallized a regional story and became usable for the future; metaphor helped move the story past nostalgia to make understanding of place a forward-looking means for adaptation. The adaptation grew out of the challenge inherent in a metaphor that simultaneously suggested change, alluded to a history in revision, and had several possible interpretations that themselves had an uneasy relationship with each other. As a result, the Buffalo Commons metaphor again made the Buffalo Commons proposal and prediction more concrete.

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

BUFFALO COMMONS APPROACHES ELSEWHERE

Geographers may well serve other regions by devising usable metaphors for them. The economic and environmental trends that have forced rethinking on the Great Plains affect other large parts of America. Many farming, mining, timber, and manufacturing communities have lost or are losing their agricultural, extractive, or factory base; technological change, market shifts, environmental consequences, and increasing globalism remove jobs, investment, tax bases, and people. Like the Plains, such places face the question, What now? Each region can use its own metaphors to aid its adjustments. To work effectively, such metaphors need to derive their terms from a recognizable regional narrative.

Many rural regions are potential candidates: the Lower Mississippi Delta, central Appalachia, the Upper Midwest, northern New England, the western portions of the Corn Belt, the Pacific Northwest, and central Alaska (Lonsdale and Archer 1998). West Virginia coal, Minnesota iron, Michigan automobiles, Oregon timber, Illinois and Louisiana farm towns and their surrounding areas have all recorded serious population and economic losses. They show gap-toothed blocks and deserted buildings, whether empty storefronts, automobile dealerships, barns, breakers, or factories. Such places often experience environmental degradation as well—dropping water tables, say, or mounting slag heaps—that makes the regions less desirable

and complicate their future possibilities. The regions amount to brownfields, their images connoting waste or decay. Better to find and develop metaphors that capture what has sustained the regions than ones that rein them back. The metaphors have to incorporate potentially positive images in order to work as bases for their region's future.

The rural Pacific Northwest, for instance, has seen its communities decline, much like the Great Plains. Northwest logging has suffered because of timber depletion, competition from other American wooded regions (notably the Southeast) and abroad, tightened federal environmental restrictions on the region's national forests, and environmentalist urgings for even tighter restrictions. Logger-environmentalist violence has occurred. In fact, the Interior Department's Great Plains Partnership was created largely because former Kansas Governor Mike Hayden, then an assistant secretary of the interior, worried that a Northwest-style "train wreck" would recur on the Plains (Pendleton 1993; Herndon 1994).

In the Northwest the ruling metaphor can build on the salmon, the region's signature animal (Findlay 1997). Politically and symbolically adept use of the fish has already started to shape the region's transition. In March 1999 the Interior Department's Fish and Wildlife Service listed nine wild species of salmon as either endangered or threatened. Most Oregon and Washington state government and business leaders endorsed the designations and their likely consequences, such as altered logging practices, dam teardowns, restored streamflows, restrictions on building, and public purchases of land. The office of Washington Governor Gary Locke formulated plans to respond to the designations months in advance (Verhovek 1999a, 18).

Salmon return has multiple metaphorical meanings in the Pacific Northwest, extending south to the Sacramento River in northern California. At a literal level it simultaneously connotes the return of the individual salmon to its original spawning ground, the annual collective run of the fish, and the restoration of its habitat. At a policy level it suggests several kinds of action. In rural areas it implies restoring economic health and finding ecological sustainability for the logging industry and its communities. In big-city and suburban areas it implies controlling sprawl, pollution, and other effects of urban growth (on Portland, Oregon, for example, see Jacobson 1999). Throughout the Northwest the exact measures for reaching these objectives are unclear, as are the costs of the measures and the possible contradictions among objectives (DeWeerd 1999). But the goal of the return of the salmon is widely popular and politically motivating.

Thus Steven Rogel, president of the Weyerhaeuser Company, an international paper and timber corporation near Tacoma, told the *New York Times*, "Today's listings mean that all of us are going to have to do our fair share to solve the salmon crisis. Forest landowners are ready to go." William Ruckelshaus, a Seattleite and former Weyerhaeuser head who led the Environmental Protection Agency during the Nixon and Reagan administrations, told the same reporter, "For the last 100 years, we sort of forced the salmon to adjust to us. Now we have to figure out how to adjust to the salmon. At this juncture, there is tremendous enthusiasm for that, enough

political support to cause politicians here to feel comfortable in taking some pretty extraordinary steps" (Verhovek 1999b, 14). And Oregon Governor John Kitzhaber recently advocated breaching four large dams along the Snake River (Verhovek 2000, 9). Indeed, Seattle Mayor Paul Schell has for some time been saying that "in working together to save the salmon, it may turn out that the salmon saves us" (Verhovek 1999a, 1).

Like buffalo on the Plains, the salmon offers its region simultaneous commercial, wildlife, and mythic possibilities. Like buffalo, the salmon appeals to whites and Indians, but in different ways. Like buffalo, the salmon guide changes in regional extractive and planning practices that could yield serious benefits; both animals suggest that preservation can pay. As with buffalo, the salmon metaphor has fruitful conceptual and practical ambiguities; it usefully has different meanings to different groups. In April 1999 Timothy Wapato, a Native American who had headed the Columbia River Intertribal Fish Commission, a group working to restore the salmon, became executive director of the InterTribal Bison Cooperative and began planning for an Indian buffalo-salmon summit meeting (Wapato 1999). The salmon clearly offer the region a positive symbolic appeal that the spotted owl, another subject of 1990s Northwest environmental-economic debate, never did, even as owl-related court battles drag on (Verhovek 1999c).

The political use of the salmon so far has mainly involved agenda setting. It has not yet dealt with, for example, questions of how far the large global logging companies' interests overlap those of local timber employees and towns. Nor does it deal with whether actions that would end up controlling water pollution in Portland or Seattle would be politically acceptable in upriver Columbia Basin logging communities that produce some of the pollution in the first place. In addition, the probable measures based on salmon restoration lead to rather more potentially unpopular federal and state regulatory activities than have Buffalo Commons measures. But building the salmon symbol into a full-blown regional metaphor—call it perhaps Salmon Return—could broaden societal possibilities in a situation in which changing land uses harm some groups. At least verbally, these groups now seem willing to make genuine sacrifices for the sake of the salmon.

Similarly, the New York City author and photographer Camilo José Vergara has suggested that twelve crumbling square blocks of downtown Detroit be preserved as a monument to the high period of early modern American capitalism (1995a; 1995b, 215–225; 1999, 205–206). The blocks consist of skyscrapers built in the 1920s as offices, department stores, or hotels that are now thinly occupied, vacant, or boarded up. Vergara's response to the relocation of downtown Detroit's automobile industry—an industry that in its heyday gave the city more tall buildings than any city except New York and Chicago—was to celebrate it as archaeology: "I propose that as a tonic for our imagination, as a call for renewal, as a place within our national memory, a dozen city blocks of pre-Depression skyscrapers be stabilized and left standing as ruins: an American Acropolis. We could transform the nearly 100 troubled buildings into a grand national park of play and wonder" (Vergara, quoted in Bennet 1995,

10). As the *New York Times* noted, in practice Vergara's Detroit Acropolis already exists, though neither the city government nor tourists have yet discovered it. Vergara argues, "People need to say, 'Damn it, this used to be a symbol of failure, but damn it, this is now something sublime'" (p. 10).

It will be interesting to see whether Vergara's concept begets any projects. Like the Buffalo Commons and Salmon Return, it pulls back from previous attempts at mastery. Instead of large-scale manipulation and drastic refashioning of land-use patterns, it strives to minimize further human impacts, to revive and conserve the most evocative parts of the past. Again like the Buffalo Commons and Salmon Return, it starts with a seemingly negative premise—the current conundrum of apparently inevitable economic decline—and refashions it as an environmental solution. Vergara's idea, as with its Great Plains and Pacific Northwest counterparts, offers intriguing ambiguity that draws attention. For instance, the Detroit Acropolis, like the Athenian original (Storace 1996), glories in a city's (and a region's and a nation's) past while showing little regret for its demise. To fully function as a regional metaphor, however, it may need to allude more to something unique to Detroit in order to generate experimentation in places and uses beyond a single district of grand ruins.

Detroit is one of the many large old cities in the Northeast and the Midwest that have declined since World War II, as much of their more affluent populations left for the suburbs or the Sunbelt. Nearly all the Northeast-Midwest decliner cities have lower populations today than they did in 1950 (Rybczynski and Linnemann 1999, 32–35). St. Louis, Missouri, and Buffalo, New York, actually have lower populations than they did a century ago. The main outlier to this trend is New York City, whose postwar population has held almost constant because of immigration, in recent decades primarily from Asia and Latin America. Moreover, the decliner cities would have fallen even farther were it not for their own Third World immigration. Before World War II, when these cities were growing because of European and domestic immigration, the nation had an urban-regional metaphor to describe the resulting diverse neighborhoods and the national culture they created: the Melting Pot.

The metaphor came from a pro-immigration hit play of that name by Israel Zangwill, an English novelist, dramatist, and Zionist leader. Set in New York City, the play opened in Washington, D.C., in 1908, with President Theodore Roosevelt, at the time a supporter of liberal immigration, in the audience, and it soon became a smash in New York, Chicago, and London. The Melting Pot metaphor conveyed the ambivalence that many Americans, old and new, felt about the controversial immigration of the period; they liked the growth it produced but worried—often in a racist manner—about its sources and outcome. Even Zangwill, in a 1914 afterword to his play, wrote that "the process of American amalgamation is not assimilation or simple surrender to the dominant type, as is popularly supposed, but an all-round give-and-take by which the final type may be enriched or impoverished" (1914, 203).

At the same time, the Melting Pot captured the unruly but mostly optimistic vision Americans had of themselves and their futures. In the last two generations the country has largely abandoned the Melting Pot without finding as powerful a new urban or national metaphor to replace it. The more recent (and even less assimilationist) ideas of multiculturalism or of the United States as embodying a tossed-salad ethnicity simply cannot compete. The consequence has often been considerable discouragement about our cities, our latest immigrants, and our collective prospects. The nation badly needs a contemporary metaphor comparable to the Melting Pot.

THE BUFFALO COMMONS AND GEOGRAPHICAL PRACTICE

“Regions,” writes Marie Price, “are the most common spatial abstractions geographers can create. . . . Having the ability to form mental and textual images of places, to make people see a place anew, is one of the most important contributions geographers make.” In her analysis of Venezuela’s awareness of its Andean region, she shows that “Regional depictions, crafted with care, affirm the power of narrative description lauded by Yi-Fu Tuan as that ‘magical idea that mere words can call places into being’” (Price 1996, 334, 352, quoting Tuan 1991, 691). In 1961 the geographer Jean Gottmann united the American Northeast into a new metaphorical configuration: Megalopolis (Gottmann 1961). Our Buffalo Commons experience convinces us of metaphor’s worth as a method to extract meaning from regions and enable public creation of practical new meanings. Unlike metaphor, many contemporary geographical techniques—for instance, geographical information systems, deconstruction, and statistical inference—often distance the discipline from important lay audiences. Thus we urge geographers to make more use of regional metaphors.

Regions are the concepts and constructs of geographers, but they too often leave to others the invention of metaphors that end up defining the regions for the general public. Zangwill offers one example, among many others. The conservationist Marjory Stoneman Douglas’s metaphor of the “River of Grass” formed the nation’s consciousness of the Florida Everglades (1947). Her book helped expand Everglades National Park, create the neighboring Big Cypress National Preserve, stop late-1960s proposals for an Everglades Jetport, and stimulate Florida’s 1972 growth-management law, its 1980s and 1990s successors, and the current federal Everglades ecosystem initiative, which may amount to the largest environmental-restoration project in history (Wald 1999). Douglas’s *The Everglades: River of Grass* has stayed in print continually for more than half a century.

Nongeographers create regional metaphors for commercial, political, and moral purposes as well. The *Chicago Tribune* and its publisher, Colonel Robert McCormick, effectively promoted metropolitan Chicago as Chicagoland from the 1920s through the 1950s “as a kind of ultra-normal, common-sense alternative to the excesses of the East and West Coasts . . . a place apart, a calm heartland of bedrock American values” (Lyman 2000, 16). The metaphor of Silicon Valley for the computer-driven San Francisco Peninsula originated in 1971 as the title of a trade-

press article on the growth of the semiconductor industry in the overall Bay Area (Hoeffler 1971). *The Nine Nations of North America*, by the journalist Joel Garreau, suggested mentally dividing the continent into regions and used geographical, economic, ethnic, and historical metaphors to name them; for example, the Foundry for the industrial Northeast and Midwest, the Empty Quarter for the intermountain West, and Mexamerica for the southern borderlands (1981).

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

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

By contrast, our Buffalo Commons work seeks to construct a new regional metaphor with complexity and generativity, as a term with its own life—ambiguous, edgy, annoying to some, admirable to others. An essential part of metaphor construction involves launching it into the larger world and seeing how it fares there, beyond the influence of its authors. For a regional metaphor to work, it should be at least mildly discomfiting to a few relevant groups. Describing the Great Plains as the Buffalo Commons challenges such ideas as the Cattle Kingdom and America’s Breadbasket. Calling the Everglades a River of Grass contests policies of drainage and development.

Thus an effective regional metaphor suggests particular consequences—that is, proposals and predictions. The Buffalo Commons leads to, for example, various forms of bison cultivation and grasslands restoration, in the same way that Salmon Return offers criteria for logging and urban development or that the Melting Pot points toward ethnic and racial tolerance. A successful regional metaphor is likely to discourage some land uses. The Buffalo Commons is not casinos, landfills, and prisons; nor is the River-of-Grass Everglades artificial channels, airports, and massive subdivisions.

Surprisingly often, a workable metaphor comes from outsiders to the region rather than from natives of it. We have never lived in the Plains; Vergara is not a Detroit; and Zangwill was not an American urbanite. Perhaps outsiders bring a detachment that is useful in seeing a region differently from how those already there do, and so they reenvision it. Their outsider status also gives them some security from retaliation by angry insiders.

Above all, the terms of a productive regional metaphor should be simple words, ones in wide and varied use. They should allow different interpretations, so that the public can craft its own reactions and actions in response to the metaphor. Ambiguity in this case is not a drawback; it is a necessity. In the case of the Buffalo Commons, ambiguity allows such seemingly divergent groups as the InterTribal Bison Cooperative, the Forest Service, the Nature Conservancy, the Great Plains Restoration Council, and individual buffalo ranchers to collaborate productively in regional restoration, while each gives it specific meaning and direction.

Authors of regional metaphors should recognize the sheer chanciness and mysteriousness of devising one that the public adopts. Some entirely plausible regional metaphors never attract attention for reasons no one can explain. Most may be doomed to public failure. As far as we can tell, the Buffalo Commons came to public light primarily because in 1988 a member of North Dakota Governor George Sinner's staff showed him our first article, and he began to mention it in his speeches as a sad sign of how little the rest of the country knew about Plains agriculture. We only learned the details of these events a full decade later, when a *Bismarck Tribune* reporter published them in a story about the tenth anniversary of the Buffalo Commons (Olson 1998).

It helps when regional metaphors fall on well-prepared ground. Over the last 160 years, for example, many observers of the Great Plains have suggested ideas similar to the Buffalo Commons. They include such prominent figures as the painter and author George Catlin in the 1830s, the Paiute Indian prophet and leader Wovoka in the 1880s, the Agriculture Department official Lewis Gray in the 1920s and 1930s, and the author James Michener in the 1970s (Popper and Popper 2000). None of the earlier observers used the phrase "the Buffalo Commons," but all believed that Americans had oversettled the Plains (or would soon), and most believed that the region's salvation—its preservation—would require more buffalo. Again, most of them were outsiders to the region.

Even the best-constructed regional metaphor needs nurturing by its authors if it is to reach the public. They, just as much as their metaphor, must be accessible to the public. They should write for nonacademic publications. They should promptly and fully answer all mail, telephone calls, and publication and speaking requests. They should respond fully and unstintingly to the media. Most importantly, the authors should stay cool when—not if, but when—their treasured metaphor is publicly misunderstood, even if some of the misunderstanding is deliberate. They should suffer fools gladly and be grateful for them. The fools signal that the metaphor is working.

The construction approach to regional metaphor democratizes and energizes landscape creation precisely because it easily escapes its authors, especially if it is picked up and used. The authorial inability to tightly manage metaphor's meaning—a result of metaphor's inherent openness to interpretation—is essential. Our work has been most effective when least controlling. It was never our plan to intervene in the life of the Great Plains. When we first proposed the Buffalo Commons, many people responded as though we had the power to make it happen, and they resisted. We actually received hostile letters asking where we were planning to locate a fence around the ten-state area. As our lack of power became clear, resistance diminished, and the emergence of the Buffalo Commons grew more likely. The metaphor generated a clearer, stronger reality than we ever could. The different interpretations have resulted in a flexible, diverse Buffalo Commons more varied than we could have imagined ourselves.

South Dakota rancher-writer Linda Hasselstrom reflects the best Plains tradition—down-to-earth, thoughtful, useful, literate. In *Going Over East* she eloquently portrays the quotidian life of her home place and ponders its meanings as she moves cattle from pasture to pasture. She writes, "It's easy to romanticize and distort the West; our history invites it." She understands the tendency, but refrains: "Broad generalities and shallow theories confuse and anger me. Reality hinges on practicality, on knowledge that has daily use" (1987, 104, 105). Her stance challenges geography, for conceptualizing regions requires generalities and theories. Regional metaphor offers a method to deepen them, to bring them closer to a public that can then make them practical.

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