According to Janine Brodie, “Regionalism structures political conflict around the distribution of resources across geographic space.” All regions are imaginary—the sharp borderlines and different coloured spaces of the map are intellectual constructs, not physiographic ones—but, like most imaginary human constructs, maps control some of the ways human minds can conceptualize, in this case, place. If we look again at our particular map of the Great Plains, we can see that its outlines are an amalgam of physiographic and political features. On the land itself, elevation gradually rises and average annual precipitation gradually drops from east to west, while summer temperatures rise and summer daylight hours diminish from north to south across the Great Plains. Both native vegetation and contemporary cropping patterns spill over the edges of the region in all directions. Rural areas of the Great Plains share with the rest of rural North America, and indeed the world, problems such as depopulation, loss of political power, soil and water degradation, siting of material and human “waste” facilities, and low and uncertain commodity prices. Urban Great Plains centres are
indistinguishable in their Wal-Marts, fast food franchises, and drug problems from other North American cities. Yet the variability across its area and the indistinct boundaries of the Great Plains do not negate the value of discussing it as “region” in order to structure our understanding of the political and economic tug-of-wars that have characterized this place and are rendering the rural areas—the vast majority of the land—socially and demographically unviable, except for the growing populations and high birth rates on reserves and reservations.

Let us look briefly at the geographical and human history that does unify the Great Plains and enables us to speak of it as a region that is more meaningful than either a single state or province or the larger and far more amorphous region designated “the West.” As we noted, about 65 million years ago, the great tectonic plates on which the continents ride ground together in the Laramide orogeny, pushing up the Rocky Mountains. The soil of the plains is largely derived from the weathering away of the Rockies by wind, water, and frost, and the deposition of soil wherever the wind or water slows down enough to drop individual grains. Because the prevailing winds come from the west, they tend to shed most of their water on the west side of the mountains, since the air cools and condenses out moisture as the winds rise to pass over the obstruction. The resulting rain shadow east of the Rockies determines the semi-arid nature of the plains. Glaciation, the recession of the glaciers, and the concentration of meltwater in ancient Lake Agassiz (whose remnants are Lakes Winnipeg, Manitoba, and Winnipegosis) repeatedly flattened the region, but also decorated it with ancient shorelines, lateral and terminal glacial moraines, and prairie pothole lakes, formed where chunks of ice surrounded by glacial till melted, leaving holes in the till. The Black Hills and Cypress Hills became stone islands in the seas of ice, providing refuge for a variety of species: even today, they support different flora and fauna from the surrounding plains. Huge deep beds of gravel underlie the smooth surface of the prairies: like sponges, they collect water as it flows through the flat, braided rivers of the plains south of the Missouri and seeps down to aquifers, particularly the Ogallala Aquifer, which underlies the land from Nebraska’s sandhills to the Llano Estacado of Texas. The deep, dark soils of the Great Plains, an annual average precipitation of nine to twenty inches (17 to 50 cm), and frequent
lightning-caused fires allowed a characteristic vegetation of grasses and associated forbs to evolve, along with gallery forests along riverbanks and ravines.2

Before the nineteenth century, the Plains had supported human societies for millennia—longer in the south than in the north, for the most part. The people had blended horticulture in corn villages along the rivers with hunting and gathering. Their travois pulled only by their sturdy dogs, they could neither follow the buffalo nor ride them down, but they could predict where they would be and painstakingly herd them into pounds or over cliffs.3 In the nineteenth century, it was the Great Plains that had the distinction of becoming, in a way not true for any other region, Amer-European “free land”—despite being the heartland of flourishing and expanding horse-bison-Sun Dance cultures. As early as the 1820s, the US federal government was eying the Plains as land too far west or too arid for Amer-European settlement and as a dumping ground for Indigenous peoples until such time as they either assimilated or died out. Before the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, the whole eastern tier of the US Great Plains was Indian Territory, and Oklahoma and the Dakotas retained this distinction until statehood, though actual Indigenous occupancy was progressively more restricted. Starting with the passage of the Homestead Act in 1862 in the United States and continuing with the passage of the Dominion Lands Act in 1872 in Canada, the Great Plains in both countries was the main area opened to homesteading—in which the intending settler bet three (in Canada) or five (in the US) years against the government for 160 to 640 acres of land. In reality, more land on the Great Plains was purchased (through pre-emption, from railroads, from the Hudson’s Bay Company, from government entities, or from other settlers) than was actually proved up in homesteads. In any case, this segment of national land policy—although it was also used in the southern United States, the upper Midwest, and the Pacific Northwest—overwhelmingly centred on the Plains, introducing the land to free market economies in a most incongruous way. The land and the terms of its incorporation into the current market system distinguish the Great Plains from the US Midwest and the St. Lawrence/Great Lakes lowlands, which were sold for money or in exchange for military service or which were granted or sold to seigneurs or other landlords who intended
to tenant them for a profit. At the same time, the Plains differed from the
Shield, the mountains, the desert, and the North, which never entered pri-

tative ownership.

In *The Fur Trade in Canada*, Harold Innis laid out an enduring
relationship between the European metropolitan centres, the Canadian
entrepôt cities, and the fur-producing staples hinterlands. J.M.S. Careless
developed the theories, Paul Voisey modified them for the Canadian
Prairies, and William Cronon, in *Nature’s Metropolis*, further modified
them for the US Great Plains. But “hinterland” is a purely economic and
relational status. The Great Plains of both Canada and the United States
are now economic hinterlands—even if Calgary now boasts more corporate
headquarters than any other Canadian city but Toronto. During Blackfoot
and Lakota times—when many nations shared the culture marked by the
bison, the Sun Dance, and eventually the horse—the Great Plains was the
centre of the universe, the place where creation began. Full of sacred sites
as well as both faunal and vegetal abundance, linked to trading routes that
provided any wants the Prairies did not produce, this region was no hin-
terland until it was encountered by Europeans. But the connotation of “hin-
terland” is not simply relational—it implies some kind of deficiency, as in
the title of the play “If You’re So Great, Why Are You Still in Saskatoon?” It
is important to reiterate that no region in the world is deficient—or exces-
sive—in terms of the organisms that have co-evolved with it. The Great
Plains is grassful, not treeless.\(^4\) The Great Plains is semi-arid, its weather
as variable as anywhere in the world, and often violent, but these are condi-
tions that promote a complex grass and grazing ecology. Drought is a recur-
ring condition on the Great Plains, a deficiency for a sedentary agrarian
society but an advantage for a pastoral lifestyle in ways that contemporary
whitestream plains society does not yet seem to have fathomed.

The movement of peoples onto the Great Plains between the 1860s
and 1914 is an epic of one of the great migrations in human history. It
is more (and less), however, than the valorized saga of “conquering” the
land and establishing the breadbasket of the world and the home of mil-

lions of valiant family farmers where once had been a desert occupied by a
few nomadic bands of Indians. “Desert” is, first of all, an unreliable term.
Remember, no ecosystem is deficient in terms of the organisms that have
co-evolved with it. The Great Plains is a complex and dynamic ecosystem with biofeedback mechanisms—such as gophers and grasshoppers—that keep it viable in the face of one of the most extreme and variable climates on earth. “Nomad,” in the sense of a non-planning, erratic wanderer, is as suspect a term as “desert.” Plains people before the advent of the horse visited various areas on a regular seasonal cycle, anticipating bison, elk, and other animal migrations as well as utilizing roots, tubers, berries, and other vegetable foodstuffs in season and preparing and storing them for winter. The return of the horse to the Great Plains increased the distance the people could cover and the materials they could carry with them, freeing them to use the whole Plains instead of being tied to the general vicinity of major rivers.

After the European “discovery” of North America but before any prairie schooners had crossed the Missouri or cart brigades had set out hopefully from Red River, numerous migrant peoples had entered the Great Plains from the east, south, and northwest. Although, as Vine Deloria suggests, the Siouan peoples may have come from the Black Hills area, by 1492 they seem to have been living in the Great Lakes/Ohio valley region, from whence they migrated west. The Osages settled in the southeast (Missouri and Oklahoma) and the Lakotas and Assiniboines in the northwest (Montana, Dakotas, Manitoba, Saskatchewan), with other groups strung out in between. Partly they responded to a push from the east, as European settlement and trade patterns started a train of displacement, and partly to the pull of the hunting and gathering opportunities of the Great Plains; perhaps they were merely returning to an ancestral homeland. By the 1810s, the southeastern peoples who had assimilated far too successfully for their Amer-European neighbours—the Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Seminoles—began moving west, mostly to escape Amer-European encroachment. By the 1830s, the bulk of these people, including mixed-blood (with white and black) and African-Americans both enslaved and free, had been forcibly removed by the US government to Indian Territory (Oklahoma); in the following decade, numerous midwestern and eastern groups such as Shawnees, Miamis, Wendats, Senecas, Ottawas, Delawares and others were less violently but still forcibly removed to Indian Territory (Kansas and Oklahoma). When the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854
opened the land to “squatter sovereignty” and set off “Bleeding Kansas,” a long-running prelude to the American Civil War, no land in Kansas was legally available for either free-state or slave-state settlers—it was all set aside in treaties or in trust for Native nations.5

Coming south from Hudson Bay and west along the St. Lawrence and Great Lakes, mixed-blood descendants of the fur trade settled at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. Their numbers were augmented by both the children and the retired workers of the fur trade, and eventually by Scots and Swiss immigrants. In the south, another mixed-blood community, of Spanish, Native, and Moorish descent, moved slowly into the Llano of West Texas and New Mexico, surrounding and to some extent blending with the long-settled Pueblo agriculturalists and the Athapaskan-speaking pastoralists from the northwest. Similarly, the Kiowas moved, over several centuries, from the northwest down through the Black Hills to central Oklahoma.6

Euro/Afro/North American settlement of the Great Plains, then, came into a complex and diverse ecosystem that at many places may have been at or near the carrying capacity of the land. Mounted hunter-gatherer cultures both competed with and complemented older corn village/hunter-gatherer societies, such as the Pawnees and Mandans, who were established in many river valleys. The Canadian prairies, with a shorter ice-free history than the United States and a much shorter growing season, for the most part lacked the corn villages, but this ecological niche was accounted for by Scots and Métis horticulturalists in Red River and by Ojibwa (Anishinaabe) wild rice harvesters to their east. Euro/Afro/North American settlement did not introduce agriculture to the Great Plains, but it did introduce large-scale commercial monocultures in both field crops and animal husbandry. Eco-historians question the sustainability of bison herds even before commercialized bison hunting led to the collapse of the herds in the 1870s and theorize that even by the 1830s, the bison were both overstocked and over-hunted. Indeed, it is likely that bison numbers were never stable. Despite theories of climax vegetation (implying also climax fauna), the Great Plains is marked by variability—even instability. As James Malin has pointed out and contemporary ecologists such as Don Gayton have emphasized, the grasslands have developed symbiotically with crisis—dust storms, prairie
fires, long droughts, floods, and population explosion and collapse. The
sunflower-bordered roads of which Willa Cather writes so fondly are less
examples of J.E. Weaver’s progression to climax than of the alternations
among various forbs and grasses in adaptation to changing conditions.7

Once Euro–North Americans encountered the Great Plains, they
imaged it alternately as desert or garden, responding less to dry or wet con-
ditions in the place itself than to ideas of what they wanted it to be. Thus,
various reincarnations of the wishful thought that rain follows the plough
lasted from the 1870s in Nebraska, through the localized dam building and
irrigation era of the early twentieth century and the mainstem Missouri
dams of the 1940s, until at least the early 1990s and the building of the
Oldman Dam in Alberta. Global-warming denial is the most recent and
least imaginative version of the mantra. Nonetheless, once the collective
decision was somehow made that the Great Plains was to be a garden, set-
tlement and transformation of the region from what Scott Momaday called
a “lordly society” of “fighters and thieves, hunters and priests of the Sun”
to a society of production agriculture linked to world markets happened
extremely rapidly.8 Unlike agricultural frontiers to the east and to some
extent the west, which had undergone a period of subsistence agriculture as
described by such pioneers as Ontarian Susannah Moodie or Michigander
Caroline Kirkland, the Plains jumped into global competition in two gen-
erations. The process began in the 1860s with the original US Homestead
Act, the end of the US Civil War, Canada’s Confederation, the completion
of the Union Pacific, the first transcontinental railroad, and the cession of
Rupert’s Land to the Dominion of Canada. The taking of the Great Plains
was completed in the first decade of the twentieth century with Alberta
and Saskatchewan becoming provinces in 1905 and Oklahoma achieving
statehood in 1907.

There were a number of interlocking ideas involved in these two
generations of taking of the land. One was the assumption, so basic as to be
unstated, that had governed westward expansion from Europe since before
the time of Columbus. An ideology still embraced by some neo-conserva-
tive thinkers, it held that a Christian society with an expanding population,
an agricultural land-use ethic based on individualism and private property,
and an increasing mastery of science and technology had an inherent right
to land and natural resources, a right that naturally trumped the rights of anyone else with whom such a society might come in contact. By the 1860s, this basic belief had also evolved to require, quite explicitly in the United States and more hesitantly in Canada, a free market economy buttressed with an infrastructure—internal improvements and a banking system—provided or facilitated by the federal government. For Canada’s first prime minister, John A. Macdonald, using “free” land to attract immigrants and building a railway to get them to the Prairies was part of what came to be called the National Policy. The railway would fulfill the promise to British Columbia that it would have a land link to the Dominion of Canada, would hold the newly acquired Rupert’s Land territories against US expansionists looking north and Fenians looking to avenge Ireland by taking England’s North American territories, and would transport the settlers to the “free” land. Once there, these pioneer farmers would create a market for machinery made in central Canada, thus developing an industrial base for the new country.

The square survey that enabled the hopeful homesteader to stake a quarter section is a perfect blend of federal infrastructure and individual enterprise. Thomas Jefferson had dreamed of an America based on yeoman farmers, each tending his own plot of ground and practising virtues that would lead to a settled and happy democracy. Alexander Hamilton, on the other hand, envisaged a commercial and urban America that would be a financial power in the world. Philosophically, the various Homestead Acts were purely Jeffersonian—contented families living in white houses with green trim and looking out on red barns with white trim would live happily ever after on their 160-acre farms. In practice, the Homestead Acts were a lot more Hamiltonian. As Alberta historian Paul Voisey has shown in his wonderful study Vulcan, some settlers were genuinely interested in putting together family farms of 160 acres or more. A few were seriously involved in constructing much larger farms. Many were engaged in speculation, perhaps holding down a homestead and dabbling in town lots, changing both profession and residence with bewildering speed and frequency. In fact, the Homestead Acts were the greatest instruments of middle-class capital formation ever invented. It was not wheat that made Alberta and Saskatchewan magnets for immigration of both capital and people, it was
the land itself. The land became capital and wheat was the obvious, if temporary, mechanism. As a long-term wheat-producing asset, the land would never be worth what mortgage companies and intending buyers poured into it, a truth that continues to haunt the Plains in terms of perennial grain surpluses.

Turning land into capital was also crucial for the free-grass ranching that flourished on the Great Plains in the margin between Indigenous people assigned to reserves and the entrance of the homesteaders. As ranching historian Warren Elofson has shown, the inherently unsustainable open-range cattle operations could never be economically viable, but they siphoned large quantities of money into the country. As they went belly up after the big Die-Ups, the money stayed with the sellers of cattle, the ranch hands who had been paid for bogus homestead and pre-emption entries to secure water rights for the ranchers (a practice more common in the US than in Canada, where leases provided a somewhat more rational basis of allotting land), and the various other payees and middlemen who handled the cash or started small viable herds of “orphaned” cattle. While the homesteaders focussed on the deficiency of the land, the open-range ranchers claimed the pastures as a paradise for cattle; they underestimated, though, the deficiency of both southern range cattle and the beefier British imports to sustain themselves on the northern prairies without shelter, protection from predators, or supplemental feeding.

The Homestead Acts were more successful at creating capital than at creating viable family farms; they were also extremely successful at moving land first from Native sovereignty to the public domain and then to private ownership. Like the Land Ordinance of 1785, which set out the form of the square survey, based on astronomical observations rather than on the lay of the land, the Homestead Acts commodified land, moving it from the commons to individual plots for individual ownership. An obsessive belief in the magic of fee simple ownership of land, including surface and usually mineral rights in perpetuity, fuelled the Homestead Acts as well as the Dawes General Allotment Act of 1887 and its variants from 1885 to 1906. Although allotment was supposed to make it easier for Native families to hold onto their land, in practice, it resulted in massive land losses: from 1887 to 1934 (when allotment was repealed), Indian land in the United States dropped
from 135 million to 47 million acres. The *Dominion Lands Act* was an inevitable result of the US *Homestead Act*. Canada could compete with settlers, particularly immigrants, only if it also offered them “free” land on even easier terms than in the United States. The gut-level commitment to owning land, particularly on the part of European peasants who had never been able to secure tenure on the soil they worked, as well as the ideological commitment to private property, especially in contradistinction to the radicals of 1848 in Europe, who extolled variations of communism, obscured the truth that the Great Plains was *not* free land in the nineteenth century.

Before the homesteaders, the Great Plains was purposefully occupied and used in ways that countered climate variability with geographic mobility. Indigenous people did not *follow* the buffalo herds—rather they anticipated buffalo movement and stationed themselves where experience told them the bison would be moving. Or, if their forecast was wrong, they moved toward alternate or supplementary food sources, such as deer, elk, berries, or prairie turnip. Allotment of specific small parcels of land, for both Indians and homesteaders, meant that modifying the effects of a variable climate and producing a uniform product for a world economy would substitute for modifying place of residence to sustain a plentiful subsistence living. And even if fee simple had been the key to a more prosperous life for humans on the Great Plains, the 160-acre homestead, laid out arbitrarily on the grid system, was by no means the most propitious choice. The river lots that the Métis had borrowed from the Laurentian valleys in Quebec granted each landholder access to water, wood, and transportation along the river; a kitchen garden; fields for grain; and finally, communal hay and pasture lands. Because they included both river frontage and uplands, the river lots allowed, on a small scale, the geographic mobility that had marked successful human adaptation to the Great Plains and took advantage of the micro-climates that affected everything from subsoil moisture to frost-free days.

To the extent that Indigenous people could control their allotments, they, too, chose river frontage mixed with upland to provide a source of indigenous food plants, access to hunting land, and access to pasture and crop land. The completely arbitrary nature of the range and township system that assumed all land was essentially interchangeable was singularly
ill-equipped to help the Native family or the settlers adapt, within the confines of their own homestead, to extreme variability. Although the implied uniformity of the land was amenable to commercial agriculture for global export, it was not a particularly intelligent way to utilize the Great Plains. As James Scott has shown in *Seeing Like a State*, the square (or cadastral) survey was not really in keeping with peasant agricultures in Europe, where it was introduced for the benefit of state administrators and tax collectors, but it was even less suitable to the Great Plains. Yet neither lawmakers nor homesteaders questioned whether the allotment of the commons through the square survey was a superior form of land use—it was, by that time, self-evident. Indigenous people throughout the Great Plains did question the assumption during the whole allotment period, both by opposing allotment in general and by trying to secure plots that combined riverine and upland acreage and adjoined land held by other family members. Neither government nor incoming settlers, however, credited their arguments.

Canadian officials were not as obsessed with allotment as were Americans, probably because the original reserves were much smaller than American reservations, so there was less need to create the idea of “surplus” land that must be captured for intending homesteaders from the East. Prairie reserves, however, lost about half of their land between 1896 and 1928. Nonetheless, officials were equally deaf to the pleas from peoples such as the Dakotas of Saskatchewan for promised hay and pastureland. And, as Sarah Carter has shown, Indian Superintendent Hayter Reed’s obsession with the idea of the inevitable progression from “savagery” through “barbarism” to “civilization” fatally hampered Cree adaptation to farming by equally foreclosing both communal and individualistic adaptations of sedentary farming techniques to northern Plains climate variability, thus eliminating Crees as economic rivals to neighbouring Canadian-European farmers.

If the *Homestead Act* was the advertisement, the railroad was the vehicle for the intending settlers. The construction of the railroads was high drama, especially the first transcontinentals in each country, the Union Pacific Railroad and the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR). Both lines gobbled human lives, money, timber, stone, and iron. Both were exercises in what economists call “premature enterprise”—too risky to build for the normal economic gains to be expected at the time. As Robert Fogel explains, in the
United States, a handful of entrepreneurs developed an elaborate kickback scheme centred around their Credit Mobilier company to raise the rate of return enough to attract investors. In Canada, John A. Macdonald’s still unfinished CPR would almost certainly have fallen into bankruptcy and ruin had it not been for the Northwest Resistance in Saskatchewan (or the Northwest Rebellion, as MacDonald would have called and understood it) and both England’s and Ontario’s perceived need to ship soldiers out West to put down the “Indians.”

Though it may be a metaphor to call the Euro–North American settlers of the Great Plains an army of occupation, the first passengers on the CPR were quite literally soldiers sent to affirm Canadian sovereignty over the Great Plains.

The saga of building the CPR across the muskeg of the Shield, over and through the mazy mountains of the Rockies and the Selkirks, and down the gorges of coastal ranges is definitely a national saga. Although the railway was originally built to tie British Columbia to the rest of the newly confederated Canada, in terms of loss of sovereignty, mono-crop settlement, and economic development (or exploitation), the effect of the railway was greatest on the Plains. The railway became one of the most vivid ideas—positive or negative—in the intellectual repertoire of the Plains. Settlement of the sort that occurred was impossible without the railroads, yet the railroads, grain elevators, and markets, and Macdonald’s National Policy, were also the scapegoats for the prairie pioneers’ indomitable sense of entitlement. Both countries paid for the railroad building partly through granting each rail company land in a checkerboard pattern on either side of each completed mile of track. Where the land did not seem to be of sufficient quality that its future sale would pay off the rail-building costs, the rail companies could select “lieu lands” in a more promising area. Settlers looking for free land who found that half the most valuable areas were railroad property, and for sale only, felt themselves to be victims of a “bait and switch” scheme. They were even more incensed when the railways were slow to choose their lieu lands, leaving settlers uncertain, sometimes for decades, about what lands would turn out to be “free.”

The gospel of the Homestead Acts is enormously appealing: by sweat equity, deserving families would create farm homes for themselves while helping to feed a hungry world. That such an enterprise was also a gamble,
a lottery, was acknowledged both by the homesteaders, who frankly stated that they were betting Uncle Sam five years of their lives versus 160 of his acres, and by the actual lotteries that parcelled out the right to claim farm land or town lots after the seemingly endless “free land” ran out. The sense of entitlement that came from capturing and taming land—the belief that your five years on the land in the United States or three in Canada entitled you to a farm, including enough water to grow crops—plus that trust in gambling, in lotteries, has remained part of the idea bank of Great Plains thought today. Farming is always a gamble, but nowhere more than on the Great Plains, where the only constant in the climate is its variability and its “too-ness”—it is always too hot, too dry, too windy, too wet, too cold . . . It is not a place that breeds caution.

Homesteads, allotments, and the rigid assignment of farmland on Canadian reserves, then, succeeded in transforming the Great Plains from Buffalo Commons to fee simple agriculture in two generations. As Irene Spry has noted, it was the last chapter in the loss of the commons that had begun in medieval England. While the popular image of this human movement onto the Plains was, and is, that it civilized wild land and wild people and made the desert blossom like a rose, feeding a hungry world, the underlying economic interactions were somewhat more complex. As Hamlin Garland astutely pointed out in the 1880s and 1890s, the pseudo-homesteader who sold a relinquishment of a claim and moved to town or to an eastern city was more likely to prosper than those who stayed on the farm. Rates of return in agriculture are usually lower than those in commerce and manufacturing. The wet weather booms followed by the dry weather busts of the 1870s, 1890s, early 1900s, and 1920s and 1930s resulted in massive farm consolidations and a rise of tenantry—which, somewhat paradoxically, because it allowed for more flexibility than land ownership, was often more humanly and economically successful than hunkering down on the family homestead. Landowners, as Voisey points out, were likely to be cash poor because everything had gone for more land and equipment to work it.14 As men and animals were replaced by machines, farming became more capital intensive and more tied to the commercial market.

In a market system, more risk is supposed to yield more potential gain, but as is the case in any kind of gambling, more risk always leads to
more loss. Newspapers publish excited stories about the people who win the lottery—they do not publish long lists of people who lose the lottery. Farmers worked, in most cases, extremely hard. They kept clean fields and they planted and tilled and harvested. Writers and politicians praised them as the salt of the earth. As Patricia Limerick has shown, they felt entitled to succeed, to hit the pot of gold that had to be at the end of the double rainbow of hard work and high risk. Their chosen role became that of the “injured innocent.” Many Great Plains farmers were successful and prosperous, establishing farms that stayed in the family and sustained it for generations. Most were not. The economics of Great Plains farming have called for fewer people and more capital on larger and larger spreads of land. Since rates of return are lower on farming than manufacturing, commerce, and other kinds of extractive industries—such as petroleum—the consistent mismatch between expectations and return enticed farmers to keep on insisting that they ought to succeed. The old joke about the farmer who won the lottery and explained that he’d just keep farming until he lost it all shows a wry rural appreciation of the nature of the operation. Perhaps the problem was not with the land or the farmers but with the way society defined success.

Certainly, the Great Plains has been a hotbed of resistance to the commercial market. On both sides of the border, agrarian discontent has bubbled in waves. From the Grange, to the Populists, to the Nonpartisan League, to United Farmers of Alberta and the United Grain Growers, to the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation and Social Credit, to the Progressives, to the New Democratic Party, to Reform and Alliance, to the Saskatchewan and Wild Rose Parties, the lineage of western and agrarian discontent, on right and left, is strong. Yet in many ways, the Reform slogan “The West Wants In” may be the truest comment of them all. With the partial exception of the Non-Partisan League, the UGG, and the Progressives, and the almost total exception of the CCF in Saskatchewan under Tommy Douglas, agrarian protestors have been determined to make the market economy work for them. But the genius of free enterprise under the old pure Adam Smith definition of the elusive “free market” is to make decisions that exploit hinterlands for the sake of metropolises. The much-reviled National Policy, the CPR, the elevators, the grain merchants in Winnipeg
and Chicago, the bankers and mortgage brokers, and all the other favourite
targets of agrarian protest, along with Ottawa and Washington, are behav-
ing exactly as they should—without even mentioning, as William Cronon
has shown, that middlemen such as grain elevators actually provide a useful
service to grain growers.16

The Great Plains should export its soil and water (in the form of
grain and meat), its other natural resources, and the best and brightest of
its children elsewhere: that is the way the free market is supposed to work.
Someone like Tommy Douglas, who makes a reasoned plea for sustained
sufficiency rather than the jackpots and busts promised by the free market,
may succeed temporarily in constructing the Co-operative Commonwealth,
but it is true that in the long run, Great Plains people have refused to accept
governmental reforms that mute booms as well as busts and strive to abol-
ish poverty before establishing wealth. And so Great Plains people support
a market system that, working as it should, is bound to diminish the rate of
return to the region as a whole. Furthermore, because capital is more mobile
than labour, people are left behind in small towns of the Great Plains that
dry up until there are more people in the nursing home, the only economic
diversification in town, than in the school. The countryside produces more
crops with fewer people and expects governments to find markets for them.

Except during wartime, the Great Plains has produced more wheat
and corn than the market can absorb, at least at prices that return to farm-
ers their cost of production plus a small profit—and certainly not at prices
that would mitigate the mining of soil fertility and water for the production
of grain. After World War II, the Great Plains supplied grain for the rest of
the world and avoided both starvation in the war-torn countries and the
collapse of grain prices that had so devastated farmers after World War I.
But by 1948, there was a world surplus of grain that the US Department of
Agriculture and the Canadian Wheat Board contrived to control by keeping
their prices low enough to discourage other countries from going into the
wheat export market. By 1963, however, this agreement had fallen apart,
and the United States was gaining control of more of the world wheat
market. In 1968, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau asked President Richard
Nixon to help salvage the year-old International Grains Agreement, which
had set a minimum world price for wheat. Nixon declined, and Canadian
wheat farmers, who had an even smaller domestic market than the United States, were in deep trouble.\textsuperscript{17}

Not surprisingly, farmers believe deeply in the Great Plains as the breadbasket of the world and in the inherent nobility of producing beautiful, wholesome grain to feed hungry children everywhere. There is enormous joy in the “straight, dark rows” behind the ploughs of spring, in the intense green fields that follow, and in the steady stream of plump golden kernels the combine pours into the waiting grain hoppers.\textsuperscript{18} Although USDA subsidies favour agribusiness at the expense of “family farms,” American farm rhetoric from television herbicide commercials on up pay homage to the old Jeffersonian ideal of the yeoman farmer. Trudeau’s 1969 federal task force on agriculture may have been realistic in its acceptance that family farms were being squeezed out and that Ottawa would not be able to sell all the wheat that farmers were producing, but it was arrogant and ham-handed in suggesting that the farm population should be reduced by two thirds and the grain acreage by half in about four years.\textsuperscript{19} When Trudeau flippantly asked Prairie grain growers why they should sell their wheat, he badly misjudged not only the economic realities of wheat marketing since the beginning of Prairie grain farming, but also the importance of the entire breadbasket motif of western settlement. Ottawa should market the West’s wheat because that is the basic premise of settlement and all the history of markets and the Great Plains since then.

Trudeau’s arrogance hurt all the more because he had hit upon the real weakness of the Great Plains. The cheap food policies of both Canada and the United States and the encouragement and exportation of highly inefficient practices such as the transformation of multiple pounds of grain into single pounds of fatty meats, do not protect North American food safety or sufficiency and certainly do not protect the land, the water, or the human communities of the Great Plains. While it was impossible in 1969, and remains so now, to stop all food aid to the rest of the world, especially Africa, overproduction and export harms both the Great Plains and the areas that receive its grains. As Stan Rowe bluntly asks, why should Canadian or American governments or larger societies try “to save and maintain an exploitive, industrial, export-based agricultural system that has poorly served a large sector of the farming population, while at the same
time running down the soils, diminishing surface and subsurface water, destroying natural landscapes and decimating native fauna and flora?” Nebraska, the Cornhusker State, grows far more irrigated corn than all the humans and animals in the state could possibly consume. Some of it ends up as high fructose corn syrup in carbonated beverages and thousands of other processed foods; some is distilled into ethanol—if oil prices are high enough. But under various farm plans, the US government markets it—or sometimes simply gives it away as food aid—all over the world. In Mexico and Central America, this cheap corn tends to displace subsistence farmers who had sold small corn surpluses in local markets. And if they turn to high-priced coca crops, which then return to Nebraska as cocaine, a recreational drug for displaced farm boys and girls and others in Great Plains cities and towns—well, isn’t that the way the market is supposed to work?

Traditions of agrarian discontent and western protest have settled down into a voting pattern in which the Great Plains states, which theoretically should never benefit from a free market, always support the Republican free market candidate for president, while the rural areas of Saskatchewan, which should theoretically benefit least from a free market, back the Ross Thatchers and Grant Devines and the Saskatchewan Party. Given the almost religious intensity of the belief in individualism and market forces that led to the commodification and settlement of Great Plains land, it is not surprising that this belief should remain so strong, especially as most economic diversification attempts on the Plains have failed. The US farm subsidy programs overwhelmingly support the largest and most capital-intensive farmers, while propositions from Liberal Ottawa setting out deliberate farm depopulation or a National Energy Policy—no matter how intelligent or defensible—have conditioned Plains people to distrust “government intervention.” So American farmers “farm the mailbox,” waiting for subsidy payments, and funnel more and more corn into ethanol despite the contention of some agronomists that it costs more petroleum to grow the corn than to buy gasoline. The essentially conservative nature of agrarian discontent manifests in voting behaviours that can only reward farmers with subsidies of one sort or another—the exact opposite of a free market or of any rational system to protect the environment or the long-term economic viability of farmers or the rural West.
Although, as David Jones shows brilliantly in *Empire of Dust*, the twenties were economically disastrous for the Great Plains, it was the 1930s that exposed the failure of governments to deal with drought and depression, even though the New Deal and the *Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act* permanently inserted the federal governments into agricultural decision-making. The American documentary film *The Plow That Broke the Plains* is an artistically effective condemnation of the farming practices that left delicate land uncovered by grass or crops and susceptible to the blowing of the Dust Bowl. The backlash against the film from Great Plains farmers, incensed that the government would censure or restrict their farming methods or “knock” the region, was so intense that the film was withdrawn from circulation until 1961, and then was shown only as art, not as history.²² What farmers asked for, and eventually received, were crop supports and foreclosure moratoriums, which, however needed in the immediate crisis, were not alternatives to a free market system. While both Canadians and Americans reluctantly acquiesced to returning environmentally sensitive land to grass, including parks and leased and community pastures, Great Plains farmers and ranchers would not tolerate a wholesale assault on the fee simple cropping system, even though it did not work for the majority of them.

Diversification has become a watchword of western protest. To some it may mean simply diversification into different crops—canola instead of wheat, for instance. In Alberta, it usually means diversification from gas and oil. But most often, it means diversification into some form of manufacturing or “value-added” economic activity, not just the exploitation of natural resources. One of the West’s great complaints about Macdonald’s National Policy was that westerners were saddled with buying low-quality, high-priced farm machinery made in Ontario, while high tariffs kept out cheaper, better, American-made implements. American farmers of the same era complained of the banks and moneylenders who made them pay off their high-interest machinery loans in deflating currency.²³ One apparent answer would have been diversification into farm machinery fabrication in the Great Plains, but a dispersed market, a distance from materials, and especially the lack of the synergy of the “rust belt” industrial concentration doomed any such hopes. The 1960s and 1970s were the heydays of
regional planning and economic development worldwide, as “more developed regions” attempted to stabilize their population growth by directing development to “less developed regions.” The theory was simple enough—set up “growth poles” by importing industry and develop the economies around them. For the most part, such development failed because it never engaged the host economy. Economic enclaves flourished as long as they had development support and faded as soon as it was withdrawn. In fact, as we shall see later, economic development has failed in many ways in the Global South, and, although development theories are useful in explaining the Great Plains in the nineteenth century, they do not provide much sustenance for the twenty-first century.

Frank Popper, a planner from New Jersey who at first supported regional development but later became an astute critic, responded to the failure of most regional development projects by proposing Buffalo Commons. Originally an intellectual puzzle—how does one plan for de-development?—with the aura of Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal,” Buffalo Commons attracted so much attention that Popper and his geographer wife, Deborah, built a cottage industry around elaborating it. Briefly, Buffalo Commons is reverse development planning, an orderly program for the depopulation of the Great Plains, the clearing of the dying towns and the economically unviable farms, and the re-establishment of native grasses, buffalo, and Aboriginal people—with a few grizzled old homesteaders for their pictorial value for the new crop of eco-tourists who would be drawn to the new/old Great Plains. Like The Plow That Broke the Plains and Trudeau’s plan for reducing farm populations, Buffalo Commons aroused a good deal of hostile interest in grass country. Perhaps the best response came from a pair of planners in Minot, North Dakota, who suggested working out the orderly depopulation of New Jersey so it could become a parking lot for New York City. Others, such as Maxine Moul, the former economic development director for the State of Nebraska, take Buffalo Commons very seriously as a useful instrument for rural planning. But like the regional development theories that it parodies, Buffalo Commons is firmly rooted in a free-market-with-government-tweaking model and bases its calculations on homogeneous space rather than distinctive places. Buffalo Commons is essentially conservative. Tyler Sutton
and the Grassland Foundation have more recently proposed a variation on Buffalo Commons that would be developed by community groups, but the procedure is still in a hypothetical stage.24

In contrast to the underlying free market conservatism of most agrarian revolt on the Great Plains is a deeper and perhaps more valuable strain of resistance. The first resistance comes from the land itself. Except perhaps for truck gardens, land and growing things are resistant to the conformity and uniformity of production agriculture. Hydroponic greenhouses and hog confinement sheds grow more uniform “products” than crops grown in dirt and reliant on rainfall or than animals let out to “root, hog, or die.” The Great Plains, with its enormous climatic variability and an evapotranspiration rate that usually exceeds natural precipitation, is a pretty chancy environment. Even seventeenth- and eighteenth-century peoples such as the Pawnees and Osages who combined riverine horticulture with large-scale bison kills and small-scale hunting and gathering could not always balance the various resources and environments available to them to avoid scarcity.

Although both rowcrop horticulture and cattle ranching (after the demise of the “free range” system) have produced much larger and more stable harvests in any given spot than did subsistence horticultural regimes based largely on hunting and gathering, their long-term sustainability, as Stan Rowe notes, is questionable. On the other hand, as Geoff Cunfer points out, Great Plains agriculture is as sustainable as any North American agricultural regime, which has tended toward being primarily a large-scale slash-and-burn regime. In fact, Rowe points out that there are no precedents elsewhere in the world for sustained agriculture in a semi-arid region. The row crops grown from Texas to Saskatchewan are the largest and longest experiment of their kind—yet perhaps ranching would be more sustainable. Monocropping mines the soil of both water and nutrients, and requires large inputs of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and water. It exposes soil to blowing, contaminates surface and shallow well water with nitrates (my domestic well in Nebraska cannot be used for drinking or cooking), and severely reduces the flow of Plains rivers used directly or indirectly for irrigation. Fee simple land ownership and allotment tend to make migration a confession of personal failure rather than an expected and pragmatic
response to the climate. As Robert Fletcher says, when Montana homesteaders quit, “they had nothing to take with them. They just spit on the fire and whistled for the dog.” This is quite a contrast to Hamlin Garland, leaving South Dakota with $200 for his relinquishment in his pocket, or even some enterprising homesteaders in western Nebraska who proved up, mortgaged the quarter section to the hilt, and took the money—leaving the land to the banks. Historians have not always distinguished between people who tried to make farms and failed, and the enterprising capitalists who were happy to turn land into money and then go on looking for the main chance. And perhaps those who, like the Montanans, left with nothing, should not be considered to have failed. It was only that the land won.

Stan Rowe, Wes Jackson, and, to some extent, Alan Guebert have been foremost and principled defenders of the land and of the Great Plains as a particular and highly desirable place. Rowe was an early proponent of what is now usually referred to as the Gaia hypothesis, the idea that as atoms are to molecules and cells are to organisms, so organisms, volcanoes, rivers, air, and every part of the ecosphere are to Earth itself. Thus the land is both the community and indeed the very self that we inhabit. We need, then, a mind that values the land—and in Rowe’s case, especially the tallgrass prairie—for itself, and not just as a commodity to be mined. Wes Jackson, who accounts himself a student of Rowe’s in his introduction to Rowe’s *Home Place*, has also hosted Rowe for several of the annual festivals at the Land Institute outside Salina, Kansas, where Jackson has spent a lifetime sponsoring research on communities—be they human or grass—in the tallgrass prairie. Why, he asks, is that part of Kansas that was once Quivira now capable of supporting fewer people than in Coronado’s time? And why does it export its soil and water in the form of field crops outside the region instead of parlaying its resources of sunlight and rain into grass and then bison muscle produced within the region? Alan Guebert, a syndicated newspaper agriculture columnist from Illinois, though more sympathetic to production agriculture than the other two, also speaks for the land by looking, sometimes caustically, at US federal agricultural policy and its discontents. Despite the fallacies inherent in “thinking like a mountain” or talking like a prairie, these writers, especially Rowe and Jackson, have long and convincingly preached a gospel of the land. And, as Jackson
says, at the Land Institute, he and his collaborators and interns are working “to build an agriculture based on the way a natural ecosystem works . . . perennializing major crops to be placed in mixtures that mimic the vegetative structure of that old prairie.” Both Jackson and Rowe are particularly mindful of the thousands of years of land knowledge that European science and religion tried ruthlessly to eradicate.26

In addition to the land itself, resistance also comes from the First Nations of the Plains. Although putting “resistance” and “Indians” into the same sentence usually conjures up visions of “Custer’s Last Stand” or Riel at Batoche, peaceful Indigenous resistance may actually be more meaningful. As Blair Stonechild and Bill Waiser point out, the usual conflation of Big Bear and Poundmaker with Riel obscures the fact that the Cree leaders were looking for a Cree solution that would include consolidated settlement of many bands in close proximity to one another with enough land for hunting and agriculture, and a fully developed cultural life. The people of Indian Territory, what became eastern Oklahoma, similarly proposed that the territory become the state of Sequoia. Instead, Senator Dawes came back from retirement to preside over the allotment of Creek, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Seminole land. These so-called Five Civilized Tribes (so specified despite the fact that all North American Indigenous peoples were “civilized” in the sense of being human cultures with well-defined, meaningful rules and value systems) had displayed amazing adaptability, rising from their Trails of Tears to independence and prosperity only to be torn apart by the US Civil War, then rising again from the punitive peace forced upon them to prosperity by the end of the nineteenth century. They had managed to accommodate the market within a system of communally owned land in which usufruct rights accommodated the control of anyone who consistently worked a plot of land. Creek Chief Pleasant Porter accurately pointed out that the Creek Nation had no paupers yet was being forced to adopt the land system of a mainstream United States that suffered pockets of horrendous poverty.27

Another centre of determined but severely compromised resistance developed in the 1940s and 1950s among the Missouri River Lakotas and Dakotas, Hidatsas, Mandans, and Arikaras. Many had survived allotment by claiming riverine land that would not support production agriculture
but could be adapted to a combination of hunting and gathering with horticulture and small-scale ranching. Almost all their riverbanks were taken for the construction of the Pick-Sloan projects, a series of dams and reservoirs constructed along the mainstem of the Missouri to provide irrigation, hydro power, commercial navigation, recreation, and downstream flood control. Both the Five Nations of Oklahoma and the Missouri River peoples had put together a hybrid society not unlike that of Appalachia or Newfoundland, in which traditional subsistence activities, low-wage occasional or permanent work, and, in some cases, welfare allowed people to create an existence that was humanly satisfying, if materially less than middle class. Although Indian policy in both Canada and the United States ostensibly aimed toward assimilation, in most cases it succeeded in producing only marginalization. The Crees, the Five Oklahoma Nations, and the Missouri River peoples, among others, all shared the capacity to wed their social marginality with land that the free market system also termed marginal—hilly eastern Oklahoma, the Missouri Breaks, the Cypress Hills. In so doing, they created a flexible way of life that adapted to Great Plains climate fluctuation by utilizing different altitudes and terrains at different times of the year and of the drought cycle. All three of these resistance communities were ruthlessly broken up, with no regard for treaty assurances, in the name of securing “better” free market conditions, but all three have shown us ways to adapt to the land in tandem with the market. Contemporary subsidy programs in Canada’s North that enable people to continue traditional ways of living on the land while still participating in the cash economy demanded by settlements that provide formal schooling and health care demonstrate at least one alternative model to the deliberate destruction of subsistence communities.

Economic development in Europe and North America has, from the first, been synonymous with urban development, as we can still see in the concerted efforts of the Canadian government to move northern peoples to permanent urban centres. New Amsterdam became New York. A certain undistinguished swampy tract supporting small Indigenous villages became Washington DC, and Bytown became Ottawa with some Gothic buildings. Muddy moorings on the Great Lakes became Toronto and Chicago, and fur trade outposts on river confluences became St. Louis and
Winnipeg. With the exception of the national capitals, placed where they were for political and strategic reasons, these cities grew because they captured the trade of the surrounding areas and began to sell to settlers goods such as shoes that could more easily be manufactured than imported. Despite images of prairie schooners and white-hatted cowboys, the West has always been the most urban part of North America. As transportation hubs and population centres, cities feed on their own success. Growth promotes growth. But only up to a point. Internal improvements, first canals and then railways, expedited the growth of the Wests of both countries. But on the Great Plains, that growth slowed down some time in the 1910s or 1920s. The great population rush onto the Plains reversed as soon as it hit its peak, right around the time of World War I. The cities kept growing because the rural population was retreating to them as farms consolidated and fewer people were needed to work the land. But the cities of the Plains did not take off in the way that coastal cities, including Los Angeles and Vancouver, did.

The West Coast cities were the ones that boomed. Partly, they filled with Prairie people who had made good and moved to LA or Victoria. Regina, or even Calgary, in mid-January is a daunting proposition. Both Canada and the United States expended extraordinary amounts of money during World War I and even more in World War II. Some of it went to munitions plants in Montreal. Some went to aircraft factories in Wichita, Kansas. Much more of it went to the West Coast. San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle all developed aircraft manufacturing facilities during World War I so aviators could take advantage of the good weather. Between 1941 and 1945, the population of San Diego increased by 147 percent as the United States strove mightily to increase its military capabilities in the Pacific. Except for Los Angeles and San Francisco, already well established as traditional entrepôt cities, and Vancouver, a quintessential railway and port city, the urban West Coast was largely created by defence contracting. Except for Wichita, Great Plains cities never received a proportional share of this bounty and never saw the consequent economic takeoff. Empire aviators trained in the clear skies of the prairies, and Tinker Airforce Base in Oklahoma was named after an Osage general, but no one built thousands of planes in Saskatoon or Edmonton or Winnipeg. Because
of the persistence and power of Senator George Norris, Omaha, Nebraska, did build the Enola Gay and other huge bombers, but after Norris’s defeat and death, Nebraska lost all but the Strategic Air Command headquarters in Bellevue, near Omaha. The big contractors that had built the western federal dams during the Depression had done better at entrenching themselves in federal contracting than had the Great Plains states—and San Diego was a lot more convenient to the Pacific than were the Plains.29

If twentieth-century West Coast cities are—like so much in the twentieth-century West, particularly in the United States—the creations of the federal government, that is simply not the case on the Great Plains. There, the land seemed deficient compared to warm, sunny coastal cities with white beaches. We do have a few cities, such as Calgary or Tulsa, that are the gifts of the petroleum industry, but for the most part, if Plains cities are to grow, they must grow (as Calgary has discovered) in the context of sustainable growth of the whole region. In the absence of vast military spending, is there any way to fuel economic growth in prairie cities? That kind of spending is certainly not going to come—Winnipeg missed out on the F-18s with a bid that made market sense,30 and none of Halliburton’s booty is coming to Wyoming. If there is an answer, it might come, I think, from the third point of resistance, Tommy Douglas’s Saskatchewan.

Unlike the bulk of agrarian reform, which, as already noted, has always been conservative in its insistence on making the market system work for this hinterland, Douglas recognized that there is no such thing as a free market economy—the pure Adam Smith is always tweaked. When the ccf called for the end of capitalism, Douglas explained that what they meant was the end of the dog-eat-dog capitalism that resulted in farm foreclosures and hobos and the enormous waste of human capital seen in the Great Depression. Douglas’s solution to the tendency of the invisible hand of the traditional economists always to take from the Great Plains was to develop a tripartite provincial economy that combined entrepreneurialism and private enterprise with co-operatives and Crown corporations that ran effective monopolies such as utilities and auto insurance, as well as business ventures that could not gain backing from outside investors but that filled a niche in the Saskatchewan economy. Many of Douglas’s ideas came from Europe, but they had Great Plains antecedents, too. In
both the United States and Canada, as we have seen, the large-scale settlement of the Great Plains and its instant linkage to the market system were entirely dependent on the railways, and both of the initial transcontinental railways were adventures in premature enterprise. The United States coped with “creative” financing, and Canada gained British financing for its first transcontinental railway in response to the apparently opportune outbreak of armed resistance. Subsequent transcontinental railways displayed an alarming tendency to go belly up at inconvenient intervals, setting off panics or requiring more government intervention. Another Prairie-grown model for Douglas was the Rural Electric Administration and Nebraska Public Power, developed by Nebraska senator George W. Norris, and a model from Central Canada was the public development of hydro power.

Although many Albertans consider “Tommy Douglas” a bad word, the Conservative premier at the time, Peter Lougheed, agreed with the need for a modified free enterprise system to protect an energy-producing province. Even the Nobel Prize-winning economist of the Chicago School, Milton Friedman, hardly a socialist, points out the paradoxical relationship of energy and the market system: “Few . . . industries sing the praises of free enterprise more loudly than the oil industry. Yet few industries rely so heavily on special government favors.”31 Douglas had the advantage of being premier of Saskatchewan after World War II, when economies everywhere seemed invincible. Nevertheless, his government compiled an admirable record of balanced budgets and his Crown corporations provided jobs, research, windows on industry, and useful products and services to Saskatchewan while also returning modest dividends. Economic growth is easy in a staples economy—money comes in and products go out. Economic development, on the other hand, requires money to recycle within the community, supporting secondary and tertiary industry as well as the service sector. Douglas fostered development. Although his acceptance of dams as being without environmental cost and his assimilationist response to Indigenous peoples were not particularly oriented toward a Great Plains consciousness, his judicious use of government investment without creating white elephants (like some of those developed by Alberta out of its oil earnings) showed that sustainable economic development is feasible in even the purest and most isolated part of the Great Plains.
As Jim Pitsula and Ken Rasmussen show, the privatization of Saskatchewan in the name of the free market following the Douglas years was economically counterproductive, functioning, as it is designed to do, to return Saskatchewan to its hinterland status. And it may be that Saskatchewan, like the Creeks in Oklahoma a century ago, has lost that successful moment of resistance that might have been the seed of a new destiny for the Great Plains. Margaret Laurence, the region’s great novelist, believed that the small towns of the world would protect a vital kind of human knowledge that would not survive in the big cities, similar to the medieval monasteries preserving knowledge that would otherwise have been lost in the world of the Dark Ages. Although free enterprise and western democracies may be the best systems the world has yet seen, they are certainly not flawless. Francis Fukayama was wrong—we are not at the end of history. State-run, tribal, and theocratic societies are enormously important in our world, and some experimentation with other ways of governing economies would be wise, if only for self-protection. More than almost any other place in the world, here on the Great Plains, where free enterprise, working as it is intended to work, should make us a hinterland, we have both the incentive to experiment and the tradition of successful resistances—from the land, from Native peoples, and from Tommy Douglas (and Peter Lougheed).

John Richards and Larry Pratt, writing in the 1970s, identified a rentier mentality in Alberta and eventually in Saskatchewan that allowed provincial citizens to turn over the development of their substantial mineral treasures to large foreign companies. Although Richards and Pratt contrast this to Texas populists who got out their guns to fight for their mineral rights, in truth, the Texans for the most part are just as much of the rentier mindset except that they are dominated by their own domestic companies. More recently, Roger Epp has shown that the increasing de-skilling and de-politicization of the rural West has resulted in an aimless and even hopeless clientism, which sees the provincial government as both inevitable and useless: “The development initiatives of community-minded people founder on the difficulties of speaking about, and for, a community interest in a world that increasingly presents only individual choices.” Similarly, Thomas Frank shows how Kansans, especially from rural and suburban
areas, have become willing to substitute narrowly focussed “moral” issues regarding abortion and gay marriage for more universal matters of social and economic justice, which they passively cede to large corporations that render them just as powerless as the foreign corporations did Albertans.33

Like Epp, and like Sharon Butala, I believe that there is a Prairie consciousness that exists where Indigenous and newcomer peoples have merged their land and economic knowledge. I believe that this consciousness has to do with place, with finding the best symbiosis of land, plants, and animals, including humans. I believe that we must study the models of Native resistance that have been repeatedly demonstrated on the Great Plains. I believe that a certain attention to the rhetorics of deficiency of this land and a close attention to where they have broken down and where they have been most pervasive will allow us, as contemporary residents of the Plains, to articulate a Great Plains consciousness that will allow us not only to live with, rather than against, this demanding land, but also to suggest how peoples of all regions can live better upon this earth, which, despite the musings of scientists such as Stephen Hawking, is still our only home.