

BROKEN GROUND: PLOWING AND AMERICA'S CULTURAL LANDSCAPE
IN THE 1930s

By

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BROKEN GROUND: PLOWING AND AMERICA'S CULTURAL LANDSCAPE
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Abstract

This dissertation considers the significance of images related to plowing from the 1930s and their connection to humanity's relationship with the land. Environmental history, agricultural history, and the cultural geography of the plains are used in the analysis of these images to suggest the pervasiveness of the plow as a cultural symbol of man's relationship to the earth. My investigation begins with a chapter devoted to a chronological survey of European and American art depicting agricultural landscape imagery. My second chapter considers Grant Wood's 1931 painting *Fall Plowing*, a depiction of a steel walking plow, to focus on the function, history, and impact of the implement itself. The next two chapters focus on artistic products of the Dust Bowl that expose problems inherent in American treatment of the land. The third chapter examines Pare Lorentz's 1936 documentary film *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, which charts a history of soil exploitation. Alexandre Hogue's *Mother Earth Laid Bare* from 1938 and *Crucified Land* from 1939, the subjects of my fourth chapter, respond to the Dust Bowl through landscapes that have been ravished and sacrificed as a consequence of man's exploitative tendencies. My fifth chapter considers artists who identified and advocated practical solutions to the agricultural crisis. This tendency is best demonstrated by John Steuart Curry's work as artist-in-residence for the College of Agriculture at the University of Wisconsin. This investigation of human cultural engagement with the landscape concludes with an epilogue that contemplates the ways in which artists have explored the earth as a subject and medium amidst increasingly intensive systems of agriculture since the 1930s.

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These machines,
These marvelous machines!
Do we shape them
Or do they shape us?
Or reshape us from our decent, far
designs?

- Russell Lord, "Scenario: The Land. A Word-Picture of Robert Flaherty's Moving Picture, Prepared in Advance."
The Land 1, no. 2 (spring 1941): 155.

Introduction

Broken Ground: Plowing and America's Cultural Landscape in the 1930s examines images of plowing as expressions of American historical and cultural values. It is an investigation of the changing meaning of a symbol over time. The plow has been synonymous with agriculture for thousands of years, during which it has evolved into an increasingly mechanized implement. Throughout much of American history the plow has functioned as a symbol of settlement, civilization and progress, appearing prominently in iconography. The state seal of Kansas (Fig. 1) succinctly expresses this symbolic message, as a farmer plows fields in its foreground below a banner stating, *Ad Astra Per Aspera*, or “to the stars through difficulties.” This plowman would face the difficulties acknowledged in that motto during the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, although those challenges were not those envisioned by the pioneers who coined the phrase. The Dust Bowl represents a period when images of plows often evoked a sense of abandonment and despair as the country evaluated the environmental and sociological consequences of its attempted mastery of nature.

Historically, the plow and the furrow represent evidence of American conquest as the young country expanded westward into the plains. The implement and its mark demonstrate the subjugation of wilderness into an ordered civilization. American settlers destroyed native flora to establish their own agrarian culture just as they eliminated or displaced the native peoples who filled the so-called virgin continent. As this impulse toward conquest was demonstrated in the physical terrain of the western plains, the images of plowing that concern this study also represent plausibly real places, possessing meaningful connections to western history. The study of landscapes concerns many seemingly disparate disciplines. A landscape may be a visual representation of a place but it can also be a real, physical site – usually that which a viewer can

observe with his or her eyes. We also landscape, modify, and alter the earth. The task of understanding a place and its people requires the melding of many fields of inquiry.

This dissertation considers the significance of images related to plowing and their connection to humanity's relationship with the land. Environmental history, agricultural history, and the cultural geography of the plains are used in the analysis of these images to suggest the pervasiveness of the plow as a cultural symbol of man's relationship to the earth. The following key texts provide background for themes covered in the dissertation. Frieda Knobloch summarizes the history of the plow and its impact in *The Culture of Wilderness: Agriculture as Colonization in the American West*. Donald Worster's *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* charts the human and environmental factors that contributed to the creation of the Dust Bowl. Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* provides a classic thematic consideration of the West and its socio-historical constructions. Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* offers theoretical background for an exploration of the mechanized plow in an agrarian setting.¹

In *Plain Pictures: Images of the American Prairie*, Joni Kinsey uses art to construct a social history of the American prairie including a discussion of Dust Bowl images, which I re-examine with greater attention to their connections to environmental and agricultural history. This methodological approach draws influence from a small but memorable exhibition I encountered in 2001 upon my first visit to the University of Kansas, the Spencer Museum of Art's *Remembering the Family Farm*. This exhibition combined agricultural history and cultural

¹ Frieda Knobloch, *The Culture of Wilderness: Agriculture as Colonization in the American West* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (1979), 25th anniversary ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950), reprint. (New York: Vintage Books, 1957); Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

geography in an assessment of American prints that significantly altered the way I appreciated art depicting agrarian themes. Lisa Dorrill's dissertation, *Picturing the Dirty Thirties: Paintings and Prints of the Dust Bowl*, provides a survey of many additional pertinent images. In the 1930s, the environmental crisis of the Dust Bowl caused Americans to contemplate their relationship with agriculture and question its sustainability. The art from this period of heightened environmental awareness serves as a timely subject for further investigation.²

This study of land use and landscape pertains to a specific geographic region, the grasslands that once covered much of the country between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains. This region does not neatly conform to a particular geographic label today. Instead, it includes portions of the Midwest as well as the West, the Great Plains, and the parts of western Kansas, eastern Colorado, and the Texas and Oklahoma Panhandles most adversely affected by the Dust Bowl. The grasslands once occupied a vertical portion of the center of North America, with tallgrass prairies in Iowa and Illinois that transitioned gradually to shortgrass prairies beyond the hundredth meridian in accordance with the country's increasing aridity. The plow functioned as the instrument that brought agrarian order to the wilderness of those prairies.

More than a "natural" disaster, the Dust Bowl was engineered by a culture bent on breaking the wild prairie into a productive garden. Walter Prescott Webb's classic 1931 treatise, *The Great Plains*, differentiated farms in what would become the Dust Bowl region from farms of the East. The plains were sparsely populated and consisted of ground that was level and free

² Joni Kinsey, *Plain Pictures: Images of the American Prairie* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996); Stephen H. Goddard, ed., *Remembering the Family Farm: 150 Years of American Prints* (Lawrence: Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, 2001); Lisa Dorrill, "Picturing the Dirty Thirties: Paintings and Prints of the Dust Bowl" (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 1998).

of trees – “ready for the plow.”³ These factors contributed to the formation of larger farms that utilized newer, labor-saving mechanized technology typically to produce commercial, rather than subsistence crops. Plains agriculture was threatened by the aridity of the environment, but aided by evolving technology and abetted by increased demand from national and international markets for grain. Spurred on by demand, farmers used their mechanized plows and tractors to destroy the native grasses with their deep root systems that held the soil year-round and converted the prairies to farmland, which left the soil exposed for much of the year. These farming practices met with drought conditions in the 1930s, resulting in the Dust Bowl.

Artistic response to the Dust Bowl often demonstrates the causal relationship between an exploitative culture and the disastrous effects of the dust storms on land and people. These images and films reveal not just “the plow that broke the plains,” but also the social attitudes that transformed the plow from an implement of cultivation to a weapon of destruction. My investigation of the plow’s mark on our cultural landscape begins with a chapter devoted to a chronological survey of European and American art depicting agricultural landscape imagery. The shifting symbolism of these images over time from pastoral emblems to evidence of progress parallels the evolution of agriculture from subsistence to commercial enterprise. This history of landscape ideologies provides background for later discussion of art from the 1930s.

Each succeeding chapter emphasizes one or two key works of art. My second chapter considers Grant Wood’s 1931 painting *Fall Plowing*, a depiction of a steel walking plow, to focus on the function, history, and impact of the implement itself. Wood’s plow can be viewed as a culmination of Euro-American agricultural settlement in the plains that sets the stage for the subsequent Dust Bowl tragedy. The next two chapters focus on artistic products of the Dust

³ Webb uses this phrase on three separate occasions in his text. Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1931), 390, 411, 78.

Bowl that expose problems inherent in American treatment of the land. The third chapter examines Pare Lorentz's 1936 documentary film *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, which charts a history of soil exploitation. Lorentz evokes a strong sense of the plains region informed by evocative music, imagery, and language. The film successfully articulates causes for the dust storms rooted in capitalist impulses but offers few solutions to the crisis, a resolution that resembles the difficulty farmers and government leaders encountered in their attempts to contend with the catastrophe.

Alexandre Hogue's *Mother Earth Laid Bare* from 1938 and *Crucified Land* from 1939, the subjects of my fourth chapter, respond to the Dust Bowl through landscapes that have been ravished and sacrificed as a consequence of man's exploitative tendencies. These painterly investigations of the plow's role in the production of eroded land were part of a broader realization of the nation's vulnerability. The loss of soil and the exodus of Dust Bowl migrants described in imagery and rhetoric from the period reveal the extent to which America was rooted in its imperiled Heartland. Writers, artists and early environmentalists came to recognize that the Dust Bowl was caused by an ethical failure of stewardship. They reasoned that the necessary corrective shift in behavior would have to be both psychological and practical.

My fifth chapter considers artists who identified and advocated practical solutions to the agricultural crisis. This tendency is best demonstrated by John Steuart Curry's work as artist-in-residence for the College of Agriculture at the University of Wisconsin. Curry's intended designs for the rotunda of the Topeka Statehouse and other paintings from the mid-to-late 1930s illustrate his assimilation and promotion of the latest technological innovations developed in Wisconsin. The artists like Curry who painted and photographed scenes of contour plowing presented audiences with curvilinear furrows that disrupted the aesthetic of straight lines that had been

ordered upon the landscape since the Land Ordinance of 1785.⁴ Soil conservation offered a conceptual and visual shift from that grid mindset which democratically ruled land into equal sections. This investigation of our cultural engagement with the landscape concludes with an epilogue that contemplates the ways in which artists have explored the earth as a subject and medium amidst increasingly intensive systems of agriculture since the 1930s.

A survey of landscape art in European and American history may not initially seem pertinent to the appreciation of art relating to the Dust Bowl. This is in part due to the nature of formative scholarship related to the landscape genre in the field of art history. Foundational scholarship such as E. H. Gombrich's 1966 essay, "The Renaissance Theory of Art and the Rise of Landscape," and Kenneth Clark's *Landscape into Art*, published in 1949, establish an origin story for landscape painting based on an emerging new conception of the world.⁵ The genre was revolutionary, an assertion of modernity, and represented a new method of seeing. Clark and Gombrich strive to establish what they deem the first landscape, a distinction they confer based on the works they deem to be pure landscapes, those that emphasize the primacy of being for their own sake. They each conclude that the artistic form of the landscape emerges as a consequence of broader Renaissance humanist curiosity about the world and is confirmed through collection inventories that designate artworks as landscapes for the first time.

⁴ Hildegard Binder Johnson, *Order Upon the Land: The U. S. Rectangular Land Survey and the Upper Mississippi Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976). Johnson addresses the cultural ramifications of the survey system in Minnesota and Iowa. This foray into the aesthetics of agrarian order also informs my study.

⁵ E. H. Gombrich, "The Renaissance Theory of Art and the Rise of Landscape," in *Norm and Form* (London: Phaidon, 1966). Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into Art* (London: J. Murray, 1949).

W. J. T. Mitchell has offered a more recent, Marxist rebuttal to this origin story in his 1995 essay, "Gombrich and the Rise of Landscape."⁶ Mitchell questions the construct of a so-called "pure" landscape, arguing that the form is a response to geographic, political, anthropological, and social factors. He concludes his essay expressing hope for the creation of "a program of research that recognize[s] the insularity, the historical specificity, and relativity of European landscape in relation to the diversity of human responses to and reshaping of their environment."⁷ Mitchell's effort to connect landscape to context and history can be seen as part of a larger effort reaching across disciplines to understand human response to place. For this reason the emergence of pictorial landscapes in Europe amidst emerging technological innovations, the rise of capitalism, and the growth of colonial empires can easily be appreciated in relation to each of these changes. Depictions of the land represent cultural values toward place. The landscape may be an artist's imaginative creation, may depict terrain fashioned and altered by humans, or it may appear to be untouched, wild, and natural.

With these relationships in mind, an assessment of landscapes depicting scenes of cultivation allows us to witness the journey through which westerners have transformed nature into culture. This statement defies Mark Roskill's assessment in his 1997 survey of landscape painting and its functions, that "landscape represents traditionally the domain of nature as opposed to culture."⁸ Roskill challenges this interpretation by arguing that landscapes are an expression of a human attempt to improve nature. How, one might ask, is such an exercise

⁶ W. J. T. Mitchell, "Gombrich and the Rise of Landscape," in *The Consumption of Culture, 1600-1800: Image, Object, Text*, ed. Ann Bermingham and John Brewer (London; New York: Routledge, 1995). See also W. J. T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁷ Mitchell, "Gombrich and the Rise of Landscape," 115-16.

⁸ Mark W. Roskill, *The Languages of Landscape* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 1.

anything but an expression of culture? By beginning in Europe we can witness not only early explorations of the genre, but also trace the influence of European land use and values upon contemporaneous and subsequent American agricultural imagery. This history informs imagery of American settlement as colonial landscapes in turn illuminate the different topography, technology, and sense of place indicative of imagery related to westward expansion.

In the same manner that landscape scholarship has been reevaluated by Marxists, the fields of American history and American Studies have been broadened and challenged by what has since been deemed “New Western History.” Practitioners of this movement, including Patricia Nelson Limerick, Knobloch, and Worster, have attempted to reinterpret the history of the trans-Mississippi West with a broader socio-historical lens that incorporates considerations of race, gender, capitalist consumption, and the environment. These historians also acknowledge and explore the fact that the Native Americans who occupied the continent prior to white contact were displaced and disenfranchised as a consequence of the nation’s settlement and expansion. This socio-historical camp of scholarship acknowledges and sometimes offers a counterpoint to the efforts of American Studies pioneers Smith and Marx. In the 1950s and 1960s, those scholars established an assessment of western history concerned with myths, symbols, and ideologies that helped to construct “the West” that historians have since attempted to deconstruct.

This interdisciplinary thinking about history and place often utilized in American Studies has not always been extended to art history. While efforts have been made to consider the political and environmental ramifications of English landscapes, the merging of New Western History with the history of art in the American West has proved to be a tumultuous union. In 1991, the Smithsonian’s landmark exhibition and catalogue, *The West As America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*, challenged viewers and readers by exploring

the historical significance and cultural values revealed through images of westward expansion.⁹ A well-documented public backlash to *The West as America* suggests a discrepancy between contemporary academic and popular assessment of imagery that exposes a distinct western regional identity as much motivated by the myths of the West as by its realities.¹⁰ Other surveys that explore a more interdisciplinary approach to American landscapes include Angela Miller's *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representations and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875* and Sarah Burns' *Pastoral Inventions: Rural Life in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture*. Joni Kinsey also applies a socio-historical assessment of images to a specific (and pertinent) geographic region in *Plain Pictures*.¹¹ These examples inform my reading of landscape images but differ in scope from my aims. My intention is not to assess art simply to understand it better but to examine art to see what it reveals about a history of human engagement with the earth.

If, as Limerick argues, the West is a region in which the consequences of a culture bent on conquest can best be observed, images from the Dust Bowl reveal truly catastrophic

⁹ William H. Truettner, ed. *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

¹⁰ Bryan J. Wolf, "How the West Was Hung, or, When I Hear the Word 'Culture' I Take out My Checkbook," *American Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (September 1992). Wolf argues the exhibition and catalogue demonstrate how the West was defined by rhetoric and conquered by ideology, each emphasizing the act of constructing the West more than the West itself. For reproductions of highlights from the voluminous comment books associated with the traveling exhibition, see "Showdown at 'the West as America' Exhibition," *American Art* 5, no. 3 (summer 1991). A later assessment that affirms the catalogue's efforts to reveal the constructions that shape our conception of the West while acknowledging that the wall labels pushed the revisionist methodology of the project a bit too far can be found in Roger B. Stein, "Visualizing Conflict in 'the West as America'," *The Public Historian* 14, no. 3 (summer 1992).

¹¹ Angela L. Miller, *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Sarah Burns, *Pastoral Inventions: Rural Life in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989). Kinsey, *Plain Pictures*.

consequences of that exploitation.¹² Well after the prairies were surveyed into sections and the sod of the grasslands was broken with plows, the effects of the Dust Bowl challenged fundamental attitudes toward the way that Americans utilized their land. Images from the 1930s manifest those challenges and question not just American agricultural practices but political and economic systems as well as conceptions of stewardship. Limerick's "legacy of conquest" continues to shape life in the plains. Americans are disconnected from the land and the way it is used to serve their needs. The Dust Bowl offers a historical moment when the land and the people were unified in crisis and the nature of their relationship was critiqued. My intent in this study is therefore to explore images from this period in order to examine the roots of the ongoing cultural relevance of land use.

¹² Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1987).

Chapter 1. Possession of the Soil: Land Use and Landscape

The dust storms of the 1930s that enveloped the Great Plains in choking darkness represented an unparalleled ecological disaster for the center of the United States. Scientists and historians firmly believe this event was prompted by not just the arid climate found west of the one hundredth meridian but also by human agency through agricultural overproduction of commodities such as grain. The Dust Bowl represents the culmination of a populace bent on conspicuous consumption with an at times willful ignorance toward the environmental realities of its habitat. Art that relates to the Dust Bowl provides intriguing insights into cultural behaviors and attitudes that helped produce the disaster. To understand the messages and attitudes toward the land embedded in artistic imagery depicting the Dust Bowl, one must appreciate the way these symbols and beliefs developed. This chapter traces the shifting function of agricultural landscape imagery from late-medieval to modern Europe and the United States while considering the cultural, social, and historical evolution of western agricultural land use. This visual progression demonstrates not just how Dust Bowl art reacted against our ingrained understanding of the farm as a representation of a pastoral ideal, but how Americans came to act as agents in the creation of the environmental catastrophe of the 1930s.

The agricultural focus of my evaluation of landscape imagery emphasizes depictions of plows and plowing. From the verdant fields of Grant Wood's Iowa to Alexandre Hogue's devastated acres in north Texas, from Pare Lorentz's apocalyptic film *The Plow that Broke the Plains* to John Steuart Curry's optimistic imagery of soil conservation, the plow shaped the landscape of Dust Bowl art. The plow serves as potent symbol not just in art of the 1930s, but appears throughout the history of landscape paintings emphasizing rural themes. Agriculture in fact means the art and science of cultivating the soil while cultivation means to put labor into

improving the land by tilling it.¹ Cultivation shares the same Latin root as the word culture, and our modern definition of culture as the beliefs and expressions of social groups builds on a notion that the self, like the land, can be improved. Agriculture represents the culture of how humans produce food and it also means the art and science of plowing.

From pre-Roman times through the medieval period, European peasants used hand tools and simple plows powered by horses or oxen to cultivate the soil. Agricultural imagery from preindustrial Europe reflects this continuity over hundreds of years. Ambrogio Lorenzetti's allegorical representations of good and bad government in his frescos for the Palazzo Pubblico of Siena include optimal as well as dire scenes of peasant agriculture. Lorenzetti's fresco of *The Good City*, 1337-40 (Fig. 2) illustrates not just the space within the city walls but also the surrounding farmlands that fed Siena. In a detail from this rural view, *The Good Countryside* (Fig. 3), we see one peasant plowing and another sowing along with harvesting scenes of reaping and threshing in a continuous narrative of late medieval life in the fields. A figure of Security presides over the country, her scroll assuring the viewer that men may freely till and sow, her benediction serving as one of many visual manifestations of a highly functional system of government. Lorenzetti contrasts this tableau with another fresco, *The Bad Government and City*, in which Fear reigns over countryside devoid of any activity save instances of pillage and chaos. The frescos reinforce the need for a harmonious class system dedicated to the greater good of the community.

The agricultural scenes depicted in *The Good Countryside* correspond with annual tasks aligned with months of the year and represent a component of the various forms of human

¹ These definitions can be found in the introduction to Frieda Knobloch, *The Culture of Wilderness: Agriculture as Colonization in the American West* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 4.

activity comprising the Italian Commune and its surroundings.² The seasonal record preserved in Lorenzetti's frescos relates to the calendrical function of Books of Hours found in Italy and throughout Western Europe. The most lavish of these, the French *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, 1412-16, devotes over half of its depictions of characteristic tasks associated with each month to field labor appropriate to that season. *March* (Fig. 4), highlights a plowman tilling a small parcel of the Duke's property, indicative of a generalized trend across Europe to consolidate what had been typically open, common lands.³ The fundamental connection between these agrarian practices and monthly activities as well as annual cycles is presented as being certain as the transience of human existence. In Hans Holbein's 1523-26 print series, *The Dance of Death*, (Fig. 5) Death speeds the plow alongside a German peasant, perhaps helping him finish the row before taking his life. The peasant bears a strong similarity to his French counterpart in *March* despite postdating him by a hundred years.

This similarity reflects the relative consistency of agricultural practice prior to roughly the eighteenth century. A classic expression of the unwavering constancy of peasant labor can be observed in Pieter Bruegel's 1558 painting, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (Fig. 6), which depicts the mythological character of Icarus as he plunges from his lofty pursuit of the sun into the sea while a plowman occupying the foreground remains completely oblivious. Much as the tale of Icarus represented a warning to not exceed one's station, the plowman's focused

² For a state of the research on Lorenzetti's frescos, see Diana Norman, "Love Justice, You Who Judge the Earth,': The Paintings of the Sala Dei Nove in the Palazzo Pubblico, Siena," in *Siena, Florence, and Padua: Art, Society, and Religion 1280-1400* ed. Diana Norman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

³ This trend reflects response to changes in technology, increase in population, and the commercialization of agriculture. For a focused investigation of the regional specificities associated with this transition during the medieval period, see Rosemary L. Hopcroft, *Regions, Institutions, and Agrarian Change in European History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

dedication to his task confirmed the necessity for agrarian labor in society.⁴ Although this plowman's social position within his larger community cannot be discerned from Bruegel's painting, medieval agriculture typically occurred in the form of peasants working as tenants on communal lands controlled by a lord.⁵ *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* is as much about the man who works the earth as the man who falls to it.

The artistic conception of a landscape was originally derived from the Dutch word *landschap* in the late sixteenth century. Initially the term simply meant a tract of land, but when much of that land was claimed from the sea through remarkable feats of human engineering, Dutch *landscaps* were lands of labor.⁶ Drawing upon a tradition begun by earlier counterparts like Bruegel, the landscape painters of the Dutch Republic transformed this form of painting into a popular genre, capturing the geographic character of their homeland with a new, nationalistic pride. The sweeping changes in Dutch politics, commerce, and religion manifested themselves in the form of generalized enthusiasm for the local landscape as a pictorial subject more than as an emphasis on agricultural practices in those compositions. Ann Jensen Adams cites the ramifications of the Protestant Revolution, the shift toward market capitalism, and the typical lack of a feudal or manorial system in the Low Countries that characterized much of Europe to conclude that, "with no individual in whom to invest the symbols of national identity and when faced with the problem of the creation of a communal identity, the Dutch turned to their land."⁷ The distinct airiness and horizontal spaciousness that characterize Jan van Goyen's *Landscape*

⁴ Walter S. Gibson, *Bruegel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 40.

⁵ Hopcroft, *Agrarian Change in European History*, 25-28. This system continued into the sixteenth century in many European regions.

⁶ The origin and significance of the term landscape is contemplated in Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 10.

⁷ Ann Jensen Adams, "Competing Communities in the 'Great Bog of Europe': Identity and Seventeenth-Century Dutch Landscape Painting," in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 44.

with Dunes from 1647 (Fig. 7) is representative of classic seventeenth-century Dutch landscapes and the agricultural history of this region.

A farmer plowing at the left of this painting, a small detail, becomes little more than *staffage*, yet the dunes help us locate ourselves along the coast. Historians have established that in the coastal regions of the Low Countries a laborer like van Goyen's plowman possessed access to markets which allowed for agricultural specialization and the production of crops as a surplus, rather than subsistence economy.⁸ This shift toward commercial agriculture affected all of Europe, notably England where the development of a capitalist economy involved enclosing lands at the reduction of common rights, displacing the agrarian poor into an eventual "landless proletariat" who left the country for the prospect of work in increasingly industrial cities.⁹ As these changes occurred, dual and sometimes overlapping themes began to dominate interest in landscape: the pastoral tradition and the picturesque.

The pastoral tradition first appears in Greek and Roman literature of Theocritus and Virgil, whose poems imagine a peaceful Arcadia populated by shepherds and simple farmers. Europe's industrial revolution helped rekindle this interest in artistic depictions of an idealized, rural paradise. Rurality became a subject for aesthetic appreciation as a natural contrast to increasingly urban population centers.¹⁰ John Barrell suggests the art-buying English aristocracy

⁸ Audrey M. Lambert, *The Making of the Dutch Landscape: An Historical Geography of the Netherlands*, 2nd ed. (London: Academic Press, 1985), 180.

⁹ John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730-1840* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 3. For more information on the agricultural revolution in England see Hopcroft, *Agrarian Change in European History*, 58-89; W. G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1955); K. D. M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England, 1660-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

¹⁰ In his survey of landscape as interpreted through numerous disciplines, John Wylie describes Hoskins's *Making of the English Landscape* as part of a "long-standing and deep-rooted English

during this period would have lived in greater distance from the rural realm, prompting an interest in such pastoral subject matter typified by the French landscapes of Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin.¹¹ English writer William Gilpin theorized that Claude and Poussin's picturesque views aestheticized landscapes to celebrate the inherent naturalness, i.e. the roughness or irregularity of their subject.¹² A picturesque landscape, either viewed in nature or created in paint, expresses this naturalness in a visually striking and appealing manner. Gilpin's constructed counterpoint to this aesthetic ideology, *Scene without Picturesque Adornment* (Fig. 8) captures a sense of vastness devoid of topographic content necessary to captivate a viewer.

English Romantic painters such as Joseph Mallord William Turner and John Constable utilized an interest in the pastoral applied to their local countryside while remaining mindful of the formal conventions governing enthusiasm for the picturesque. In *A Ploughing Scene in Suffolk (A Summerland)*, 1814 (Fig. 9), Constable allows the plowman to serve as the focal point of his composition, but the man retains a symbolic identity as proof of "calm, endless, and anonymous industry ... confirm[ing] the order of society" rather than a fully actualized, working class laborer.¹³ The horizontal wooded ridge that divides the landscape into foreground and background compositionally encloses the plowman in his labor, preventing him from experiencing the pastoral beauty that Constable has artfully arranged for his audience to admire. One might wonder how Constable's peasant is emblematic of the plight of the disenfranchised agrarian laborer while Bruegel's plowman reinforces the necessity of the class system. In fact, both images appear to emphasize the need for agrarian workers, but within the context of the

discourse in which a certain *rural idyll* is represented as a source of aesthetic, social and ecological harmony." John Wylie, *Landscape* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), 34.

¹¹ Barrell, *Dark Side*, 8.

¹² Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1850* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

¹³ Barrell, *Dark Side*, 149-52.

early nineteenth century Constable's plowman may represent the pastoral under the threat of eclipse in the face of new industrialization. The woods that compositionally enclose Constable's laborer evoke the British Enclosure Acts that drastically reduced the quantity of arable common land available to the working poor. These enclosures, along with a rising population, increasing supply of landless laborers, and new developments in mechanized technology all contributed to great changes in agriculture for the British people.

Depictions of the agrarian laborer would become increasingly associated with the victimization of the proletariat during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in European art. Although Jean-Francois Millet's painting *The Gleaners* from 1857 depicts harvesting, rather than plowing, the image resonates as a quintessential expression of the heroism of the working poor, particularly in light of the recent lower-class uprisings including the revolution of 1848. German artist Käthe Kollwitz used plowmen shown bowed to the earth (Fig. 10) pulling a plow with human strength rather than domesticated animals in order to equate agrarian laborers to broken men, forced to become enslaved beasts of burden. This symbolic expression of the worker introduces a revolt that dominates the narrative of her *Peasant War* series, completed in the early 1900s. Throughout its use in European landscape imagery, the plow tends to reinforce the low status of peasant laborers, even as the historical realities of those workers changed dramatically.

Although the notion of agricultural imagery tended to be tied to a conception of the working-class laborer, agriculture and the pastoral ideal held a different meaning for Europeans when applied to their discovery and settlement of America. Their new continent embodied every pastoral hope of Arcadia, or even Eden. Early reports of contact with the Americas revolved

around two extremes: a pastoral paradise or a hideous wilderness.¹⁴ The earliest known representation of the New World (Fig. 11) has prompted considerable speculation as to the work's intended geographic subject, be it central Mexico or the American Southwest, but to European audiences in the sixteenth century it would primarily represent a strange and utterly new land.¹⁵ Rural venues of pastoral calmness and the "naturalism" of the picturesque seemed thoroughly civilized in comparison to the terror and potential of a thoroughly wild continent, populated not by Arcadian shepherds but natives who were deemed savages.¹⁶

This wilderness represented a vacuum to be filled and conquered, but it could also be a new raw content of fecundity and potential.¹⁷ Only civilizing the wilderness and building a garden in its place could reconcile this dichotomy. In French author Alexis de Tocqueville's influential book about the character of Americans, *Democracy in America* (1831), he determined that Americans cared about the wilderness because they valued what could be made from it.¹⁸ Late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century landscapes reinforced this fascination with the wilderness and the quest to subdue it. Ralph Earl's depiction of Leicester, Massachusetts from 1800, *Looking East from Denny Hill* (Fig. 12), records the rolling acres of the Denny farmstead at harvest time, emphasizing the geometric segmentation indicative of tilled parcels of land. This

¹⁴ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 39.

¹⁵ Hugh Honour, *The European Vision of America: A Special Exhibition to Honor the Bicentennial of the United States* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1975), 29-31.

¹⁶ Roy Harvey Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). Pearce explores the concept that colonials defined themselves in contrast to the Indians they encountered, who they deemed versions of men existing in a rude, uncivilized state.

¹⁷ For a discussion of the influence of Old World consideration of the wilderness see Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967), 3rd, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 42-45; Marx, *Machine in the Garden*.

¹⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1831), trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Library of America, 2004), 557.

landscape has been smoothed by man's agency into productive units maintained by several field workers. Earl's landscape assists in revealing a conceptual and visual shift in the pastoral ideal from shepherds who had populated the landscapes of Claude to farmers who were settling and civilizing the American frontier.¹⁹

Although the preeminent American landscape tradition of the nineteenth century, the Hudson River School, most often championed the spiritual and perhaps material value of the wilderness through images of forests and mountains, Thomas Cole's iconic 1836 painting, *The Oxbow (The Connecticut River Near Northampton)* (Fig. 13), offers a pastoral presentation of the land.²⁰ In *The Oxbow*, a settled plain disrupted by the meandering Connecticut River divides the wilderness in the foreground and sweeping distant hills. Compositionally, Cole establishes the middle landscape as the locus for agrarian settlement and focal point of the painting.

Environmental historian William Cronon posits that *The Oxbow* represents a landscape that is not fully wild or fully settled into the pastoral, indicative of Cole's fear that eventually America's course of empire would allow progress to consume the wilderness entirely.²¹ Cole recognized with more concern than was typical of his day that the wilderness that so fascinated him and his

¹⁹ Ibid., 98.

²⁰ Angela Miller uses the term "first New York school" rather than "Hudson River School" to emphasize the northeastern specificity of the group's participants and their subjects while also acknowledging that this New York-based landscape style eventually became a national preference. The term was originally used to reflect the provinciality of the artists and their subject in contrast to the French Barbizon style that had become popular. Angela L. Miller, *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 3-4.

²¹ William Cronon, "Telling Tales on Canvas: Landscapes of Frontier Change," in *Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts: Transforming Visions of the American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 43.

fellow painters was rapidly retreating as a consequence of the project of progress, foretelling, “Where the wolf roams, the plough shall glisten.”²²

The middle ground of Cole’s Connecticut Valley corresponds symbolically with the development of a belief in a “middle state” between animalistic and intellectual beings that functioned as a compromise between the natural and rational ideals of humanity.²³ For eighteenth-century thinkers, man’s ideal nature should find equilibrium at some point between a primitive and civilized state. French Neoclassicist François-André Vincent offered a Rousseauian homily about the necessity of agricultural virtue in his *Lesson of Plowing* from 1798 (Fig. 14), depicting a wealthy family who takes their well-dressed son to the country to complete his education through the tilling of soil.²⁴ If the pastoral idyll represented a vocational middle state for philosophers, the agrarian farmer was its exemplar. As described by British minister Richard Price, “the happiest state of man is the middle state between the *savage* and the *refined*, or between the wild and the luxurious state. Such is the state of society in CONNECTICUT, and some others of the *American* provinces; where the inhabitants consist ... of an independent and hardy YEOMANRY.”²⁵

Cole explored these “states of man” in his cautionary tale of civilization seen through landscape, *The Course of Empire*. In five canvases, executed from 1833-36, Cole presented views of a locale transitioning from a savage state to the pastoral, then descending from a

²² Thomas Cole, “Essay on American Scenery,” *The American Monthly Magazine* 1 (January 1836): 9.

²³ Marx explores this term, as adapted from Arther Lovejoy’s broad discussion of the Great Chain of Being. Marx, *Machine in the Garden*, 100-02.

²⁴ Robert Rosenblum, *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 93-94. Garry Wills, *Cincinnatus: George Washington and the Enlightenment* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 76.

²⁵ Richard Price, *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution*, (London: T. Cadell, 1785), 57-58 (emphasis in original), quoted in Marx, *Machine in the Garden*, 105.

climactic consummation of empire to its destruction, and eventual desolation. The Puritans believed settling the New World was a divine imperative, and this need to conquer wilderness continued to fuel proponents of expansion into Cole's day.²⁶ Despite this edict of dominion, the wilderness and natural surroundings were also deemed a safety valve that would counterbalance America's pursuit of empire, excluding it from the inevitable decline observed in historical empires.²⁷ For Cole, the fall of empire was a universal destiny that even America's democratic exceptionalism could not thwart. *The Oxbow* suggested an ideal moment during the transition from the wilderness to an empire that has "transgressed its natural origins."²⁸ Its compositional and social balance presented a recommendation that America might well elect to plateau at just this state.

The notion of an agrarian middle landscape as an ideal and counterbalancing force was perpetuated by colonial authors and statesmen who adjusted the pastoral shepherd into a republican farmer who would represent the ideal balance of power, liberty, and virtue for the new, democratic nation.²⁹ The French-born author J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur began to clarify the agrarian nature of American life in his essays from the 1780s, published in the volume titled *Letters from an American Farmer*, in which he questioned, "Who should we American farmers be without the distinct possession of the soil?"³⁰ Such possession fulfilled the national objective to subdue the wilderness, a process that would later be theorized as a key determining

²⁶ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 31.

²⁷ The historical roots of American exceptionalism are explored in David M. Wrobel, *The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the New Deal* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 7-10.

²⁸ Miller, *Empire of the Eye*, 29.

²⁹ John F. Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America, 1776-1900* (New York: Grossman, 1976), 7.

³⁰ Crèvecoeur, "Letters from an American Farmer" (1782), quoted in Marx, *Machine in the Garden*, 110.

factor in the formation of a distinctive American character. Thomas Jefferson affirmed Crèvecoeur's conception of Americans' communion with their land by declaring, "The true American is the ploughman, whose values are derived from his relations to the land, not from 'artificial rules.'"³¹

The Oxbow depicts a landscape transformed by republican farmers of Leo Marx's middle state who have ordered much of the wilderness into a garden. As the farmer became the ideal representation of an American, his fields took the pictorial formula of a middle landscape, one that was neither too wild nor too agriculturally refined.³² Political and philosophical preference for agrarian labor and agrarian locales gradually altered American aesthetic appreciation of land until, as Burns clarifies, "the most beautiful land was cleared, tilled, and productive."³³ By the 1850s, artists had distilled this expression of beauty into the succinct symbol of an American family farm. As seen in Frances Palmer's lithograph published by Currier and Ives, *American Farm Scene: Spring*, 1869 (Fig. 15) this New England homestead represented a universal American ideal.³⁴ The farm's orderly and diverse rows of crops, neat outbuildings, and local granary systems could serve as sources of pride for the farmers and their rural communities. Audiences came to appreciate this subject matter as a new kind of American pastoralism.³⁵

If the farm symbolized a quintessentially American place, the farmer was the ideal citizen. Republican adaptation of Roman pastoral values to American civic identity can be seen

³¹ Jefferson, Letter to Peter Carr, 10 August 1787, quoted in *ibid.*, 130.

³² Miller, *Empire of the Eye*, 13.

³³ Sarah Burns, *Pastoral Inventions: Rural Life in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 6.

³⁴ Bryan F. LeBeau, *Currier & Ives: America Imagined* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 178. LeBeau points out that a New England farm neither matched the varied regional specificities of the country nor fit the average home for an increasingly urban populace.

³⁵ Allen Carlson, "On Appreciating Agricultural Landscapes," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 43, no. 3 (spring 1985): 301-02.

in Jean-Antoine Houdon's portrait (1785-88) of George Washington as a modern-day Cincinnatus (Fig. 16), the military leader who retired after victory to resume tending his fields. Washington appears in contemporary uniform but rests on Roman fasces, a bundle of rods symbolizing power. Behind Washington sits a plow, the agrarian implement that not only associates the colonial leader with the land, but specifically connects him to the story of Cincinnatus. Washington's decision to retire from a position of political power to rejoin the ranks of yeomen exemplified the democratic character of the new nation. With America's greatest hero turned farmer as a model of civic virtue, Crèvecoeur could confidently declare that the new nation had "no princes for whom we toil, starve and bleed: we are the most perfect society now existing in the world."³⁶

The republican spirit that fueled Crèvecoeur and Jefferson's faith in an agrarian society was challenged and inspired by the prospect of the "vast, remote, and unspoiled" West, which renewed "the plausibility of the pastoral dream, now projected into the future."³⁷ The prospect and promise of the so-called "vacant continent" shaped the character of society as it expanded westward.³⁸ Americans embraced what was described as their "manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us."³⁹ American statesman William Gilpin, a booster for this ideology of Manifest Destiny, offered a challenge to

³⁶ Crèvecoeur, "Letters from an American Farmer" (1782), quoted in Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950), reprint. (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), 144.

³⁷ Marx, *Machine in the Garden*, 68.

³⁸ Smith, *Virgin Land*, 3.

³⁹ [John L. O'Sullivan], "The True Title," [*New York*] *Morning News*, 27 December 1845, quoted in Conrad Cherry, *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 128-30. This is the first recorded expression of the phrase "Manifest Destiny."

the nation when he proclaimed, “the untransacted destiny of the American people is to subdue the continent – to rush over this vast field to the Pacific Ocean ... to confirm the destiny of the human race – to carry the career of mankind to its culminating point ... and to shed blessings round the world!”⁴⁰

John Gast’s 1872 painting *American Progress* (Fig. 17) illuminates the project Gilpin proposed, as allegorical Progress glides westward over the plains, bedecking the landscape with a garland of telegraph wire. Hunters and trappers clear her way, pioneers and plowmen accompany her, and locomotives nip at her heels. Native Americans and buffalo flee her advance. Representations of an agrarian society that converted the country’s interior into a garden as it marched west became dominant symbols of the nation.⁴¹ The pictorial language of westward expansion quickly became associated with agriculture, as evidenced by the McCormick Reaper Company’s advertisement from the end of the nineteenth century (Fig. 18) that utilized the compositional format of Emanuel Leutze’s well-known 1861 painting, *Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way*, to promote the promising harvest ready to be reaped in the western plains.

Frederick Jackson Turner famously argued in 1893 that this westward course defined America’s true character. “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” applied the ideals of Jefferson’s hardy yeomanry to the populace who ventured west, chasing the romantic frontier where savagery meets civilization.⁴² Settlement of the frontier had not only produced America’s democratic spirit, but it also created a garden out of what had been wilderness. Turner

⁴⁰ This William Gilpin is not to be confused with the previously mentioned English theorist Gilpin associated with the picturesque. Gilpin, *Mission of the North American People, Geographical, Social, and Political* (1874), quoted in Smith, *Virgin Land*, 40.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁴² Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History (1893)," in *The Frontier in American History* (1920), reprint. (New York: Holt, 1950), 3.

declared that garden to be effectively civilized and settled, rendering the frontier “closed.” Despite this conclusion, the expansionist principles articulated in Turner’s history of the West have been recognized by subsequent scholars as meaningful beyond the specificity of his romanticized narrative and can be viewed as critical to a broader understanding of American identity.⁴³ Turner’s description perpetuated the notion of the frontier, and the West, as fluid and moving constructs as well as geographic boundaries.

In theory, as described by Turner, the nation’s interior served as the ideal venue wherein America’s farmers could manifest their agrarian destinies. In practice, belief in an Edenic middle state held by easterners in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was confounded by reports from explorers who found the plains far too arid to support agriculture. In 1810, explorer Zebulon Pike first suggested the idea that the interior held a desert. Stephen Long elaborated on this report when he christened the plains as the “Great American Desert” after his expedition of 1819-20. The *National Intelligencer* of Virginia further circulated Long’s account by locating this desert extending 400 miles east of the Rocky Mountains and spanning 500 miles from north to south. While to some writers who discussed the plains the term desert meant simply an unoccupied and therefore wild space, the *Intelligencer* offered an environmental description, stressing a terrain composed of “sand, gravel, and pebbles,” with “few plants but nothing like a tree.”⁴⁴ These reports concluded that agriculture could not be sustained beyond the hundredth meridian.

⁴³ See for example Wrobel, *American Exceptionalism*.

⁴⁴ *National Intelligencer* (Alexandria, Virginia), 11 October 1825, quoted in John L. Allen, “The Garden-Desert Continuum: Competing Views of the Great Plains in the Nineteenth Century,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 5 (Fall 1985), 211. The current definition of desert as a region that receives less than ten inches of rain a year was not established until the turn of the twentieth century. Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (Oxford, England; New York: Oxford University, 1992), 69.

George Catlin's impression of the plains from 1832 (Fig. 19) was too fertile to be called a desert, but lacked the picturesque landmarks Eastern audiences would associate with desirable and potentially useful land. Catlin equated the strange uniformity of his view more with sea than earth, describing the vistas before him extending "out of sight of anything rising above the horizon, which was a perfect straight line around us, like that of the blue and boundless ocean."⁴⁵ Catlin's undulating, treeless slopes resemble Gilpin's conception of an unpicturesque landscape (Fig. 8) and suggest the aesthetic challenges the relatively flat plains posed to American appreciation of potential inherent in that land. Without picturesque markers to construct an appropriate view, the travelers who encountered the plains for the first time lacked a frame of reference for the infinite sameness of the topography save familiarity with ocean or ice. If trees did not grow here, one could not assume crops would.

Along with views of plains vistas, Catlin introduced eastern audiences to images of Plains Indians. Catlin believed his representations would preserve some aspect of a people who were doomed to extinction as a consequence of white settlement. By the nineteenth century, Plains Indians had developed a culture that was largely, although not exclusively dependent on the hunting of bison and use of horses that had been introduced to America by the Spanish in the late sixteenth century. In contrast to the stereotypical view of Plains Indians as purely nomadic hunter-gatherers, many tribes cultivated a variety of crops that represented a significant portion of their diet, and some lived in permanent villages near rivers and streams.⁴⁶ Prior to European

⁴⁵ George Catlin, "Letter No. 27, Mouth of the Teton River," in *North American Indians: Being Letters and Notes on Their Manners, Customs, and Conditions, Written During Eight Years' Travel Amongst the Wildest Tribes of Indians in North America, 1832-1839* (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1903), 245.

⁴⁶ For the farming tribes in the Missouri River Valley region of Nebraska, such as the Pawnee, the introduction of the horse prompted an increased dependency on hunting, reducing what had been a major dependence on the cultivation of crops such as corn. R. Douglas Hurt, *Indian*

contact, agricultural production flourished in the Central Plains from the eleventh through fourteenth centuries during a period of increased precipitation.⁴⁷

On the banks of streams, these indigenous peoples used wooden digging sticks or antlers to break up the soil, and cultivated corn, beans, squash, and sunflowers with hoes made from bison scapulas.⁴⁸ The women who practiced this agriculture did not disturb the upland prairie sod and instead gathered wild plants for food and medicine. Their bottomland fields were enriched by floods, and were fallowed when their fertility declined. Agriculture formed part of a dual economy along with hunting, each of which supplied resources for communities in varying degrees depending on the climate. These agricultural methods generally persisted until the influx of white settlers on the plains drastically and forcibly altered Indian life. Unlike the Indian populations that had successfully adapted their lifeways to the climatic variances of the plains, white settlers seemed determined to transplant eastern American and European agricultural practices to a prairie environment that differed wildly from the landscapes they had previously known.

While trial could resolve whether or not the plains could be civilized to Anglo standards, the psychological distress a settler might experience in the infinite void of the plains proved

Agriculture in America: Prehistory to the Present (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1987), 57-58.

⁴⁷Waldo R. Wedel, *Central Plains Prehistory: Holocene Environments and Culture Change in the Republican River Basin* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

⁴⁸For more information about Indian agriculture in the Great Plains, see Waheenee and Gilbert Livingstone Wilson, *Buffalo Bird Woman's Garden: Agriculture of the Hidatsa Indians* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1987); Elliott West, "The Story of Three Families," in *Kansas and the West: New Perspectives*, ed. Rita Napier (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003); Hurt, *Indian Agriculture in America*.

difficult to overcome until the prairie wilderness was converted into civilization.⁴⁹ Perhaps in reaction to emerging impressions of the interior as a desolate wasteland, Tocqueville reassured his readers that an American settler could also conquer the wilderness of the interior, stating “the plains ... are becom[ing] parcels of his [the settler’s] domain and yield freely of their treasures to his researches and toils.”⁵⁰ Gradually, the treeless landscape became an asset to settlers weary of clearing Eastern forests into farmland and its seeming emptiness inspired possibility instead of unease. Yi-Fu Tuan summarizes this changing nature of spatial perception and aesthetic appreciation during westward expansion by noting “the Eastern seaboard might have finely ordered places but the West claimed space and freedom.”⁵¹

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the intense boosterism employed by defenders of a vision of the plains as a garden fought valiantly to dispel the desert stigma perpetuated by Long, subsequent travelers and settlers, and hard evidence such as the drought of 1860. The free-soil farmer who made the desert “blossom as the rose” was a hero for the nation and icon for the emerging Republican Party at mid-nineteenth century. The later 1860s saw high rainfall and productive harvests, which helped inspire Henry Worrall’s 1878 challenge to denunciations of Kansas as a “drouthy” region (Fig. 20).⁵² Worrall first produced this cartoon as a sketch in 1869 to welcome friends from Cincinnati to Kansas, a state the Ohioans equated

⁴⁹ For a summary and analysis of literary references to European and American encounters with the Great Plains, see Robert Thacker, *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989).

⁵⁰ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1831), quoted in Marx, *Machine in the Garden*, 194.

⁵¹ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 57.

⁵² “Drouth” is another word for drought that was used in Midwestern and Southern vernacular until at least the 1930s. Alexandre Hogue wrote an editorial in the *Tulsa Tribune* in 1974 insisting that use of the word “drouth” was valid and should not be corrected by Eastern broadcasters, magazines, or museums.

with desert far more than garden. *Drouthy Kansas* was widely circulated by the press and used in advertisements as propaganda.⁵³

Some boosters even used the plains' desert reputation to promote the way in which farmers were changing nature into a garden. Nebraskans Samuel Aughey and Charles Dana Wilber insisted that cultivation of the land would inspire rainfall, that rain would follow the plow. Wilber iterated, "in this miracle of process, the plow [is] the avant courier – the unerring prophet – the procuring cause. [By] toiling with his hands, man can persuade the heavens to yield their treasures of dew and rain upon the land he has chosen for his dwelling place."⁵⁴ Wilber assured his listeners that the desert was merely the "result of conditions that can be controlled by the genius and industry of man."⁵⁵ Belief in the Great American Desert contradicted not only a republican need for the middle state in the nation's interior, but also the necessary fecundity of that garden. If the climate in the plains was indeed found to be arid, American ingenuity would still find ways to make the garden bloom.

Contradictory and extreme accounts of wild desert and lush prairie were both popular views of the interior from the 1810s through the 1860s, and each was reconciled by the 1870s to a conception of what we now call the Great Plains, a semiarid, sparsely populated grassland.⁵⁶ In order to institute a system of annual cereal crops within this ecosystem, the perennial grasses

⁵³ Robert Taft, "The Pictorial Record of the Old West. III. Henry Worrall," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (August 1946): 249-51.

⁵⁴ Charles Dana Wilber, *The Great Valleys and Prairies of Nebraska and the Northwest* (1881), quoted in Smith, *Virgin Land*, 211.

⁵⁵ Charles Dana Wilber, "The Relations of Geology to Horticulture," Nebraska State Horticultural Society, *Annual Reports ... 1878 and 1879* (Lincoln: Journal Co., 1879), 91, quoted in David M. Emmons, *Garden in the Grasslands: Boomer Literature of the Central Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), 139.

⁵⁶ Martyn J. Bowden, "The Great American Desert and the American Frontier, 1800-1882: Popular Images of the Plains," in *Anonymous Americans: Explorations in Nineteenth-Century Social History*, ed. Tamara K. Hareven (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971).

with thick root systems settlers encountered on the plains had to be eliminated, or “broken.” Although scientists and farmers eventually concluded that plows did not create rain, the invention of elaborate machines such as breaking plows and massive, steam-driven tractors (Fig. 21) was necessary to convert the prairie to a garden. This quest afforded man the opportunity to harness mechanized power in the demonstration of his ingenuity and industry. As an extension of Manifest Destiny, Timothy Walker acknowledged man’s right to remake the world in a vision of his choosing, proclaiming “Where she [Nature] denied us rivers, Mechanism has supplied them. When she left our planet uncomfortably rough, Mechanism has applied the roller.”⁵⁷ Conquest of the wilderness was once again justified and lauded.

From its first imaginings in the minds of European philosophers and later discussions by American writers and statesmen, America as purely pastoral Eden has only existed as a theoretical construct. Dreams of a middle state ignored that machines of industry would be needed to subdue the wilderness into a garden. Jefferson notably desired the values of an agrarian society in his vision for America, but he also advocated progress and eventually concluded that the country would have to pursue manufacturing as well as agriculture. Political economist Tench Coxe predicted in 1787 that America’s potential growth sectors included “agriculture, manufactures, and commerce,” each emerging as a logical resource and each likely to provide “innumerable opportunities of acquiring wealth.”⁵⁸ Daniel Webster echoed the significance of these systems of economic production for America in 1840, defending

⁵⁷ Timothy Walker, “Defense of a Mechanical Philosophy,” *North American Review*, 33 (July, 1831), 122-36, quoted in Marx, *Machine in the Garden*, 182.

⁵⁸ Tench Coxe, *A View of the United States of America*, quoted in *ibid.*, 160.

agricultural pursuits as not only the most important, but as the foundation of civilization. He argued, “When tillage begins, the other arts follow.”⁵⁹

An eponymous mural cycle designed by Grant Wood for the Iowa State University Library in the 1930s illustrates this concept. The first portion of the mural, *Breaking the Prairie Sod*, 1935-37 (Fig. 22), presents the agricultural conversion process from wild prairie to ordered garden. The “other arts,” veterinary medicine, agriculture (farming and husbandry), home economics, and engineering represent the rest of the pictorial project (Fig. 23). A dynamo, the term Henry Adams famously used to describe an electrical generator, dominates the center of this mural.⁶⁰ This generator converted not only energy to power but symbolically references a conversion from “manufactures,” as the term had been called, to the large-scale manufacturing and production that characterizes modern industry. Far-reaching in its applications from the locomotive to the tractor, the dynamo transformed the rural economy of the interior from subsistence to surplus until fruits of the garden and the garden itself became a commodity.⁶¹

The machine, be it a dynamo, train, or plow, served as a sign of progress despite its threat to the garden. This industry was needed “to fulfill imperatives embedded in the terrain,” for any other possibility would otherwise waste the latent potential of the land.⁶² The machine may be symbolically present in Cole’s *Oxbow* but the painting’s picturesque elements of mountain and wilderness allow for the possibility that the sanctity of the middle landscape may be preserved. By contrast, a prairie farm took on a fundamentally different physical appearance from the Cole’s pastoral vision. Ellsworth Ball’s Nebraska homestead, recorded in the 1880s by Sallie

⁵⁹ Daniel Webster, "Remarks on the Agriculture of England, January 13, 1840," in *Speeches and Forensic Arguments* (Boston: Tappan and Dennet, 1843), 815.

⁶⁰ Henry Adams, "The Dynamo and the Virgin (1900)," in *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918).

⁶¹ Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine*, 21-51.

⁶² Marx, *Machine in the Garden*, 157.

Cover (Fig. 24), delineates a farm scene residing amidst the expansive prairie vistas Catlin painted fifty years earlier. In this painting, the relationship between man and nature appears less harmonious than eastern landscape precedents because it lacks their picturesque elements to soften the transition.

Currier and Ives' views of family farms in the West also differed pictorially from the New England scenes that represented a national ideal. Their lithograph, *The Western Farmers Home* (Fig. 25), recreates many familiar elements from *American Farm Scene: Spring* (Fig. 15) including the farm buildings, fences, and trees. However, where the plowed field fits harmoniously in the foreground of the picturesque Eastern view, the Western fields loom abruptly beyond the wooded dwelling space of the farmer and extend infinitely onward to a distant horizon. This landscape held the promise of a pastoral future for a free-soil republic after the Civil War, but on terrain where the plow alone could convert wilderness to order, the benefits found in maintaining pastoral equilibrium were easily forgotten. Western fields were separate from the home and the majority of prairie landscapes could easily be devoted to production. Farmland in the West defied the pictorial formula of a middle landscape. Without the visual variety of trees or mountains to balance the agency of industry, the transformation of wild prairie into ordered sections of plowed land quickly consummated an empire of agriculture.

Views of farming in the West expressed the industrial character of agriculture but rarely did so by utilizing conventions of pastoral imagery. An 1871 illustration from *Harper's Weekly* (Fig. 26) starkly illuminates reports of western bonanza farms, new large-scale experiments in industrialized agriculture. In this image, the almost surreal expanses of Catlin's grasslands have

now been “torn up to make a vast wheat factory: a landscape tailored to the industrial age.”⁶³

These immense, uniform fields devoted to monocultures challenged notions that images of plains agriculture would share the same visual diversity and iconic cultural values of their New England counterparts. Such “blandsapes” exposed an industrialized landscape unmitigated by the picturesque.⁶⁴ Sarah Burns argues that in the plains, the “rationalized, mechanized farm operations most radically redefined agriculture and pushed it into the sphere of modern capitalism.”⁶⁵ The bonanza farmscape baldly revealed a legacy of human conquest of nature to serve its purposes. This was progress, proponents of industry such as Daniel Webster admitted, recognizing even in the 1840s not only that mechanization could not coexist with a pastoral landscape, but that society would willingly sacrifice its pastoral state for increased power.⁶⁶

Power could be gained from the commodities extracted from the land and the machine served as the mechanism that enabled the extraction of those commodities. An example of a landscape sacrificed for its commodities can be seen in Solomon Butcher’s 1888 photograph of pioneering Nebraskans, who *Us[ed] all the farm for crops - planting corn up to the front door. Custer County, Nebraska* (Fig. 27). This image is unsettling not just because the horizon is unrelenting, but because the machine has utterly subdued any hint of a pastoral landscape. As Marx concludes, “By placing the machine in opposition to the tranquility and order located in the

⁶³ Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (1979), 25th anniversary ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 87.

⁶⁴ Allen Carlson uses this term to describe his aesthetic displeasure with contemporary agricultural landscapes but the mechanization and adoption of monocultures he condemns precede the twentieth century. Carlson, “Agricultural Landscapes,” 305.

⁶⁵ Burns, *Pastoral Inventions*, 55.

⁶⁶ Marx, *Machine in the Garden*, 209-17.

landscape, [man] makes it an emblem of the artificial, of the unfeeling utilitarian spirit.”⁶⁷ The machine has conquered the garden.

As this survey of imagery demonstrates, cultural understanding of agriculture shifts over time and place, from peasants connected to the land from which they derived a sustenance economy, to western farmers who have allowed industry to overtake the garden in their pursuit of commodities extracted from the soil. In 1943, with the Dust Bowl in hindsight, Charles Little wrote, “Surely if there were a single perfect symbol for the American ethos, it would be the moldboard plow. The virgin American land was made for this plow; manifest destiny was achieved with it; the wealth of the nation depended on it.”⁶⁸ This chapter has tested Little’s assertion by considering the ways in which artists from Europe and America have used representations of plowing to reveal cultural constructs of place. The ethos of agrarian society in the West expressed through landscapes stems from historical traditions but also responds to a new and distinctive geographic region. These influences inform meanings encoded in art that addresses the Dust Bowl.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁶⁸ Charles Little, introduction to Edward Falkner’s *Plowman’s Folly*, p. xii, quoted in Knobloch, *Culture of Wilderness*, 49.

Chapter 2. Starting From Scratch: The Plow, Grant Wood, and Art of the 1930s

In *Whereby We Thrive: A History of American Farming, 1607-1972*, John Schlebecker observes, “The plow has long symbolized agriculture, and the plow and its power source have long determined the shapes of the fields and types of soil used.”¹ Schlebecker’s statement frames a discussion about the history and evolution of the plow in America, an exploration that represents more than the impact of a simple machine on the land. It is a story that considers the action of one plow producing a furrow, but acknowledges that one row forms a small portion of a field, which itself symbolizes just one of the millions of fields in America. Once added up, these fields become a vision of the nation with a grid superimposed over it, extending far across the trans-Mississippi West. Grant Wood’s painting *Fall Plowing* from 1931 (Fig. 28) represents not just a picture of a plow, but a cultural manifestation of the ways in which the plow, agricultural capitalism, and westward expansion shaped American conceptions and appreciation of order and beauty in the rural landscape in the early 1930s on the eve of the Dust Bowl.

This chapter traces the plow’s evolution in America from an implement fashioned by farmers with assistance from local blacksmiths to a standardized product sold by corporations and powered by mechanized tractors. Grant Wood’s image illustrates this narrative as an image of agrarian life that simultaneously sentimentalizes and subjugates the landscape. Responses from the 1930s to Wood’s stylistic treatment of Iowa fields deserve consideration in order to establish Wood’s connections to Regionalism and depictions of the “American Scene.” A discussion of *Fall Plowing* as an indicator of agrarian trends in the late 1920s and early 1930s helps establish an historical precedent for the Dust Bowl and an artistic precedent for the pictorial response to that catastrophe and the contemporary agricultural policy. The image

¹ John T. Schlebecker, *Whereby We Thrive: A History of American Farming, 1607-1972* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1975), 97.

reveals the way in which the evolution of the plow and conquest of the grasslands dramatically increased the human capacity to alter the landscape and it demonstrates how this process affected aesthetic appreciation of that land by the 1930s.

In a very basic way, the development of the plow changed the nature of civilization. When Neolithic peoples transitioned from hunter-gatherers to become agricultural societies they began the process of cultivating and domesticating crops with digging sticks and other rudimentary implements that evolved into plows, hoes, and scythes. As a result, they invested in the same land over an annual cycle from planting to harvest. Due to this newfound stability, they established permanent dwellings and were able to produce a regular supply of food – at times even a surplus. The function of an ancient plow, as seen in an Egyptian tomb model (Fig. 29), and of its modern counterpart remains the same. Aided by some form of force, the plow breaks up topsoil, simultaneously revealing fresh ground and severing the roots of unwanted plants, which then decompose and replenish the soil. The product of plowing for thousands of years has been a furrow, a groove in the land created when the plow turns over topsoil. From Mesopotamia to the Great Plains, the process has been essentially the same.

Although the physical appearance of plows varies considerably from their Neolithic origins to Grant Wood's depiction of a John Deere plow, each is composed of basic parts. The parts of a Deere plow like the one in *Fall Plowing* are diagrammed in Fig. 30, which views the subject from below. The parts are numbered as follows:

1. Share – this is the cutting edge which culminates in a point.
2. Moldboard – the plane of wood or metal that turns the soil.
3. Landside – the face opposite the moldboard that receives pressure from the side while the furrow is being turned. (In Wood's painting, the landside faces us.)
4. Frog – the foundation piece that connects the share, moldboard and landside.
5. Brace
6. Beam
7. Clevis – hitch for connecting the beam to a draft animal

8. Handles
9. Coulter – the blade, knife, or roller attached to the beam that severs the perpendicular side of the furrow from the land.

When Europeans arrived in America, they brought with them the market-oriented agricultural traditions of their homelands, and they to some extent adapted successful Native American practices of cultivating local and Mesoamerican crops. As the desire to produce market crops such as wheat for export to Europe increased, colonists began to import and produce wooden plows. In about 1700, these farmers began to use the kind of plow shown in Fig. 31. This plow has a wooden moldboard but adopts an iron share, point, and strips plated to the moldboard, for the addition of iron helped keep soil from sticking to the moldboard. A farmer could make his own plow excepting the iron parts wrought by local blacksmiths. It was Thomas Jefferson who suggested the technical innovation of utilizing iron in plows, and he also developed the grid that would later determine much of the settlement of the trans-Mississippi West. Jefferson conceived of a moldboard (Fig. 32) that could be standardized and rationalized based on mathematical and scientific principles.² As the Revolutionary War stimulated the iron industry, plows with cast iron shares became standard in the North.³ When using these sorts of plows, a colonial farmer, aided by another man or boy to guide either two to three horses or four to six oxen (two to three yokes), would be able to plow one to two acres a day.

In 1797, Charles Newbold of New Jersey expanded upon the benefits of cast iron parts to patent an iron plow with the moldboard, share, and landside all cast in one piece. This invention suggested a potential for standardization, but since the plow was rendered useless if any part became broken, it proved unfeasible. When farmers began using iron in plows a fear emerged that the metal poisoned the land and caused the growth of weeds. Within ten years this prejudice

² R. Douglas Hurt, *American Agriculture: A Brief History* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1994), 101.

³ Schlebecker, *Whereby We Thrive*, 27-28.

faded, perhaps due to the realization that iron plows improved the cultivation of crops as well as encouraging weeds.⁴ In 1814, Jethro Wood of New York successfully marketed a plow with interchangeable cast iron parts. Three years later, improvements were discovered in the cast iron tempering process and subsequent adaptations were made to moldboards for different kinds of slopes and soils through the mid 1830s. These improvements reduced the number of animals needed to plow and hastened the plowing process. Between 1830 and 1845 the iron plow was adopted over much of the settled country.⁵

In addition to refinements in the plow, another action from the colonial period specifically affected the physical appearance of the marks settlers made upon their expanding lands. The Land Ordinance of 1785 ruled the countryside based on surveyed longitudinal and latitudinal lines. It divided these lines into six-mile-square townships, and further divided those spaces into thirty-six sections, each one mile square or 640 acres. Those sections divided further into 160-acre quarter sections, or homesteads, believed to be the quantity of land necessary to succeed as a farmer. As Richard Manning observes, “the whole scheme assumed a uniformity of nature in harmony with the democratic ideal.”⁶ The seemingly inherent sameness of the land allowed for limitless potential for uniform growth as settlers ventured west.

⁴ Isaac Phillips Roberts, *The Fertility of the Land: A Summary Sketch of the Relationship of Farm-Practice to the Maintaining and Increasing of the Productivity of the Soil*, 8th ed. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1905), 46. The superstitious fear about metal poisoning caused by iron plows is mentioned in many twentieth century agricultural history texts, but the earlier Roberts survey provides the only justification for this fear (evidence of increased weed growth) I have been able to locate.

⁵ Schlebecker, *Whereby We Thrive*, 99. Farmers in the Southern states were less likely to utilize moldboard plows which required skilled labor and animals and instead tended to use hand labor performed by slaves.

⁶ Richard Manning, *Grassland: The History, Biology, Politics, and Promise of the American Prairie* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 97.

As a developing nation, the United States has been described as expanding “outward in space as a way of moving forward in time.”⁷ This momentum served as a necessary consequence of farming practices. R. Douglas Hurt characterizes colonial farming as “extensive rather than intensive agriculture”: there was no hybridization of crops, rotation, or fertilization. Farmers worked the land until it was depleted, and then new ground would be broken.⁸ The short season, poor soils, and potential for wheat rust in New England gradually led farmers in that region to specialize in dairy or fruit and vegetable production. Farmers attempted to grow wheat in the Mid-Atlantic States while the South specialized in tobacco and later cotton. In each case, a market-driven agricultural economy “encouraged farmers to exhaust the soil.”⁹ New lands beckoned to the west and after the Civil War, the agrarian traditions of the North would become the dominant approach for settlers as they travelled farther into the nation’s interior.

Westward expansion did not proceed incrementally from the original colonies to the Pacific coast. Pioneers traveled through the Great Plains area and on to Oregon and California because they were confounded by the prairie they found at the edge of eastern timber. Fig. 33 reveals the boundaries of the tallgrass, mixed, and shortgrass prairies encountered.¹⁰ These prairie grasses with their deep root systems imbedded in a fertile, sticky soil thwarted wooden and cast-iron plows alike. The land formed a vast open range for cattle but served little purpose otherwise. An Iowa historian recalled that in 1836, “The prairie land was regarded as worthless for the purposes of agriculture, and was considered a useless waste. There were hundreds of men

⁷ W. J. T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 15.

⁸ Hurt, *American Agriculture*, 54.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 79, 117.

¹⁰ The borders of the mixed and shortgrass prairies conform fairly accurately to the geographic region we call the Great Plains.

who honestly believed it would never be occupied.”¹¹ Later farmers who ventured out onto the prairies quickly discovered that, although the effort required to subdue the grasses was extreme, the fertility of the broken sod warranted such toil.

The sexual metaphor of preparing “virgin” land for production is apparent in the terms “breaking” or “sodbusting” that were used to describe the plows and methods used to transform the grasslands into farmland. Although plowing is a technique employed to grow crops, as the rhetoric of older farming manuals calmly explains, “a large object in plowing is ... primarily to destroy plants.”¹² From the 1820s through the 1840s, the most popular sodbusting plow was wooden with a wrought iron share and coulter, and a wooden moldboard covered with iron strips. A heavy breaking plow weighed 125 pounds and required between three to seven yoke of oxen. Using these breaking plows, a farmer would be lucky to break eight acres in a season working on his own. A hired two-man team with three yoke of oxen and a twenty-four inch moldboard could turn three acres a day.¹³

The first narrative scene from Grant Wood’s mural series *When Tillage Begins, Other Arts Follow*, titled *Breaking the Prairie* (Fig. 22) succinctly expresses this historical process.¹⁴ The farmer in the somewhat hazy background uses a breaking plow harnessed to five yoke of oxen, which another man leads. The breaking plow, which strongly resembles the “Wisconsin Breaker” made by John Deere (Fig. 34) includes a lever that runs parallel to the beam. In a real plow, this beam would measure between fourteen or fifteen feet, providing the implement with

¹¹ Western Historical Company, *The History of Cedar County, Iowa* (Chicago, 1878), 325, quoted in Allan G. Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the Nineteenth Century* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1994), 47.

¹² Isaac Phillips Roberts, *Fertility of the Land*, 62-63.

¹³ Hurt, *American Agriculture*, 135.

¹⁴ This Public Works of Art mural commission, which was directed by Wood at Iowa State University, receives extensive discussion in Lea Rosson DeLong, *When Tillage Begins, Other Arts Follow: Grant Wood and Christian Petersen Murals* (Ames: Iowa State University, 2006).

enough weight to avoid bucking out of the furrow when the share struck roots. The lever regulated the depth of the cut, and a set of wheels balanced the front of the plow.¹⁵ Wood's plowmen calmly wade through green grass that reaches nearly to their knees, actually a conservative height for tallgrass. This green field drops and shifts to a yellowed, shorter stand of grass in the foreground. Their "breaking," though dependent on many oxen, seems rote, even easy.

The uniform, dense stubble shown in the foreground grass suggests that wheat would likely be the first crop grown on this field that had been broken the previous season.¹⁶ The ease with which the farmer and his three horses turn this ground belies the challenges this sticky soil posed to settlers. This plowman pauses to take a drink but his posture remains upright and neither he nor his horses appear to be breaking a sweat. The first crop on the freshly broken soil might support a stand of corn or wheat, but it would have to be broken again in the next season to subdue the native grasses fully. A cast iron plow could complete the second plowing, but the moldboard had to be scraped with a paddle every few feet.¹⁷ Wood's original sketch for the mural shows a metal moldboard completing the task of plowing the wheat stubble, but the final image uses a more historically accurate wooden moldboard that presumably contained an iron or steel share. Wood may have painted his plow for accuracy, but his ordered tillage scene sanitizes the laborious act of plowing even as he elevates the task by emphasizing the stately procession of men and draft animals across the sweeping landscape.

Contrary to the relative ease of Wood's sod-breaking scene, the challenge of combating the prairie required a real solution. Fortunately, according to the promotional language of the

¹⁵ R. Douglas Hurt, *American Farm Tools: From Hand-Power to Steam-Power* (Manhattan, KS: Sunflower University Press, 1982), 12.

¹⁶ DeLong, *When Tillage Begins*, 249.

¹⁷ Schlebecker, *Whereby We Thrive*, 102.

John Deere Corporation, “Invention was about to wave its magic wand.”¹⁸ In 1837 John Deere produced a plow with a polished wrought-iron moldboard and steel share. A surviving example (minus handles) of Deere’s plow made a year later appears in Fig. 35. Deere continued to refine his design as well as the manufacturing and distribution systems of his company until the 1850s when the standardized, mass-produced steel plow so associated with the John Deere name became widely available. An image of this sort of plow, which sold until the 1940s, can be seen in Fig. 36. As the plow was more of a synthesis of many concurrent mechanical improvements and manufacturing processes rather than a totally new invention, Deere’s legacy came from his “uncanny ability to assimilate the best ideas from many manufacturers to meet the exact needs of prairie farmers.”¹⁹

Deere’s steel plow earned the sobriquet “singing plow” due to the whine produced as the share efficiently sliced and moldboard turned the furrow. This plow could easily withstand the challenges of prairie sod. The Deere plow represented one popular product from a highly successful corporation that stressed the importance of craftsmanship, product improvement, competition with rivals, and salesmanship. These values helped transform John Deere from a name to a brand and the production of agricultural implements from the work of a local blacksmith to an international industry.²⁰ As Sarah Burns notes in her assessment of agrarian imagery, “Grid, machine, and capital together determined what the future of American farming

¹⁸ Neil McCullough Clark, *John Deere: He Gave to the World the Steel Plow* (Moline, IL: Desaulniers and Co., 1937), 21.

¹⁹ Hurt, *American Agriculture*, 138.

²⁰ For more information on John Deere, see Neil Dahlstrom and Jeremy Dahlstrom, *The John Deere Story: A Biography of Plowmakers John and Charles Deere* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005).

would be.”²¹ The Land Ordinance of 1785 had established the grid that would extend the territory westward in ordered units, the desire for capital motivated farmers to cultivate the plains, and the machine necessary to subdue that ground was equal to the task.

As settlers ventured westward, they had to learn how to farm in increasingly arid climates. Where tallgrass prairie grasses had once grown, corn, itself a domesticated breed of tallgrass, grew abundantly. Farther west, where mixed and shortgrass prairie grew, corn could not be cultivated successfully without irrigation. Wheat, a domesticated breed of shortgrass seemed ideally suited for the broken, fertile ground.²² Farmers began to settle the mixed and shortgrass prairies in the mid to late 1800s after Kansas and Nebraska Territory opened in 1854 and, more notably, after the passage of the Homestead Act of 1862.²³ This legislation allocated 160 acres for U. S. citizens who were either over twenty-one, the heads of families or had served at least fourteen years in the military, and had never fought against the United States. If the homestead was inhabited and improved for five years, the settler earned a title to the claim.²⁴ Six months of residence at property purchased for \$1.25 an acre was another method of gaining ownership.²⁵

In these territories and young states, the railroads, speculators, and land companies made the first claims on most land. Through a steady succession of land laws, people could buy parcels of land in increasingly smaller units without a ceiling on total acreage possessed, and the price

²¹ Sarah Burns, *Pastoral Inventions: Rural Life in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 55.

²² Manning, *Grassland*, 2-3.

²³ In the same year, the Department of Agriculture was established.

²⁴ Schlebecker, *Whereby We Thrive*, 65. Southerners were allowed to file for Homesteads by 1866.

²⁵ Hurt, *American Agriculture*, 187.

per acre declined.²⁶ Although these laws did encourage settlement on homesteads by families, they also allowed individuals to acquire large amounts of land. Between 1870 and 1890 the population of Kansas, Nebraska and the Dakota Territories grew from less than 500,000 to nearly three million.²⁷ Single-crop farming for corn and wheat made agriculture not only a speculative enterprise, but it also bound the industry irrevocably to the market. As the prairie states began to dominate grain production the high yields they amassed brought down the price on their commodities, forcing the farmers to plant even more acreage in an attempt to compensate. New and improved tools and machinery made increasing acreage in production an easy task even as this equipment raised the amount of money invested in the commercial enterprise of agriculture.

By the 1870s, the speed at which a farmer could successfully plow had increased enough to warrant the creation of sulky, or riding plows. On a riding plow, usually with two shares, one could plow five to seven acres a day. The addition of a second plow qualified the term gang plow, although this increase in draft was harder on horses. Farmers would compensate for the benefit of plowing wider passages at a time through the use of increased horse-power, eventually utilizing mechanized rather than equine sources for that energy. On the bonanza wheat farms of the Dakotas, an extreme version of agricultural production emerged in the late nineteenth century with the assistance of gang plows, horses, and hired labor. In 1878, the Cass-Cheney farm plowed 8,170 acres in fifty-one days with the use of thirty-two gang plows.²⁸ The grasslands, through homesteading and bonanza farming, converted rapidly to tilled fields ideally suited to industrialized agriculture.

²⁶ Some of these laws include the Frontier Land Act of 1800, the Preemption Act of 1841, the Graduation Act of 1854, the previously mentioned Homestead Act of 1862, the 1873 Timber Culture Act, the Desert Land Act of 1877, and the 1902 Reclamation Act.

²⁷ Hurt, *American Agriculture*, 179.

²⁸ Hiram M. Drache, *The Day of the Bonanza: A History of Bonanza Farming in the Red River Valley of the North* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1964), 120.

Throughout the nineteenth century the plow became a refined implement controlled by the vision of industry. Its impact on the twentieth century was not due to this refinement as much as the emerging power source that exponentially increased its capacity to alter our conception of agriculture and our conquest of the landscape – the tractor. John Froelich produced the first mechanically successful gasoline tractor in 1892 by mounting an existing gasoline engine on a steam engine chassis, just two years prior to Henry Ford’s invention of the horseless carriage. The Hart-Parr Gasoline Engine Company produced its first tractor in 1902 and began using the term “tractor” in 1905 rather than “gasoline traction engine.”²⁹ The tractor enjoyed major improvements and increased popularity during the 1910s thanks in large part to the need to produce grain for the war effort and the concurrent scarcity of horses. Ford unveiled its popular Fordson model in 1917. International Harvester’s Farmall, the first mass-produced tractor capable of cultivating row crops, entered the market between 1923 and 1925.

By 1932 more than a million tractors were used on farms. A farmer could hardly resist the tractor’s capacity to modernize and improve his fields, his reputation, and even his quality of life. As Robert Williams explains, “The agricultural press, land grant colleges, and farming societies all urged the farmer to be more ‘modern.’ And the farmer could see around him a society that was being transformed by machines. It was natural that he wanted to participate in the modernization process.”³⁰ Efficiency alone proved a strong selling point; in 1900, a farmer could plow one acre in 1.8 hours, but by 1938, with the aid of a tractor, he could plow an acre in thirty minutes.³¹ Approximately one out of six farmers owned a tractor in 1932, a statistic that

²⁹ R. Douglas Hurt, "The Tractor: Iron Horse for the Farmer," in *Agricultural Technology in the Twentieth Century* (Manhattan, KS: Sunflower University Press, 1991), 11-12.

³⁰ Robert C. Williams, *Fordson, Farmall, and Poppin' Johnny: A History of the Farm Tractor and Its Impact on America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 6.

³¹ Hurt, "The Tractor," 24.

was likely to be higher in the so-called “tractor belt,” a vertical stripe across the country corresponding closely to the borders of the American grasslands.³²

In the production of cash crop monocultures, be they bonanza wheat farms or smaller farms that emphasized a single market crop, few farmers employed soil conservation practices such as crop rotation. Cultivating corn and wheat exposed the soil to wind and water erosion, particularly if the crop were to fail. But the profit margin could not be ignored. Land appraised at ten dollars an acre increased ten times in value if planted in wheat. Between 1909 and 1929, thirty-two million acres of land in the Great Plains were planted in wheat. In the Southern Plains alone wheat acreage increased by 200% between 1925 and 1931.³³ This period of intense cultivation in the Great Plains has been described as the “great plow-up.”³⁴ Prices for wheat soared and farmers were encouraged to grow as much as possible to assist in the war effort. They responded to the rallying cry “Plant more wheat! Wheat will win the war!”³⁵ The command can be seen in a war propaganda poster showing a soldier, farmer, and businessman advised in turn to enlist, plow, and buy bonds (Fig. 37).

Again, evolving technology assisted in the farmer’s ability to meet this need. Steam and gasoline tractors could plow thirty-five to forty-five acres a day. By the start of World War I, they provided the equivalent work energy of seven million horses.³⁶ In 1908, a twenty-two horsepower tractor could pull six fourteen-inch plows and weighed “only” 19,000 pounds.³⁷

³² This brief summary history of the tractor in America draws heavily upon Williams, *History of the Farm Tractor*, 15-90.

³³ Hurt, *American Agriculture*, 232-35.

³⁴ R. Douglas Hurt, *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981), 68.

³⁵ Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (1979), 25th anniversary ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 89.

³⁶ Hurt, *American Agriculture*, 242.

³⁷ Hurt, "The Tractor," 13.

These leviathans were useful in the Great Plains for large-scale wheat production but were not a beneficial investment on most other types of farms. Early tractors were ill-suited to cultivate small row crops and were therefore only used in the Midwest, Great Plains, and points farther west. After 1912, attempts were made to adopt design innovations from automobiles and produce tractors that were lighter, cheaper, and useful to a broader market. A farmer who used tractors could devote even more land for market crops because there was less need to set aside land for livestock fodder. He would be less likely to grow diverse crops and would instead focus on the profitable cash crops of corn or wheat to earn the highest possible return on his investment.

The increased quantities of land in use, crops planted, efficient technology and machinery employed, and corresponding higher yields all directly contributed to overproduction and lowered prices after the war. Farmers could only attempt to offset their loss by planting more acres. Furthermore, although at times the price per bushel for wheat was extremely high, in general a farmer would have to plant a tremendous acreage to turn a profit. Between 1914 and 1919 the amount of land planted in wheat increased by twenty-seven million acres.³⁸ In the regions of Southern Plains hardest hit by the dust storms of the 1930s, the average size of a farm increased from 465 acres in 1910 to 812 acres in 1930. Either statistic represents a tremendous increase over the national average at this time, which hovered around the traditional 160-acre marker. In this same region 286 tractors were in use in 1915 while 9,727 were used by 1930. In 1931, 38% of the region was planted in wheat, and it was common to find counties in which over half of the land was given over to the crop.³⁹

³⁸ Schlebecker, *Whereby We Thrive*, 208.

³⁹ The statistics on agricultural production in the Dust Bowl region are from Hurt, *Dust Bowl*, 21-25.

The tractor not only dramatically increased the amount of acreage a farmer could cultivate; it actively changed the soil itself. The tractor's weight compressed the soil while its power allowed farmers to experiment with plowing techniques. Advice from 1919 suggested that deep plowing would make any field appear to be virgin soil again. As subsoil lacks the fertility of topsoil, by 1930 it became apparent that this mixing exhausted the soil faster. In that same year, it was reported that, when horses pulled a plow, it took a generation to wear out the soil in a field, while tractors hastened the process of exhaustion to as little as five years.⁴⁰ Along with other mechanized farm implements, the tractor was directly implicated in its transformation of agriculture as a cause of the Depression in the 1930s.⁴¹ The plow and, later, the tractor defined American agriculture as they altered the physical landscape of the plains.

In 1931, a year that intense drought and high temperatures struck most of the United States, Grant Wood painted a landscape called *Fall Plowing* (Fig. 28). Just to the left of center at the foreground of the image rests an isolated plow made in the style popularized by John Deere (compare to Fig. 36).⁴² Unlike the plow's position in the foreground of *Breaking the Prairie*, the landside faces the viewer in *Fall Plowing*, revealing the cutting and turning action of the share and moldboard more explicitly. The foreground only diminishes a few plowed rows ahead of us before the ground plane dips abruptly from view to meet a swelling rise of corrugated hillside. This swell of furrows runs perpendicular to the horizontal foreground and tapers as the hill recedes in space to meet another hill dotted with a few autumnal trees that appear to be

⁴⁰ Williams, *History of the Farm Tractor*, 178-79.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 153-54. Williams notes that these declarations overstated the direct contributions of tractors to the creation of the Depression and qualifies that increased mechanization is now considered one of many factors that changed Americans' economic and agricultural circumstances during the period.

⁴² The plow is not visibly branded with the Deere name or logo, but its resemblance appears to have been sufficient to satisfy the Deere Corporation, who acquired the work in 1966.

composed of chiseled clouds more than leaves and branches. On this second rise, shocks of corn continue the orthogonal path toward the vanishing point on the distant horizon begun by the furrows on the first swell.

As the farmscape continues to recede, undulating hills roll along in a patchwork of greens, plowed browns, and stubbly creams. A small farmstead sits just to the left of the isosceles triangle formed by the receding orthogonal furrows, aligned vertically with the plow's beam. The image conveys a sense of verdant perfection: our visibility extends for miles and each furrow, shock, and tree appears slightly too rationalized and legible to be plausible. A comparison between *Fall Plowing* and a nearly contemporary image by Canadian artist Anne Savage (Fig. 38) demonstrates the formal hyper clarity of Wood's designed landscape compared to Savage's use of more expressive brushwork. Wood's and Savage's treatments of agrarian subjects can be seen as indicative of a larger trend in 1930s art in North America to look inward and explore local land and people through styles that attempted to shrug off dependence on European modernism. *Fall Plowing* also functions as a Janus-like image that reveals long-standing American attitudes toward the land even as it appears to anticipate the imminent crisis of the Dust Bowl.

In 1931, the prolific and caustic critic Thomas Craven published his art historical survey, *Men of Art*. The conclusion of this text, "Hopes and Fears for America," beseeched the artists of "home" to disavow any allegiance to European modernism and produce art derived from "strong native impulses, simple ideas, and popular tastes, an art reflecting the color and character of the machine age."⁴³ Citing the public murals of Mexican artists Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco as examples of indigenous power, Craven found few examples save Thomas Hart Benton

⁴³ Thomas Craven, *Men of Art* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1931), 506.

who were painting an “inclusive picture of his time.”⁴⁴ Although lacking Craven’s jingoistic flavor of cultural nationalism, Peyton Boswell, editor of *The Art Digest* similarly praised the emerging imagery of Benton and others seemed to “document the look and feel of the country.” He called it “The American Wave.”⁴⁵ Over time, scholars have come to describe this broad trend as American Scene painting, with subdivisions within that heading described as Regionalism and Social Realism.

Although critics, historians, and even the practitioners have discussed these movements extensively, Matthew Baigell distills an essential ideological distinction between Regionalists, who “wanted to create an art from local conditions,” and Social Realists, who “wanted to change those conditions.”⁴⁶ These motivating principles can surely be fluid, but the artists considered the central practitioners of Regionalism, Wood from Iowa, Benton from Missouri, and John Steuart Curry from Kansas, produced imagery that was typically Midwestern in its subject, but which attempted to be archetypically “American” in its content. The commonality of their purpose emerged in December of 1934, when *Time* magazine proclaimed: “Today most top-notch U. S. artists get their inspiration from their native land, [and] find beauty and interest in subjects like Kansas farmers” The article also declared, “No man is a more fervid believer in developing ‘regional art’ than Grant Wood.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 511.

⁴⁵ For discussion of Craven, see Erika Lee Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 97-98; Matthew Baigell, *The American Scene: American Painting of the 1930's* (New York: Praeger, 1974), 23, 38. Baigell traces origins of the term “American Wave” to Boswell in *American Scene*, 18.

⁴⁶ Baigell, *American Scene*, 61.

⁴⁷ [Allen Jackson], “U. S. Scene,” *Time*, 24 December 1934, 25-26. Curry first visited Wood in Stone City in 1932. Wood first met Benton in New York in the fall of 1934. Wood encouraged both artists to return to the Midwest (Curry was in Connecticut, Benton in New York) in the mid 1930s.

Wood's personal regionalism reflected a commitment to painting his native Iowa, but his homespun images along with those of Curry and Benton also resonated with audiences as generally, nostalgically, and even comfortingly "American."⁴⁸ Grant Wood grew up on a small farm in eastern Iowa until the age of ten, when his father passed away and his mother moved their family to Cedar Rapids. Curry and Benton could also call upon childhood memories of rural life for inspiration. Much of Wood's later artistic imagery draws upon these nostalgic memories of farm life. He spent much of his early career painting in a style suggestive of Monet or van Gogh until a period between 1927 and 1930 when he developed his signature, detail-oriented treatment of vernacular subject matter and playful use of Midwestern types. One well-documented influence on this signature style was the fifteenth-century Flemish paintings the artist observed while in Germany working on a commissioned stained glass window project. Wood combined the hermetic realism of Flemish paintings with an emphasis on design grounded in his familiarity with the Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau movements in a style he described simply as "decorative."⁴⁹

Wood fully embraced his new style after the success of *American Gothic* in 1930. He produced his first landscape completed in this manner, *Stone City*, later the same year. *Fall Plowing* is therefore an early example of Wood's representative landscapes and predates most of the rhetoric Wood and critics would eventually use to describe his painting after Regionalism gained recognition as a movement. In 1935, Wood published what amounted to a manifesto for

⁴⁸ The primary resources on Wood are James M. Dennis, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture* (New York: Viking Press, 1975); and Wanda M. Corn, *Grant Wood, the Regionalist Vision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983). A new biographical source is R. Tripp Evans, *Grant Wood: A Life* (New York: Knopf, 2010). Evans's study was published too late to be considered in this dissertation.

⁴⁹ Irma René Koen, "The Art of Grant Wood," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 26 March 1932, 6.

the movement entitled *The Revolt Against the City*, which encouraged an artist to look inward to his own locale, using “material which is really part of himself” to promote “subject matter which he can best interpret because he knows it best.” The text also stated that this regionalist stance necessitated eschewing Europe, industrialization, and urban modernism in general.⁵⁰ Perhaps coincidentally, Wood lost some of his critical favor after his philosophy became more extreme.⁵¹ Critics of his day challenged the sincerity of his vision. Typically, they found his landscapes antithetical to a supposedly direct representation of place, and suggested these objections with metaphors inspired by Wood's curvilinear conceptions. Lewis Mumford provided a particularly cutting example when he stated, "Wood's recent landscapes are almost unmitigatedly bad If that is what the vegetation of Iowa is like, the farmers ought to be able to sell their corn for chewing gum and automobile tires."⁵²

What of these “chewing gum” trees and impossible fields? An early biography gauges the accuracy of Wood’s landscapes and concludes that “something basic and instantly recognizable in the landscape has been selected and emphasized.”⁵³ Craven describes an Iowa landscape in which “the earth, for the most part, mounts leisurely, like ground swells of the sea, into stately

⁵⁰ Grant Wood, *Revolt Against the City* (Iowa City: Clio Press, 1935), 22. Wanda Corn and, later, James Dennis confirm the likelihood that *Revolt* was actually ghost-written by Frank Luther Mott and that Wood did not harbor such extreme anti urban views. Corn, *Grant Wood*, 153, footnote 85; James M. Dennis, *Renegade Regionalists: The Modern Independence of Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, and John Steuart Curry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 255, footnote 13.

⁵¹ Although Wood professed that an artist should produce indigenous expressions of his or her own locale, as a professor and director of federal art projects, Wood became increasingly insistent that other artists employ his particular pictorial formula. By the late 1930s he also began to talk about Regionalism more than he found time to paint.

⁵² Lewis Mumford, "The Art Galleries: A Group of Americans," *The New Yorker*, 4 May 1935, 28.

⁵³ Darrell Garwood, *Artist in Iowa: A Life of Grant Wood* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1944), 133.

undulations planted in corn.”⁵⁴ That Craven found Wood’s paintings of Iowa to be overly stylized does not discount the similarity of this description to an image like *Fall Plowing*.⁵⁵ Undeniably, Wood records the activities characteristic of Iowa farm life, though not with textbook accuracy. The act of fall plowing prepares the ground to accept moisture more effectively during the frost/thaw/freeze cycle of winter, and it breaks down the roots and stubble from the previous summer’s crop in order to return their nutrients to the soil. This agricultural function, known to a local audience, suggests the painting can serve as a genre study and a landscape. The absence of a plowman or horses deemphasizes the labor involved in plowing and accentuates the manipulation of the landscape caused by the tillage. Wood’s work may stylize the land, but Mumford’s suggestion that it inaccurately captures the character of Iowa is excessive.

Wood captured the fields of Iowa in their varied seasons, from fall harvesting and subsequent plowing to spring plowing and seeding. *Spring Turning*, 1936 (Fig. 39) showcases rich farmland swelling with fullness and abundance: the green fields form a voluminous quilt, patterned by three horse-drawn plows incising decreasing concentric squares of furrows on hillsides. Although the agricultural significance of spring and fall plowing informs Wood’s paintings, the most striking aesthetic effect of these actions is the creation of patterns in his landscapes. This notion fits well with Wood’s “decorative” approach to his subjects and his enthusiasm toward the decorative arts. It is not surprising that Wood developed his quilt-like landscapes into a textile design (never realized) (Fig. 40). This design demonstrates Wood’s treatment of plowed concentric furrows on a plot of land adapted to a quilt square. An example of this trend in patterning applied to more extreme terrain is visible in California artist Milford

⁵⁴ Thomas Craven, "Grant Wood," *Scribner's*, June 1937, 16.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

Zornes' 1936 etching, *The Pattern Makers* (Fig. 41), while the same furrowing occupies the valleys of fellow California printmaker Olinka Hrdy's 1938 lithograph, *Good Earth* (Fig. 42).⁵⁶

These artistic constructions confirm an agricultural aesthetic for furrows. A farmer's skill at plowing was a source of great pride, and through competition at local fairs, champion plowmen were crowned. Prior to the 1940s, the winner of these competitions would be the man who could plow the straightest, cleanest furrows.⁵⁷ These neat rows, due not only to the plowman's skill, were also the result of perfected moldboard construction. In 1868 John Lane welded cast iron between steel to produce a virtually unbreakable moldboard. A year later, James Oliver developed a "chilled-iron" tempering method for the production of harder cast iron moldboards less susceptible to warping. Oliver, Deere, and other leading plow manufacturers altered their moldboards so that they would neatly turn a "ribbon of earth."⁵⁸ This action proved a more effective preparation of the soil, but the aesthetic results were not lost on farm communities or regionalist painters.

The ideal physical appearance of this innovation is apparent in a series of illustrations from a guidebook to farm practices. Fig. 43 shows a furrow completely inverted that now sits too flat at the left view, a furrow insufficiently turned at middle, and the ideal condition at the right. In the right view the "surface [is] better pulverized, necessitating less surface tillage than the former case, and the plants are all buried."⁵⁹ With these illustrations of "ideal" furrows in mind,

⁵⁶ When I showed the Zornes print to environmental historian Donald Worster without any preamble he quoted a statistic to me about the loss of topsoil in Iowa farmland owing to this sort of plowing practice. Although I am fairly certain this is a California subject, the similarity to Grant Wood's treatment of plowed squares is evident, as is a broader manipulation of the agricultural landscape as endemic to California as to Iowa.

⁵⁷ Hildegard Binder Johnson, *Order Upon the Land: The U. S. Rectangular Land Survey and the Upper Mississippi Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 197.

⁵⁸ Williams, *History of the Farm Tractor*, 5.

⁵⁹ Roberts, *Fertility of the Land*, 66.

the frontispiece (Fig. 44) of *Power and the Plow*, a 1911 historical tribute to mechanized farming, is not without historical precedent. The image, captioned “The Work of the Plow – the Greatest Labor of Mankind,” is nonetheless remarkable, as it offers a bare, plowed field as an ideal, even triumphant landscape.⁶⁰ The patterned landscape, altered by man with the aid of the plow, represents the triumph of agriculture over the wilderness, but the dominant human intervention in nature also foreshadows a pending crisis.

Another example of an idealized, altered landscape is visible in a view of Mennonite farmland (Fig. 45) from *The Kansas Picture Book*, a promotional book published in 1883. The profound geometric order of section, quarter section, and furrow is an obvious aesthetic draw in the image, as is the feeling that this ordered land represents a kind of civil order as well. The book also praises this new version of the land, “improved” from its previously wild state. “Here is a spot which until lately was looked upon as an impracticable waste, remote from any hope of agricultural or communal development, beyond the possibility of usefulness save as a grazing ground for cattle, a spot apparently slighted by nature and forgotten by man ... See, now, this same tract transformed into a garden spot.”⁶¹ These kinds of agrarian ideals, expressed through a thoroughly ordered landscape, inform the way we can understand Grant Wood’s painterly treatment of farmland. Wood’s work shows an ideal that is also apparently “real,” but environmental historians would add the caveat that the costs of these agricultural practices have yet to be paid.

Wood capitalizes on Iowa’s naturally swelling topography, combined with an innate aesthetic appreciation for ordered farmland resultant from its surveying, sectioning, and plowing,

⁶⁰ Lynn W. Ellis and Edward A. Rumely, *Power and the Plow* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1911).

⁶¹ G. E. Tewksbury, *The Kansas Picture Book* (Topeka: A. S. Johnson, 1883), 55. The Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad may have funded this book to promote settlement in Kansas.

to produce a gentle caricature of the Iowa landscape. Like his portraits that innocently satirize the social types Wood encountered in small town Iowa, his landscapes also slightly exaggerate the physical features and character of their subjects. The farming practice he describes in *Fall Plowing* stems from nostalgic memories of his own boyhood, but was not necessarily anachronistic for 1931. As stated previously, only one out of six American farmers used a tractor in 1932, although this ratio would be higher in the Great Plains. A more accurate exploration of this shift toward mechanized farming is represented by a 1938 comparison (Fig. 46) of a farmer and his horse-drawn plow that lag behind the neighbor plowing with a tractor on the other side of the fence. Although Wood never paints a tractor, his pictorial emphasis on a constructed, agrarian landscape of order demonstrates an aesthetic ideology of man's dominion over the earth. The relationship between man and land is shown as positive, productive, and certainly beautiful despite accounts beginning in the early 1930s of drought and high temperatures afflicting Iowa and other plains states.

In 1935, *Art Front* writer Lincoln Kirstein demanded that Wood adopt an "element of tragedy" in his landscapes. The "real" Midwest had "dust storms and drought; slaughtered pigs, unsown crops or crops ploughed under" that Wood was smoothing over in his compositions.⁶² Kirstein's geographic conception of the Midwest appears to be quite broad, as dust storms were far more synonymous with Kansas, Oklahoma, and north Texas than Wood's eastern Iowa, and crops were plowed under primarily in the cotton-producing southern states. Kirstein also seems to be holding Wood to a Social Realist standard – to convey not just local conditions but convey

⁶² Lincoln Kirstein, "An Iowa Memling," *Art Front* 1 no. 6 (July 1935): 8. Alexandre Hogue's Dust Bowl images would likely have satisfied Kirstein's request for paintings of agricultural strife. However, Kirstein was most likely unaware of Hogue in 1935 as the artist did not receive significant national press until 1936-37 and was more associated with Texas regionalism than the Regionalism of Wood, Curry, and Benton.

those conditions with the intent of imparting change. Wood's approach to Midwestern imagery and Kirstein's proposed alternative suggest that the American Scene offered many ways in which an artist might address the country's need for confidence, security, or community amidst the economic crisis of the Depression or the environmental catastrophe of the Dust Bowl. Most nostalgic views like those of Wood fulfilled what Alfred Jones described as a "search for a usable past, for a tradition that could provide guidance and justification for present programs and projects."⁶³ The predominant tone of Regionalist imagery and most Works Progress Administration art projects stressed stability and images of the past rather than the tumultuous present to instill confidence in America through positive archetypes.⁶⁴ The degree to which artists could successfully adhere to this purpose while wrestling with a pervasive environmental, social, and agricultural dilemma like the Dust Bowl informs the subsequent chapters of this study.

Grant Wood's fellow Regionalist Thomas Hart Benton differed slightly from Wood's emphasis on images of historical stability; in many of his mural projects and other compositions, Benton sought to connect aspects of America's past, both positive and negative, with the present. His painting, *Plowing It Under* (Fig. 47) would likely have satisfied Kirstein's directive for Regionalist art that referenced current agricultural challenges while also perpetuating a stable archetype of field labor. The straightforward image of an African-American man plowing a field with a walking plow hitched to a horse gains complexity with the addition of its title, a reference to a 1933 government-initiated attempt to limit an oversaturated cotton market that is indicative

⁶³ Alfred Haworth Jones, "The Search for a Usable American Past in the New Deal Era," *American Quarterly* 23, no. 5 (December 1971): 710. Van Wyck Brooks coined this phrase in "On Creating a Usable Past," *Dial*, 64 (11 April 1918): 337-41.

⁶⁴ Karal Ann Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post-Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 20, 90-94, 107.

of the dramatic changes in land use and agricultural policy from the late 1920s through the early 1930s. These changes, as seen through Regionalist art, demonstrate the increased relevance of agricultural issues to the popular consciousness prior to the Dust Bowl. A discussion of Depression-era agricultural policies and practices upheld across the nation reveals some of the missteps that prompted unprecedented wind and water erosion to farmland during the 1930s in the South, the Midwest, and most infamously, the Dust Bowl region.

As the rise in mechanized farming and dwindling postwar markets for grain made farming an increasingly speculative venture, farmers and legislators sought solutions that would add more stability to agriculture. One key problem was surplus: farmers could produce more crops and livestock than ever before and generally equated increased production to a higher return. Production drastically exceeded demand in the 1920s and saturated the market. Attempts made by the Hoover administration to stabilize the system could not keep up with the scale of surplus.⁶⁵ Several social scientists and economists began to develop plans for farm relief during Hoover's administration, including voluntary domestic allotment. This form of aid was not implemented until Franklin D. Roosevelt charged Rexford Tugwell to develop a farm plan for his 1932 presidential campaign.

This farm plan took the form of the Agricultural Adjustment Act (Triple A), which passed in March of 1933, soon after Roosevelt's election.⁶⁶ The Triple A was an omnibus bill that empowered the new Secretary of Agriculture, Iowa native Henry A. Wallace, to execute numerous provisions intended to create higher and more stable prices for farmers. Specifically,

⁶⁵ For the development of agricultural legislation in this period see David E. Hamilton, *From New Day to New Deal: American Farm Policy from Hoover to Roosevelt, 1928-1933* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

⁶⁶ I use the abbreviation "Triple A" in reference to this Act to differentiate it from Associated American Artists (AAA), which will also be mentioned in this chapter. Triple A was used as an abbreviation for the Act during the 1930s and 1940s.

the Triple A instituted a voluntary program wherein farmers would agree to reduce their overall production for payment financed by the agricultural processors who used their products. The Act intended to establish localized planning systems so that communities could become conscious of marginal and submarginal lands and work to reduce their use. Wallace believed that these localized planning communities were necessary to execute the Triple A's vision and would function as a "modern re-expression of Jeffersonian democracy – decentralized responsibility, local decision, local control."⁶⁷ At the same time, the impulse to regulate a profitable balance between agricultural supply and demand could be understood as "a scheme to get farmers to imitate the practices of successful businessmen."⁶⁸

The government's attempts to limit production garnered many participants, but the methods of implementing the plans proved unpopular at times. The Triple A passed sufficiently late in the 1933 season that the cotton crop had already been planted. Therefore, the policy was for volunteer participants to plow up over ten million acres of the 1933 cotton crop to curtail the expected surplus and limit subsequent production in 1934 and 1935. Benton's *Plowing it Under* depicts this action. Surplus in hog farming also necessitated an emergency slaughter to remove two billion pounds of pork from the market in 1933 and 1934. In this instance, the increased tax on processors and the challenges related to responding to such an increase in volume made implementation of the plan difficult. Wheat did not require some of the limits placed on other products because, thanks to drought, the 1933 wheat crop was the smallest since 1894.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ 1933 radio address by Henry A. Wallace, quoted in Hamilton, *New Day to New Deal*, 242.

⁶⁸ Richard Stewart Kirkendall, *Social Scientists and Farm Politics in the Age of Roosevelt* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1966), 28.

⁶⁹ The effects of the Triple A on cotton, hogs, wheat and other agricultural commodities are explained in Theodore Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1982), 67-76.

Although the Triple A measures earned majority approval among farmers and were helpful in reducing surpluses, not all farmers benefitted equally from the legislation and public disapproval was not uncommon. An early product of the Federal Theatre Project from 1936 titled *Triple-A Plowed Under* documented the implementation of the federal program in the style of a “living newspaper,” with recent headlines and stories brought to life before audiences. The play portrayed positive and negative effects of the legislation, including the middlemen who profited from changes in the system as farmers and consumers suffered. At the time of the play’s performance, audiences would understand that its title had a double meaning. The Supreme Court had recently declared the Act unconstitutional for its encroachment upon state authority and unlawful appropriation of processors’ funds for use by producers.⁷⁰ As the poster for the play suggests (Fig. 48), although the destruction of crops to reduce surpluses formed an element of the Triple A, the Courts had plowed under this attempt, though imperfect, to aid farmers. The play emphasized that the power of the people, who largely supported the Triple A, could become mobilized as organized labor unions and farmer organizations with political authority.⁷¹

Although “the people” supported the Triple A as a means to provide farmers fair compensation and consumers reasonable prices, they could not see the logic behind reducing production, even when this action earned compensation. Such an action seemed antithetical not just to American ideals, but Christian ones as well. Gerald Winrod, a conservative Wichita minister went so far as to blame the droughts of 1934 and 1935 on Wallace’s poor planning. “Joseph of Egypt” knew to save excess from the plentiful years for use in the lean ones, while

⁷⁰ For a discussion of the play, see Susan Quinn, *Furious Improvisation: How the WPA and a Cast of Thousands Made High Art out of Desperate Times* (New York: Walker and Co., 2008), 71-81.

⁷¹ For a script of “Triple A Plowed Under,” see Federal Theatre Project, *Federal Theatre Plays* (New York: Random House, 1938), 3-57.

“Wallace of Iowa” “gathered up the surplus wheat, corn, cotton, and hogs ... and ordered it burned and ploughed under.”⁷² Winrod’s accusation that the Triple A plowed under corn and wheat as well as cotton is indicative of the way effects of this legislation were embellished in the national consciousness.⁷³ New Dealers maintained that acreage reduction served only as a stop-gap measure for the problem of overproduction; the long-term goal was to find new international markets for American agriculture and improve national land-use practice.⁷⁴ The best planning for the future would be communal actions intended to safeguard the land for efficient use by and economic benefit to its farmers.⁷⁵

Plowing It Under gains significant nuances and associations within this context. The title is understood to draw inspiration from Benton’s travels in the South. Given that the plowman in the painting is African-American and cotton was the only crop that was plowed under as part of Triple A legislation, a southern location is appropriate. In *Thomas Hart Benton and the American South*, Richard Gruber argues the painting represents the end of southern plantation philosophy associated with “King Cotton.” In that era, the planter class/land owner would make decisions about the use of the whole plantation without consideration of the effect on the soil. As plantations transitioned from sharecropping to tenant farms after the Civil War, the Triple A legislation represented the assertion of civic and federal input on the decisions land owners made

⁷² Gerald B. Winrod, "Joseph of Egypt and Wallace of Iowa," *Revealer*, 15 August 1935, 3.

⁷³ “Plowing under” became a popular expression synonymous with needless destruction. A 1941 war protest song recalled the waste of the Triple A plow under, concluding that American involvement in World War II would also “plow under every fourth American boy.”

⁷⁴ Michael W. Schuyler and Abigail T. Siddall, *The Dread of Plenty: Agricultural Relief Activities of the Federal Government in the Middle West, 1933-1939* (Manhattan, KS: Sunflower University Press, 1989), 47.

⁷⁵ Sarah T. Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 46.

about their property.⁷⁶ Benton's plowman is therefore part of a larger system of agricultural production and environmental engagement.

A recent exhibition catalogue offers another interpretation for the painting. Alexis Boylan argues that, unlike Gruber's reading, the painting has a "heroic timelessness" that does not relate to the contemporary context of the Triple A. Boylan contends that the field we see has been plowed for generations, and this action will continue regardless of government intervention. Benton's depiction itself does not reveal if it is a spring or fall plowing, or even if it is a plowing-under of cotton.⁷⁷ Moreover, Benton does not give the farm laborer any associations beyond his toil, including references to the white landowners who presumably dictated his actions.⁷⁸ Such conflicting interpretations of Benton's work may relate to the fact that he actually produced the painting in 1929, with the title *Plowing*.⁷⁹ Benton re-titled the image *Plowing It Under* in 1934, perhaps motivated by his affirmation of "the social exploitation of American society and resultant democratic impulses on which President Roosevelt's New Deal was based."⁸⁰

⁷⁶ J. Richard Gruber, *Thomas Hart Benton and the American South* (Augusta: Morris Museum of Art, 1998), 46-48.

⁷⁷ The loose green brushwork in the fields could represent cotton, but it could also depict weeds or remnants of the last crop. The field in general is fairly clear of plant material. The horse is shown wearing blinders, which could have been used to focus the animal on walking through a young cotton crop, a task draft horses reportedly performed unwillingly.

⁷⁸ Alexis L. Boylan, "From Gilded Age to 'Gone with the Wind': The Plantation in Early Twentieth Century Art," in *Landscape of Slavery: The Plantation in American Art*, ed. Angela D. Mack and Stephen G. Hoffius (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008), 132.

⁷⁹ Henry Adams notes this earlier date and change of title in his *Thomas Hart Benton: An American Original* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 250. The painting is reproduced with the title *Ploughing It Under* and date 1929 in Thomas Craven, *Thomas Hart Benton* (New York: Associated American Artists, 1939), 38. When I asked Adams about this issue, he stated that the 1929 date provided in the Craven publication makes sense given the style of the work and that Benton would likely have made the iconography for a painting inspired by the Triple A plow under more overt. Henry Adams. Email to Kate Meyer, 26 July 2010.

⁸⁰ Thomas Hart Benton, "American Regionalism: A Personal History of the Movement," in *An American in Art: A Professional and Technical Autobiography* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1969), 192.

Benton produced the same composition as his first lithograph published in 1934 by Reeves Lewenthal's fledgling business, Associated American Artists (AAA). Prints by Benton and other popular artists of the period, including Grant Wood, were sold through department stores and mail order advertisements in edition sizes up to 250 for the price of five dollars. *Plowing It Under*, which was sometimes also titled *Plowing*, sold out quickly.⁸¹ Benton noted that he based the print on a "drawing made in S. Carolina in 1934 – showing Tugwell's program in operation."⁸² Benton's depiction of the plowman is a familiar reiteration of agrarian toil not necessarily specific to any geographic region, and yet the image's title connects this common subject with uncommon change in the agricultural landscape. The somewhat paradoxical timelessness and contemporary relevance of the painting and print for audiences in 1934 help explain Benton's ability to navigate a Regionalist idiom successfully and to depict America's past as well as her promise, even if that promise was achieved through destruction of farmland. The image represents the dramatic changes in interpretation an image of plowing could hold for viewers who might have seen Benton's 1929 version of *Plowing* or Wood's 1931 *Fall Plowing* within a few years after their execution. American agriculture had become a speculative practice that necessitated government intervention in the form of financial relief and land-use planning. The plow, as typified by Wood's painted image, was already beginning to lose its stability as an icon of progress.

⁸¹ For more on Benton and the AAA, see Doss, *Politics of Modernism*, 156-67.

⁸² Creekmore Fath, *The Lithographs of Thomas Hart Benton* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969), 36. Both the Gruber catalogue and the Boylan essay appear to draw all of their source material about the painting from Fath's entry about the lithograph. As Benton incorrectly recalls 1934 as the year the cotton crop was plowed under, rather than 1933, and provided this and other anecdotes to Fath around 1966 to accompany reproductions of his lithograph for the 1969 catalogue raisonnée publication, this statement is slightly suspect. Benton's lithographs often drew inspiration from earlier drawings and paintings. *Plowing It Under* could illustrate a generic plowing scene as easily as the Triple A plow under. Benton may have chosen to specifically associate the image with the latter event.

Grant Wood's nostalgic view of fall plowing in the cornfields of Iowa helps us understand how the Regionalists explored a rooted interest in their own locales during the 1930s. As an image painted on the eve of the Dust Bowl, *Fall Plowing* also represents an American ideology that valued agrarian order imposed upon the land. This philosophy traced the cultural heritage of 1930s back to Midwesterners whose ancestors had fought to break the prairies and make them productive. It also revealed an aesthetic of order regulated by the surveyor's grid and the plowman's furrow. Wood's veneration of this pattern of order and of his forefathers who inscribed those marks exposes a human impulse to dominate nature. As the mechanism through which these patterns are achieved, the plow plays a critical role in this relationship between man and land.

With the plow's evolution through the nineteenth century and the contribution of mechanized power of tractors, the potential impact of these furrows increased almost exponentially in the first three decades of the twentieth century. The land the plow encountered also shifted as settlers progressed westward, including the fertile soils of tallgrass prairies and more arid climates in the shortgrass prairies of the Great Plains. The plow could achieve a sense of order on each kind of land, be it planted in corn in the east, wheat in the west, or cotton in the south. What did not remain constant, however, were the effects of these crops and these marks on lands that proved increasingly vulnerable when confronted by heat, drought, or floods. As the impact of the plow upon the farmlands of America became increasingly catastrophic during the 1930s, its function as a symbol of order and prosperity was about to shift.

Chapter 3. Sermons in the Soil: *The Plow That Broke the Plains*

On April 14, 1935, the world seemed to come to an end in the southern stretches of the High Plains. The infamous storm, dubbed Black Sunday, fell like a dark curtain over homes, farms, and towns. The frightened victims set church attendance records the next week on Easter but these spiritual refuges did not always provide physical protection against the storms.¹ A Methodist district superintendent reported in 1935, “In one place the ceiling of a new church sagged badly when a few people came for the morning service. Before men could get at it, it had burst through and the dust was pouring down. Three tons were taken out.”² In his assessment of American life in the 1930s, Frederick Allen recalled:

It must have seemed as if the Lord had taken a hand in bringing the dust storms; as if, not content with visiting upon the country a man-made crisis – a Depression caused by man’s inability to manage their economic affairs farsightedly – an omnipotent power had followed it with a visitation of nature: the very land itself had risen in revolt.³

Like the biblical tale of Sodom and Gomorrah, the apocalyptic intensity of the Dust Bowl prompted fears of divine retribution against the people of the plains. Farmers and researchers alike struggled to understand the disaster – to explain its causes and face its consequences.

In response to the calamity, President Roosevelt expanded existing New Deal legislation to establish the Resettlement Administration (RA), an agency designed to aid refugees displaced by the storms, build new planned communities, and raise awareness about the plight of these struggling citizens. Perhaps the RA’s most memorable contribution to history was their

¹ Kendra Weddle Irons, *Preaching on the Plains: Methodist Women Preachers in Kansas, 1920-1956* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2007), 17. In general, church attendance dipped during the Thirties, most likely due to the impact of poverty.

² Jesse C. Fisher, speaking to the Southwest Kansas Conference in 1935, quoted in Don W. Holter, *Fire on the Prairie: Methodism in the History of Kansas* (Kansas City, MO: Editorial Board of Kansas Methodist History, 1969), 191.

³ Frederick Lewis Allen, *Since Yesterday: The Nineteen-Thirties in America, September 3, 1929-September 3, 1939* (New York: Perennial Library, Harper and Row, 1972), 158.

sponsorship of a documentary film about the Dust Bowl, *The Plow that Broke the Plains*. This film needed to reach the city people who were aware of the dust storms but had not seen their terrifying intensity firsthand. Rexford Tugwell, Administrator of the RA, likewise wanted the film to reach “the man who was deeply in debt, the man who was farming submarginal land, the man who was destitute, ignorant, luckless – he was the farmer who needed money most and would take the longest time to fit back into the framework of a functioning agricultural economy.”⁴ *The Plow* needed to instruct the farmers that the RA wanted to resettle and to promote national awareness about the catastrophe. It attempted to achieve these goals by drawing upon the apocalyptic fears that packed the Dust Bowl victims into their churches. Ultimately, *The Plow that Broke the Plains* preaches a secular message that capitalist consumption produced the Dust Bowl and that Judgment Day is at hand. In contrast to the idealism of Grant Wood’s imagery, new portrayals of the plow demonstrated a shift in the national consciousness. Now instead of being a tool of order, the plow became an implement of destruction and chaos.

Pare Lorentz’s 1936 film, *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, constructs a narrative in which a series of mistakes culminate in an environmental disaster. The approximately twenty-seven minute, black-and-white motion picture consists of a score, live action scenes that comprise a chronological history of the Great Plains, animated images and text, and the voice of a male narrator. *The Plow* enjoyed critical approval and endured scrutiny from the moment of its premiere. It has since received considerable attention in the disciplines of film history, environmental history, and musicology. The exclusivity of each discipline’s treatment of *The Plow* justifies a synthesized discussion of the film to unite the facts and pose new questions.

⁴ Richard Dyer MacCann, *The People's Films: A Political History of U. S. Government Motion Pictures* (New York: Hastings House, 1973), 58.

My goal is to interpret the film as a challenge to political, economic, religious, and even ideological sensibilities of the era, and this requires uniting several disparate areas of study. The discussion includes background on programs like the RA and Farm Security Administration (FSA) as well as the nature of documentary films prior to *The Plow*. The men who made *The Plow* are considered, including a discussion of Lorentz's intentions for the film and his clash with his team during filming. The Hollywood backlash to the film is also examined, and the film's content is summarized. Analysis of the film includes an assessment of the role and significance of the musical score, an evaluation of the film's structural parallelism to a sermon, and a discussion of the film's use of the plow as a symbol of devastation.

The Plow capitalizes upon familiar images and melodies to link past events with a present crisis. The film creates a usable past that supplies historical and cultural explanations for the Dust Bowl. *The Plow's* call-to-arms in support of impoverished Dust Bowl refugees functions blatantly as New Deal propaganda. The formal emphasis on commodities (herded cattle and overflowing stores of wheat) found in the film also supports an anticapitalist evaluation as we witness how meeting the demand for these products exceeded the capacity of the soil. In yet another reading, the dust storms may represent the Apocalypse, with the inhabitants of the plains serving as sinners in the hands of an angry God. Their salvation may be found through faith, support of government aid programs, or perhaps through environmental stewardship. Careful attention to the film's visual and aural structure supports an assessment of *The Plow* as a critique of capitalism even as it promotes government programs and functions as an evangelical sermon of a secular, social gospel.

Roosevelt's sweeping government programs offered America a New Deal during the Depression and the Dust Bowl. Included among these were programs specifically designed to

support artists, including the Public Works of Art Program (later the Federal Art Project or FAP), and the photographers and filmmakers supported by the FSA and the RA. Unlike the FAP, the latter programs specified the type of art they wanted, namely images that would raise awareness and support for FSA and RA programs. As head of the Information Division of the FSA, Roy Stryker used shooting scripts to direct his photographers toward specific images (families, leisure time, schools, rural poverty), a practice that is well documented.⁵ Pare Lorentz convinced Rexford Tugwell, head of the RA, that this same strategy would benefit the motion picture he hoped to make about the Dust Bowl.

Such projects are typical of the Roosevelt administration, which used a multimedia approach to reaching the public. Roosevelt himself became known for his “fireside chats” which allowed the public to listen directly to the president and believe that he cared about their personal problems. In addition to radio programs, the government had produced short films prior to *The Plow* but nothing that compared to its dramatic scale and impact. These films were available to libraries or schools and resemble today’s public service announcements, or the newsreels, a novelty in 1930s America. Newsreels ran in cinemas along with theatrical films, presenting news items in live, but generally recreated, action. One notable newsreel, “The March of Time,” began in 1935 and differed from many of its predecessors by offering a viewpoint on the events depicted, usually voiced by booming narration likened to “the voice of doom.”⁶ These newsreels inspired emerging American documentary films, as did English documentaries and Russian

⁵ See for example Alan Trachtenberg, “A Book Nearly Anonymous,” in *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989). Another key resource is Carl Fleischhauer et al., *Documenting America, 1935-1943* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

⁶ Peter C. Rollins, *Hollywood as Historian: American Film in a Cultural Context* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 37. See also Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 121.

propaganda films.⁷ Russian filmmakers used editing to motivate audiences, and this captured the attention of fledgling avant-garde, left-wing filmmakers in America such as members of the Film and Photo League. These participants included *Plow* cameramen Paul Strand, Ralph Steiner, and Leo Hurwitz. Russian film techniques, rather than politics, would also influence Lorentz when he shifted from print journalism to documentary filmmaking to direct *The Plow*.

In the early 1930s, Lorentz garnered attention for his criticism of movies and politics. He worked as a syndicated movie critic and briefly as a political columnist. His first book, *Censored: The Private Life of the Movies* (1930) lamented the lack of realism in cinema and attacked the censorship of the Hays Code that reduced the medium of film to simple entertainment when it had the potential, Lorentz argued, to become America's greatest contribution to the arts.⁸ These criticisms earned Lorentz few friends in Hollywood. His next book, *The Roosevelt Year: A Photographic Record* also ran counter to the Republican political leanings of most studio heads. This book presented a photo essay documenting the effects of the New Deal in America in 1933 accompanied by limited text as narrative captions. The book articulated Lorentz's early and ample support for the New Deal, interest in agricultural issues, and his growing fascination with pictorial narratives as storytelling devices.⁹ In 1934 he drove through Des Moines and saw farm workers illuminated in the fields by the lights on their

⁷ The key figures behind these movements were John Grierson in England and Vsevolod Pudovkin and Sergei Eisenstein in Russia.

⁸ The Hays Code was a series of rules and regulations adopted in 1930s. The chief principles of the code were that film should not lower the moral standards of its audience, should uphold correct standards, and should not undermine the law. This censorship was allowed because of the 1915 Supreme Court ruling that cinema was a business, not an art, and was therefore not protected by the First Amendment. This decision was not overturned until 1952. For discussion of Lorentz's *Censorship*, see Robert L. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1994), 16-19. Snyder's book is the primary source of information for Lorentz and *The Plow*.

⁹ Pare Lorentz, *The Roosevelt Year: A Photographic Record* (New York; London: Funk and Wagnalls, 1934).

harvesters, working through the night to avoid the heat of the day, a scene he would recreate in *The Plow*.¹⁰ Around the same time, Lorentz recalled seeing a “heavy, slow-moving, gray cloud, [of] dust from the drought-stricken Great Plains, [which] blew down in the middle of Manhattan Island.”¹¹

These recollections helped Lorentz begin to contemplate a film that would explore the Dust Bowl. He was also able to find inspiration from print journalism. Poet Archibald MacLeish established a framework through which a story like *The Plow* could be told in his 1935 article for *Fortune* magazine, “The Grasslands.”¹² His article traces the history of the grasslands, for, as MacLeish explained, “Without an understanding of that story, the pillars of cloud which walked up on the Plains last spring are meaningless.”¹³ MacLeish found meaning in dust by revealing a story of grass in three parts: westward expansion, the breaking of the plains, and the recent dust and devastation. Photographs of combines in formation that accompanied the article (Fig. 49) included shots of an incoming dust storm that suggested sequential motion. MacLeish’s lyrical prose no doubt helped Lorentz conceive his vision, as the article ends on a dire note, warning, “The grasslands are the grasslands. Men plow them at their peril.”¹⁴

However, much of Lorentz’s understanding of the Dust Bowl was already established before MacLeish’s article. As part of Lorentz’s work as a *Newsweek* reporter, he addressed the

¹⁰ Lorentz, *FDR's Moviemaker: Memoirs & Scripts* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1992), 38.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹² Finis Dunaway, *Natural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 41-42. Dunaway sees MacLeish’s article as a call to arms for creators like Lorentz but does not emphasize the strikingly similar formal qualities shared by the article and film.

¹³ Archibald MacLeish, “The Grasslands,” *Fortune*, November 1935, 59.

¹⁴ Blain Allan notes that MacLeish claimed his article inspired Lorentz in “Canada’s ‘Heritage’ (1939) and America’s ‘The Plow That Broke the Plains’ (1936),” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 19, no. 4 (October 1999): 443. MacLeish, “Grasslands,” 203.

agricultural crisis in the northern Midwest in 1934. In an article that noted the emergence of distressing drought conditions, Lorentz connected these circumstances to the plights of real individuals. He balanced this specificity with a national view that emphasized the Agricultural Adjustment Act's (Triple A's) proposed relief plans while subtly suggesting the government's inability to accurately plan for such unpredictable and extreme environmental conditions. Like other journalists who had used biblical allusions to reference the Triple A aid plan, Lorentz compared contemporary farmers and Jacob's sons from the book of Exodus who each looked to the government for support through time of famine. Lorentz's article also predicted that without government intervention the plains would become a desert.¹⁵

Lorentz's support of the New Deal and concern about the plains region were firmly established when he inquired, first without success in Hollywood, and then in Washington with Tugwell, about the prospect of making a film concerning the Dust Bowl. Conveniently, Tugwell was in the market to make a film explaining the RA's aims. Lorentz quickly revised the old model for government films, arguing that they should rival those of Hollywood in their technical merit and entertainment value. He wanted to make a factual yet dramatic film that would remain conscious of budgetary limitations by avoiding use of professional actors, filming on-location instead of on expensive studio sets, and using background music and narration rather than sound recorded on location. The thrifty proposal surely pleased the RA; but Richard MacCann suggests the agency was concerned that Lorentz's proposal lacked the instructional and promotional character they needed.¹⁶ This would mark the first, but not the last, criticism of the film over its failure to measure up to political and ideological expectations. Lorentz, however, had a vision for

¹⁵ "Agriculture: Mother Nature Lays Down a Withering, Calamitous New Deal, Reducing More Crops Than AAA Decreed," *Newsweek*, 9 June 1934, 4. Dunaway attributes this article to Lorentz, although he is not credited in the magazine. Dunaway, *Natural Visions*, 39.

¹⁶ MacCann, *People's Films*, 65.

depicting the plains, and without government funding, it could not be achieved. Whether the goals of the RA, or the goals of Lorentz were met, is subject to debate.

As director, Pare Lorentz assembled a team consisting of Paul Strand, Leo Hurwitz, and Ralph Steiner working behind the camera, with Virgil Thomson composing the score. Lorentz was pro-New Deal while his cameramen were communist sympathizers, leading to ideological differences about the direction of the film.¹⁷ While filming on location, Strand, Steiner, and Hurwitz found Lorentz's shooting notes inadequate and drafted their own script, which Lorentz quickly rejected.¹⁸ Lorentz explained, "They wanted it to be all about human greed, and how lousy our social system was, and [I] couldn't see what this had to do with dust storms."¹⁹ This conflict led Strand, Steiner, and Hurwitz to limit their involvement with the picture to simply operating the cameras. Their footage, however, does appear to have swayed Lorentz to a final product that is more like their vision of human greed and flawed systems than his claim suggests. *The Plow* does not critique the government, but it relates a history of the plains through emphasis on the commodities extracted from it. Despite Lorentz's assertions, the film does link the capitalist impulse to use the land for financial gain to the creation of the Dust Bowl; at the same time, it forcefully emphasizes the plains' natural disposition toward aridity.

¹⁷ Elia Kazan named all three in his 1952 testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee. The specter of such "un-American activity" and the Communist party's confidentiality about membership makes it difficult to prove whether these men were card-carrying communists. The term can therefore simply represent their political leanings in the 1930s.

¹⁸ See Peter Ellis, "The Plow That Broke the Plains," *New Theatre* 3 no. 7 (July 1936): 18-19. Film critic and Film and Photo League member Irving Lerner wrote for *New Theatre* under the pseudonym Peter Ellis. For more about Lerner and the Film and Photo League see Russell Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back: Radical Filmmaking in the United States, 1930-1942* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982).

¹⁹ W. L. White, "Pare Lorentz," *Scribner's*, January 1939, 9.

In addition to Hurwitz, Steiner, and Strand's struggles with their director, Thomson recounts fighting with Lorentz over *The Plow*: "battling was for Pare a way of life and that even in creating he warred with his teammates. He did not bicker; his tone was gentlemanly ... but Pare's film was his brain child not yet born, and he could not be stopped from going on about it."²⁰ Filmmaker Irving Lerner's account of the film indicates that Lorentz kept shots that "vitiating the integrity of the original concept"; overall, he thought that *The Plow* was a "pale imitation of what it intended to do."²¹ Any vitriol that might have plagued relations between director and his cameramen appears to have calmed over time, with Strand eventually proclaiming the film "first-rate" and Steiner later conceding that they could have found a way to work with Lorentz's script.²²

Hollywood as a whole rejected this government-sponsored film, a reaction apparently based on more than a vendetta against Lorentz regarding his criticism of their industry. In *Hollywood's New Deal*, Giuliana Muscio explores numerous conflicts between the Roosevelt White House and movie studios. Both entities wished to capitalize on public interest in the New Deal. Washington controlled its own publicity and packaging of New Deal policies while censoring film content and accusing the major studios of violating anti-trust laws. Until a Supreme Court ruling in favor of the government in 1948, movie studios held control over their theaters, limiting showings to pictures from that studio only.²³ Lorentz found few theaters that would show his government film within this oligopoly. Caught in this conflict and concerns over

²⁰ Virgil Thomson, *Virgil Thomson* (New York: Knopf, 1966), 269.

²¹ Ellis, "The Plow That Broke the Plains," 18.

²² Calvin Tomkins, "Profiles: Look to the Things around You," *The New Yorker*, 16 September 1974, 74.

²³ Giuliana Muscio, *Hollywood's New Deal, Culture and the Moving Image* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996). The decision was reached in *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.* also known as the Hollywood Antitrust Case of 1948.

the length of his film – too long for a newsreel and too short for a feature – Lorentz failed to find a commercial studio that would distribute the film and had to work directly with theater operators to schedule bookings. He even claimed that a movie executive told him “I wouldn’t release any government picture, not even if it was *Ben Hur*.”²⁴

The film premiered at the White House in March of 1936, and then the Museum of Modern Art sponsored a showing at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington two months later.²⁵ The theaters that would show the film treated *The Plow*’s struggles to find distribution as a benefit, advertising the film as “the picture they dared us to show” (Fig. 50).²⁶ Typically, the government freely distributed their films to “farmer’s organizations, schools, colleges, churches, theatres, and other agencies of persons desiring to borrow them.”²⁷ But *The Plow* was not a typical government film. It played on 3,000 screens nationwide, out of about 14,000 in operation at the time.²⁸ After this initial run, the U. S. Film Service distributed the film with over 3,000 bookings by August of 1938 and over 5,000 by the spring of 1940.²⁹ In 1938, the FSA estimated twelve million people a year were seeing *The Plow*.³⁰

The Plow that Broke the Plains opens with written text, a prologue informing the audience that this story will concern the Great Plains and what has been done with that arid land.

²⁴ Frank S. Nugent, "Raw Deal for the New Deal," *The New York Times*, 24 May 1936, X3. Another challenge confronted by Lorentz was the fact that government films had to be free to the public while theaters charged their audiences.

²⁵ Snyder, *Lorentz*, 39. The film was shown along with other European documentaries.

²⁶ Arthur Mayer used this caption when he debuted the film at his Rialto Theatre on May 28, 1936, quoted in Barnouw, *Documentary*, 118. The advertisement appeared in the *New York Times* on 28 May 1936, page 19.

²⁷ Thomas M. Pryor, "Uncle Sam: Film Producer," *The New York Times*, 12 July 1936, X4.

²⁸ MacCann, *People's Films*, 71.

²⁹ As quoted in Snyder, *Lorentz*, 141. Snyder bases these statistics on reports from Congressional Hearings from 1939 and 1940.

³⁰ Fanning Hearon, "The Motion-Picture Program and Policy of the United States Government," *Journal of Educational Sociology* 12, no. 3 (November 1938): 158.

An animated sequence (Fig. 51) maps the perimeter of the Great Plains and the outlines of states that lie within the region. A live action shot of prairie grass composites into the shape identified as the Great Plains, and that shot then wipes outward to fill the frame. This grass (Fig. 52) covers the plains, forming a country of high winds, intense sun, few rivers, and little rain. The next section of Lorentz's history of the plains emphasizes cattle. He cuts to a scene filled with cattle (Fig. 53). The music shifts to melodies from cowboy tunes. Cattle swarm over the hills as a cowboy on horseback looks on. The narrator states that cattle brought the railroad and the railroad brought the world to the plains. The cattle lumber through the frame in a close-up dissolving to a covered wagon that seems to mimic the cattle's trajectory across the screen as banjos transition to folk tunes.

Virgil Thomson's score harmoniously evokes the mood of these shots.³¹ As director, despite placing responsibility for its score in Thomson's capable hands, Lorentz maintained critical interest in the music and sounds his audience would hear. At one point Lorentz considered including an additional voice announcing cattle prices during the livestock scenes.³² What we hear instead are the melodies of three traditional cowboy songs: "I Ride an Old Paint," "Git Along Little Dogies" (*It's your misfortune and none of my own*), and "The Cowboy's

³¹ Two dissertations devoted to Thomson's score help explain and scrutinize choices made in the musical arrangements: Neil William Lerner, "The Classical Documentary Score in American Films of Persuasion: Contexts and Case Studies, 1936-1945" (PhD diss., Duke University, 1997); Matthew C. Schildt, "Part I. Where the Shadows Cease. Part II. Music for Film by American Composers During the Great Depression: Analysis and Stylistic Comparison of Film Scores, 1936-1940, by Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, George Antheil, and Marc Blitzstein" (PhD diss., Kent State University, 2005). These dissertations employ terminology and analysis particular to musicology and separate from the standard accounts of the film by documentary historians. Therefore, I think it is relevant to include a summary of their key ideas in this larger argument.

³² Lorentz's earliest notes to Thomson (identified by author as Source One), Virgil Thomson Papers, Yale Music Library, quoted in Lerner, "Documentary Score in Films," 105.

Lament” (*for I’m a poor cowboy and I know I done wrong*).³³ These spirited tunes contrast the viewers’ romanticized notions of cowboys with the commodified cattle they witness onscreen. The lyrics further establish a conflict between one cowboy’s blamelessness and another’s penitence, also challenging any purely romanticized associations for the listener and viewer.

The film continues as wagons race across the screen and fences are built. Progress has come. A moldboard plow cuts through the thick sod (Fig. 54), revealing dry soil that sifts through a farmer’s fingers. He is advised by the narrator to plow at his peril, a phrase that echoes MacLeish’s language in “The Grasslands.” A sequence of historical threshing scenes (Fig. 55) emphasizes quantities: the need for many horses and many workers, as well as the yield of flowing grain. The technology appears primitive by 1930s standards but serviceable. These scenes of abundance next shift to emptiness as the crops fail. The plow finds no purchase as it encounters the exposed, light soil. A baby sits in the dust next to a fallen plow. The narrator laments that many farmers were disappointed.

Hope emerges in the form of a tractor that appears over the horizon as drumbeats and bugles herald the declaration of war. In a striking montage sequence, formations of tractors on the plains (Fig. 56) and squadrons of tanks in Europe (Fig. 57) are juxtaposed as military music plays. Newspaper headlines situate us in World War I as the narrator proclaims a desperate, global need for wheat: “Wheat will win the war!” Armed with mechanized technology, agriculture satisfies the increasing demand. Shining disc plows and the bayonets of marching

³³ Thomson’s versions of the cowboy and folk songs used in the score all appear to be derived from sources in Margaret Larkin’s 1931 compilation, *Singing Cowboy: A Book of Western Songs*. Schildt, “Music for Film During the Depression,” 48. Incidentally, Larkin studied at the University of Kansas and was a communist.

soldiers repeat an ordered rhythm. The viewer understands that, as the Great Plains came to the aid of the Allies, now the nation should come to the aid of the farmer.³⁴

Scenes of productivity continue. A new era dawns as we look over a sea of wheat and music of the blues begins. A row of combines harvest grain as the narrator explains how the grasslands became the wheat lands during the Great Plow-Up. The implications of harvested grain as a commodity become clearer as the harvest scenes are cross-cut with billowing ticker tape of stock quotes (Fig. 58). The pace increases until the ticker, like the market, falls and breaks. The harvest scenes in the film resemble any number of regional images, including Thomas Hart Benton's 1941 lithograph *Threshing* (Fig. 59). But the combination of these images with Ellington-like jazz, the stock ticker, and the masses of flowing grain suggests the exploitative nature of the capitalist impulse in a manner that bears little resemblance to the agrarian idyll interpreted by Benton.³⁵ Scholars laud Virgil Thomson's facile adaptation of this hedonistic jazz sequence, praising its ability to evoke a "dark, yet playful mood."³⁶

Thomson's nuanced adaptation of familiar musical themes continues in this section. He uses the WWI marching song "Mademoiselle from Armentières," along with the folk songs "Brown-Eyed Lee," which is about love and betrayal, and "Buffalo Skinners." The latter song tells the story of a man hired to skin buffalo on the condition that his employer pay for his transportation to and from Great Bend, Kansas. At the end of the summer the boss refuses to pay. These songs combine a layer of betrayal to the visual cues of wheat harvested to win the war. Additionally, the plight of the buffalo skinner resembles that of the Okie, left stranded without

³⁴ Hollywood studios blocked Lorentz's access to stock footage of the war scenes. He was only able to attain this material through the intercession of director King Vidor. MacCann, *People's Films*, 68.

³⁵ For discussion of the jazz Thomson creates for this section of the film see Schildt, "Music for Film During the Depression," 53-54.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

support from his provider, and the more general exploitation of labor by capital.³⁷ Even Thomson's choice to include instruments in his score from diverse regional sources (such as the use of the banjo) helps further the film's propagandistic aims. Uniting the regionally disparate guitars, fiddles, trumpets, and banjo paralleled the need for a united, nationwide response to this regional problem.³⁸

The heady jazz riffs and plaintive folk tunes accompany scenes of escalating depletion of the land as boom gives way to bust. Again the rains fail, the equipment sits like gravestones, and the soil cracks. We hear the refrain: this is a country without rivers, with little rain. The plowed lands lie open and vulnerable. Dust sweeps across the barren landscape. The wind howls as children run for cover (Fig. 60). An organ plays the doxology in a minor key as dust fills the inside of a home, choking the hearth. The doxology's unsung, yet inescapably familiar lyrics provide an ironic counterpoint to this dystopic setting: *praise God from whom all blessings flow*. The terrifying dust storm sequences that follow appear wrathful and apocalyptic. While planning this section, Lorentz explained to Thomson "the final crash is leading into complete inactivity and sterility ... the end of the world."³⁹ The story of grass climaxes in devastation as a divine force, both awesome and terrible, smites the land. The film progresses from the simple beauty of the opening shot of grass towards the elemental fury of retribution. This is the agrarian equivalent of fire and brimstone.

Though many viewers might not identify all of the specific songs as they heard them during the film, Lorentz and Thomson were aware of the associations many viewers had for traditional, Western music in general. In some ways *The Plow* functions as a kind of anti-

³⁷ Lerner, "Documentary Score in Films," 131-32.

³⁸ Schildt, "Music for Film During the Depression," 114.

³⁹ Lorentz's production notes (identified by author as Source Four), Virgil Thomson Papers, Yale Music Library, quoted in Lerner, "Documentary Score in Films," 138.

western, an antithesis of the Hollywood mold. Rather than heroic loners, cowboys are just another population of workers exploited by forces beyond their control. Lorentz suggested Thomson use “herding songs” in the cattle section as well as the doxology hymn used later in the film. Lorentz re-edited his footage to resonate more effectively with Thomson’s score, making this work between the director and composer by far the most collaborative aspect of the film’s production.⁴⁰ Lorentz felt the music could “evoke emotions related to the lives of the people concerned.”⁴¹ Thomson agreed with Lorentz’s wish to “rend[er] the landscape through the music of its people.”⁴² This proved familiar territory for Thomson, who drew upon vernacular source material connected to his own Midwestern roots as early as 1928 in his “Symphony on a Hymn Tune.”⁴³ He felt that traditional music proved an appropriate resource for his aims, noting, “I don’t think it’s ever advisable to be obscure when writing for a large number of people.”⁴⁴

The film and vernacular melodies continue, now reinforcing a mood of devastation after the dust subsides. The equipment that so recently cultivated the land and made it productive now sits abandoned in the dust (Fig. 61). The viewer not only connects these plows to scenes of settlement previously established in the film, but also to a plethora of historical images that show the plows actively converting the prairie into tilled fields (Fig. 21, for example). The depiction of these implements as ruins carefully subverts their historical associations as symbols of progress, redefining them as agents of destruction and ruins of a flawed civilization. Period accounts mourned the appearance of expensive equipment wasting in the barren fields, lamenting

⁴⁰ Snyder, *Lorentz*, 35; Lerner, “Documentary Score in Films,” 73; 94; 105.

⁴¹ Lorentz, *FDR’s Moviemaker*, 43.

⁴² Thomson, *Thomson*, 260.

⁴³ This composition draws upon the Protestant hymns “How Firm a Foundation” and “Yes, Jesus Loves Me.” Schildt, “Music for Film During the Depression,” 34.

⁴⁴ “Music in Film: A Symposium of Composers,” quoted in Lerner, “Documentary Score in Films,” 87.

“thousands upon thousands of dollars worth of fine machinery ... without the sound of turning.”⁴⁵

After the storm concludes in the film, dust buries the land. The families, “baked out, blown out, and broke,” pack their meager possessions and head west (Fig. 62). Lorentz credits Dorothea Lange for those lines, as well as “no place to go ... and no place to stop.”⁴⁶ The Dust Bowl refugees head toward California, hopeless and homeless.⁴⁷ The narrator tells us these people only want a chance at a new start and to care for their children. Now it is the cars that flow onward (Fig. 63) as the ruined wreckage of their former lives sits still. The music swells to a tango as nature and humanity dance together in anguish and despair.⁴⁸ The stirring music concludes with an image of a dead tree, barren except for an abandoned bird’s nest in its branches (Fig. 64). The limbs strain against a clouded sky, an evocation of despair and lamentation found in human gestures and pictorial landscapes alike.

The original ending of the film returns to animation as the narrator explains the numerous ways in which government programs, particularly the RA, intend to aid the people (Fig. 65). The scenes featured the removal of millions of acres of submarginal farmland from use and the relocation of 4,500 families to a new community similar to what *The New York Times* described as the RA’s other “communal farms which follow the Russian pattern,” i.e., a “socialist

⁴⁵ Jesse C. Fisher, speaking to the Southwest Kansas Conference in 1934, quoted in Holter, *Fire on the Prairie*, 190.

⁴⁶ Lorentz, *FDR's Moviemaker*, 43.

⁴⁷ Paul Ivano (listed as a cameraman during the film’s opening credits) shot the footage of migrants in California but was not otherwise involved in the film. Snyder, *Lorentz*, 32.

⁴⁸ The tango first emerged in the late nineteenth century amongst the poorer classes in Buenos Aires but was quickly adopted by the European elite by the 1920s. Lerner speculates that Thomson’s use of the tango may be “intentionally sadistic as he draws the disturbing associations with privileged leisure activities and the desperation of the Okie’s poverty.” Might instead the tango reunite the impoverished Dust Bowl victims with raw and elemental music inspired by similar economic hardship in Argentina? Lerner, “Documentary Score in Films,” 247.

model.”⁴⁹ Lorentz would eliminate these “solutions” and more explicit associations with RA policies from the film within two years of its release.⁵⁰

Thomson’s score, the structural parallels between the film and a sermon, and the treatment of the plow as a symbol of devastation all contribute to the film’s powerful ingenuity. The use of familiar, traditional melodies in *The Plow* provides one example of the way in which Lorentz evokes a history of the plains. The visual elements, along with this music, combine to form a narrative that conforms to a specific type of sermon: the jeremiad.⁵¹ The jeremiad is a political sermon with medieval origins that found a uniquely American identity and popularity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Jeremiads owe their name to the Old Testament account of Jeremiah, who foretold that Jerusalem would fall because the Jews had broken their covenant with God and worshiped false idols.

The Puritans used jeremiads “to direct an imperiled people of God toward the fulfillment of their destiny, to guide them individually toward salvation, and collectively toward the American city of God.”⁵² Structurally, a jeremiad begins with an ideal – some kind of precedent from scripture to establish norms. It then moves to a series of lamentations over current sinful behaviors and social problems, and finally the assurance of good tidings to come. These

⁴⁹ Snyder, *Lorentz*, 37; Associated Press, “Communist Farming Charged to New Deal,” *The New York Times*, 31 March 1936; John E. O’Connor, *Image as Artifact: The Historical Analysis of Film and Television* (Malabar, FL: R.E. Krieger Pub. Co., 1990), 287. For more information on resettlement communities and other RA programs see Paul Keith Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1959).

⁵⁰ O’Connor, *Image as Artifact*, 292. The epilogue was removed by 1938 when the study guide for the film was produced. Versions of the film appear with and without the epilogue, making it difficult to determine in many cases which version viewers and critics saw.

⁵¹ Dunaway is the only scholar I have encountered who makes this specific association, but he does not fully explain the origin, structure, or significance of this type of sermon, or the implications of *The Plow*’s failure to fully comply with it as a rhetorical type. For his assessment, see Dunaway, *Natural Visions*, 51.

⁵² Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 9.

components build to a progressive resolution that combines the ideal with the current reality.⁵³ Jeremiads connected current strife to traditional themes and metaphors, acknowledged that punishment and mercy were both providential, and prompted assurance that periods of testing would allow the Puritans to prove their commitment to their “errand into the wilderness.”⁵⁴

The Plow that Broke the Plains is a jeremiad, but one of an original type. Jeremiads are often associated with sermons from the seventeenth century, but proclamations that prosperity will be reclaimed despite current darkness are quintessentially American rhetorical devices.⁵⁵ The main similarity can be found in the cataloging of trials and sinful behaviors found throughout the film. Drought comes and crops fail twice in the story. The final drought also prompts dust storms. In this context, human exploitation of the soil can be seen as a consequence of American faith in Manifest Destiny and its subsequent, divinely ordained western expansion. Conquest of the prairies can be viewed as a disavowal of the landscape’s inherent aridity in order to extract commodities from it. Within the construct of the jeremiad, the farmers’ breaking of the plains with their plows symbolizes a broken covenant with God to serve as good stewards of the land.

In this manner *The Plow* deviates significantly from the religious sensibilities of the Puritan jeremiad. The film reveals the contradiction of Manifest Destiny – possession of the whole continent creates human dominion over the earth, not harmony with it. Human

⁵³ Ibid., 16-17.

⁵⁴ This phrase comes from Samuel Danforth’s 1670 jeremiad sermon of the same name. Perry Miller used it as the title for his 1956 treatise on Puritan political doctrine, which in turn prompted Bercovitch’s 1978 focused study of the jeremiad.

⁵⁵ Virtually any campaign speech follows this model. Another variation on the jeremiad form in contemporary rhetoric can be seen in extreme right wing political commentators who occasionally condemn various tragic circumstances such as the emergence of the AIDS virus and even the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina as fitting punishment for the hedonistic behavior of the afflicted.

exploitation of the earth and tribulations like dust storms are not shown as evidence of God's testing man's commitment to an agenda of western conquest; they are signs that such conquest is wrong. This theme is reinforced by the film's lack of a satisfying resolution. If an ideal is given at the start of the film, it is the grasslands in their pastoral state. This ideal is not and cannot be reconciled with the sins of environmental exploitation and trials of dust. Instead of a resolution, we see two victims of the dust: the land and the people. *The Plow* does not offer solutions to save the land, but instead garners sympathy toward Dust Bowl refugees that is translated to support of aid programs like those established by the RA. If there is to be any redemption, the government is to provide it, though *The Plow* itself may not provide such an easy answer.

As a variation on a jeremiad, *The Plow* seems to question the capitalist impulse that drives conquest of the plains for monetary profit, even as it promotes government aid programs. This advocacy for economic and political liberalism reflects broader cultural trends. The New Deal did promote a more socialist attitude toward governance and both moderate and radical leftists scrutinized capitalism in the 1930s. One of the ways that the New Deal's advocacy of social benevolence was justified was through theology. Both religious and political leaders began to argue that the heart of the Gospel was a message of social generosity.⁵⁶ This attitude was a key facet of an American trend called the Social Gospel, a liberal Christian reform movement that emerged after the Civil War and stressed concern over political and social ills such as urban

⁵⁶ Charles Gregg Singer, *A Theological Interpretation of American History*, *International Library of Philosophy and Theology* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1964), 228. Singer is quick to note that the socialist tenor of liberal Protestants in the 1930s did not reflect the sentiments of most believers, but their voices proved remarkably influential.

poverty and corporate capitalism.⁵⁷ Political as well as religious leaders infused lamentations over the status of society with spiritual overtones as church mingled with state.

Spiritual teachings frequently informed political discourse. Socialist ideals can be seen as early as 1896 in a poem intended for “heartland readership,” where the character Christianity claims, “the earth is the Lord’s,” while Capitalism counters, “the earth is the landlord’s.”⁵⁸ Perhaps the best example of Social Gospel ideology in New Deal rhetoric is a statement by Henry Agard Wallace, Roosevelt’s Secretary of Agriculture, who wrote in May of 1935: “The Sermon on the Mount has been regarded as a spiritual law; I am now inclined to think it is an economic law, too; that if applied to business and government, and abided by, business and political problems would be solved.”⁵⁹ In that sermon, Christ advised his followers to strive for an earthly existence that would mimic their future in the kingdom of heaven. Wallace used this doctrine of civil justice and social responsibility to defend New Deal programs like the National Recovery Act, which intervened in American economics to help balance the interests of business and labor. In the New Deal interpretation, the government would do the Lord’s work.

Lorentz’s use of the jeremiad as a rhetorical strategy to lament social transgressions and environmental hardship demonstrates continued popular support for the Social Gospel into the 1930s. With the dust still blowing while *The Plow* was filming, Lorentz assured his documentary would end in tragedy through a critical directorial choice: he cast Nature as his lead. “Our

⁵⁷ Ronald C. White and Charles Howard Hopkins, *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976). Although this movement declines after the 1920s, the application of Christian teachings to political and social issues is an integral component of American culture from the Puritan jeremiads through the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

⁵⁸ *Coming Nation*, 22 August 1896, quoted in Jacob H. Dorn, *Socialism and Christianity in Early 20th Century America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 28.

⁵⁹ Wallace made this statement during a 4 May 1935 address, quoted in “Links NRA with Sermon on Mount,” *The Christian Century*, 22 May 1935.

heroine is the grass, our villain the sun and wind, our players the actual farmers living in the Plains country,” he explained.⁶⁰ Lorentz further articulated, “We decided to use people as symbols and background for land, and [tried] to design a story that would make land itself emotional and dramatic.”⁶¹ Reviewers understood this, indicating the film cast “land as its hero.”⁶² The reception to the film’s use of the pathetic fallacy was positive, as *Scribner’s* declared “voice, music, and pictures made the rape of 400,000,000 acres more moving than the downfall of any Hollywood blonde.”⁶³ The film promoted government strategies to heal the people but offered no solution to save the land. The destruction of the plains forms the film’s catastrophe and the actions of humanity shape that doom. *The Plow* relates those actions to its audience by revealing a new, critical attitude toward westward expansion that treats the plow as an implement of agrarian conquest rather than a symbol of progress as it had traditionally been known.

Prior to the Dust Bowl the plow traditionally represented a component of an ideal, pastoral existence or symbolized the progress of civilization. Walter Prescott Webb’s 1931 social history, *The Great Plains*, acknowledged this progressive significance. As a critic noted in a 1936 assessment of Webb’s book, “on the last frontiers of the Far West, the Industrial Revolution supplied new and powerful implements, without which the conquest of the Great Plains would have been infinitely more difficult.”⁶⁴ In this book Webb advised the use of “constant cultivation” (plowing) for dry farming to keep the soil loose, keep moisture from

⁶⁰ *McCall’s*, July, 1936, quoted in MacCann, *People’s Films*, 66.

⁶¹ Pare Lorentz, “Confidential Report,” Pare Lorentz Papers, Columbia University, quoted in Dunaway, *Natural Visions*, 45.

⁶² Nugent, “Raw Deal.”

⁶³ White, “Pare Lorentz,” 10.

⁶⁴ Ernest L. Osgood, “Revised Viewpoints: The Great Plains,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 23, no. 2 (September 1936): 250.

escaping, and “prevent the blowing of the soil by the strong winds.”⁶⁵ These misguided practices coupled with Webb’s account of the development of the plains, reinforce traditional ideals but seem outmoded compared to the environmentally conscious message of *The Plow*.

The Plow urged contemplation of the plight of the plains that drew upon Webb’s history but forged distressing conclusions. Frank Thone’s August 1936 column, “The Curse of the Plow,” published in *The Science News-Letter*, included a still photo from the film of an abandoned plow. He suggested that early inhabitants of the plains feared the plow, including settlers who believed iron plows would poison the soil. Native Americans also resisted the plow, fearing it would bury the bison.⁶⁶ The prologue to *The Plow* reveals consequences from use of the plow far broader than those the native peoples anticipated, noting “by 1890 we had cleared the Indian, and with him, the buffalo, from the Great Plains, and established the last frontier.” Thone continued to lament, “And now, in years of drought and dust storms and floods, we are seeing how truly ‘poisonous’ the plow can be to the soil itself, if used without knowledge or regard for the laws of nature.”⁶⁷ Thone’s article, which specifically acknowledges *The Plow* as an influence, revises Webb’s version of history to cast the plow as a villain.

Republican-turned-New Deal Democrat George Earle echoed this emerging attitude, arguing, “with its pioneer work ended [the machine] became a Frankenstein monster that turned to destroy us.”⁶⁸ Throughout the film, images and narration specifically address plowing as a chief agent in the destruction of the plains, likening plows to false idols. Images of abandoned

⁶⁵ Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1931), 371.

⁶⁶ Frank Thone, "Nature Ramblings: The Curse of the Plow," *The Science News-Letter* 30, no. 799 (August 1936): 79.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Congressional Record*, Senate, 75th Congress, 1st session, 81 (28 July 1937), 7745, quoted in David M. Wrobel, *The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the New Deal* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 138-39.

plows serve as potent symbols for apocalyptic devastation. Arthur Rothstein's 1936 photograph of an abandoned and decrepit horse-drawn plow, appropriately titled *The Plow That Broke the Plains: Look at It Now* (Fig. 66), offers a striking, and consciously imitative example of this symbolism. Lorentz explores the abandoned plow twice during the film. Disc plows litter the landscape to emphasize the drought that followed the Great Plow-up. A farmer also uses a moldboard plow earlier in the film in a segment that represents first settlement on the plains. When drought plagues those settlers the plow can be seen scoring a feeble path through the dry, packed soil. We then see a shot of the baby with the abandoned plow (Fig. 67).

The symbolism of the baby-and-plow shot is apparent, though its meaning is debated. The inclusion of a child is a powerful moment in the film, as it causes the viewer to think about the ways in which devastation impacts real human lives. Scholars have proposed numerous interpretations of this shot, each with merit. Farmers were as powerless as babies in the Dust Bowl environment; they were as innocent as babes in the calamity that had befallen them.⁶⁹ The image expresses the farmer's inability to conquer the landscape; it fills the viewer with anxiety that dust is this child's inheritance.⁷⁰ Each interpretation seems plausible and might have occurred to members of the audience.

The incongruous pairing prompts a sense of anxiety or unease that is difficult to identify immediately. Sergei Eisenstein utilized an out-of-place baby to startling effect in his 1925 film *Battleship Potemkin* during the famous sequence on the Odessa Steps (Fig. 68). The violence directed toward the baby in *Potemkin* differs from the calm of the plow image, but both uses of infants as helpless victims immediately prompt agency on behalf of the viewer. Perhaps Lorentz also drew inspiration from Wallace, who argued in 1934, "human beings are ruining land, and

⁶⁹ O'Connor, *Image as Artifact*, 14.

⁷⁰ Dunaway, *Natural Visions*, 59.

bad land is ruining human beings, especially children.”⁷¹ The welfare of the plains depended on America’s ability, not to stand by and watch in horror, but to act by supporting New Deal programs. Unlike the Rothstein photograph, Lorentz’s pairing of plow and infant allows for the representation of agriculture in decline as well as a desperate need to aid the hungry children affected by that crisis. The film’s closing shot also underscores a sense of ecological desperation as the dead tree’s branches reach towards the heavens like a human gesture of grief.

Lorentz was not alone in his exploration of agricultural devastation during the Dust Bowl. Alexandre Hogue’s 1938 painting *Mother Earth Laid Bare* (Fig. 69) explores this topic by pitting an exhausted, masculine plow against a thoroughly ravaged Mother Nature. Hogue also depicted the drought in religious guise in his *Crucified Land* of 1939 (Fig. 70). In comparison to *Crucified Land*, the spiritual overtones of *The Plow* seem less overt, and more nuanced. When we hear the doxology praising God as the source of flowing blessings while viewing the vacant ruin of a home, the juxtaposition is cruelly ironic. The pairing shares affinities with Margaret Bourke-White’s 1937 photograph *At the Time of the Louisville Flood* (Fig. 71), which pairs a billboard of a prosperous white family enjoying “the American Way” above a bread line of black flood victims. As Bourke-White exposes American socio-economic inequities, Lorentz redefines American agricultural “progress” as conquest with the plow as the aggressor and the land as its victim. Lorentz’s juxtaposition offers several plausible interpretations: God had punished the people of the plains for abusing His land, the notion that God had sanctioned dominion over the Earth was flawed, and humanity had used Manifest Destiny as an excuse for their environmental exploitation.

⁷¹ Henry A. Wallace, *New Frontiers* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1934), 242, quoted in Randal S. Beeman and James A. Pritchard, *A Green and Permanent Land: Ecology and Agriculture in the Twentieth Century*, Development of Western Resources (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 12.

Each of these interpretations fails to form a satisfying conclusion to the film because *The Plow* provides no opportunity for humanity to redeem itself and save the land – the final component of a jeremiad. To address this issue one must consider the complex history of the film’s epilogue. The epilogue only addresses solutions that will aid human victims of the Dust Bowl; moreover, as noted previously, Lorentz removed the epilogue within a year. Scholarship about *The Plow* is full of confusion regarding the epilogue; its removal is not always addressed, and it is sometimes difficult to ascertain which version of the film a reviewer has seen. John O’Connor attempted to resolve this confusion when he asked Lorentz directly about the epilogue. Lorentz replied that he did not write or make the epilogue and that his version of the film concludes with the shot of the dead tree. However, Thomson’s papers reveal production notes from Lorentz outlining a “written epilogue [that] will call attention to extent of devastation and fact that reconstruction and conservation are necessary.”⁷² O’Connor does not appear to have seen these production notes, yet he still suspects that Lorentz retroactively distanced himself from the controversial government-sponsored socialist farms promoted in the struck scenes. Regardless, O’Connor does feel the conclusion without an epilogue is the most natural one for the film.⁷³ Without the epilogue, the film ends with a final warning that this land will require management and conservation lest it truly become the Great American Desert.

The film’s epilogue became controversial due in part to political backlash against Roosevelt’s agricultural policies. In January of 1936 the Supreme Court ruled the Triple A, the legislation that had formed the backbone of New Deal agricultural relief, unconstitutional. This action reflected the conservative Court’s view that several New Deal programs had unlawfully

⁷² Lorentz’s production notes (identified by author as Source Four), Virgil Thomson Papers, Yale Music Library, quoted in Lerner, "Documentary Score in Films," 77.

⁷³ O’Connor, *Image as Artifact*, 292-93.

accorded the president legislative authority or usurped states' rights. The film's release coincided with several rulings that limited the power of government agricultural programs. In this climate, the political authority wielded by the RA also drew attention and criticism.⁷⁴ Outcry against the RA expressed concern that the program of resettlement and land rehabilitation "virtually affects, virtually rules, the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, who are told how much they shall spend for food, for clothes, for rent, what crops they shall plant, [and] how they shall conduct ... their lives."⁷⁵

In the midst of these judicial rulings, clever supporters of *The Plow* billed the film's explanation of the RA's plans as prophetic, claiming "nine old men keep you from seeing it."⁷⁶ The solutions were portrayed on the screen, but Republican criticism and the Court could keep them from being realized in the Dust Bowl itself. The Hollywood movie studios, who had already voiced an unwillingness to support a noncommercial film, now justified their opposition to *The Plow's* support for programs drawing so much political and popular scrutiny.⁷⁷ The *New York Times'* generally positive review of the film admitted it did promote the RA, declaring *The Plow* to be "frankly propagandist, or educational, as Resettlement prefers to call it."⁷⁸ Despite the film's propaganda for the RA, not all of the organization's agents supported it. A letter from a regional director in Dallas in 1936 explained that showing the film in Texas would provide no benefit to the RA because the film offered no real solutions, suggested it was a mistake to settle

⁷⁴ In the face of this criticism, the RA was consolidated into the Department of Agriculture, and in September of 1937 became the Farm Security Administration. For more about the RA and the FSA, see Sidney Baldwin, *Poverty and Politics: The Rise and Decline of the Farm Security Administration* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968).

⁷⁵ Felix Brummer, "Utopia Unlimited," *The Washington Post*, February 10-13, 1936, quoted in *Ibid.*, 114.

⁷⁶ "The Movie No One Will See," *Christian Century*, 3 June 1936, 788-89, quoted in Snyder, *Lorentz*, 45.

⁷⁷ Nugent, "Raw Deal."

⁷⁸ "Theatre Heads Balk at Tugwell's Movie," *The New York Times*, 15 May 1936, 28.

in the plains entirely, and provided outdated information about the extent of the drought that Texans would have immediately recognized as inaccurate.⁷⁹

Snyder agrees that the film's emphasis on problems rather than solutions makes the government plans seem inadequate, even as other scholars appreciate the "unadorned conclusion" to the film, arguing it places responsibility for finding solutions on the viewer.⁸⁰ In contrast to the view from Dallas, Mrs. R. L. Duke, of Dalhart, Texas wrote to Lorentz himself, sharing that she saw *The Plow* while in Washington and noting that her only criticism was that the film could have been more extreme: worse events like dust pneumonia had occurred in her community. She praised Lorentz for telling the truth, wryly commenting that "a lot of Chambers of Commerce flew up in the air" over it, and assured him that she got the picture shown in Dalhart.⁸¹ As a result of critical response possibly more tied to political issues surrounding the film than the film itself, *The Plow* was withdrawn from circulation by the Department of Agriculture in 1939 on the grounds that updates were needed to reflect improved agricultural conditions.⁸² The re-release of the film in 1962 did not include the epilogue, while the 2006 DVD release includes it as a special feature.⁸³

The Plow that Broke the Plains incited controversy even without its epilogue because Pare Lorentz's story of grasslands implicated as villains seemingly fundamental American philosophies, including territorial expansion and capitalism. As noted previously, Lorentz used familiar Western songs and images to establish the majestic mood of his pastoral focus. As his story progresses through time, the agrarian subjects shift from panning shots of the landscape to

⁷⁹ MacCann, *People's Films*, 80-82.

⁸⁰ Snyder, *Lorentz*, 191; Peter C. Rollins and Harris J. Elder, "Environmental History in Two New Deal Documentaries," *Film and History* 3, no. 3 (September 1973): 3.

⁸¹ Snyder, *Lorentz*, 49.

⁸² MacCann, *People's Films*, 83.

⁸³ Allan, "'Heritage' And 'Plow'," 444.

emphasize agricultural commodities extracted from that land or the increasingly mechanized implements used to work it. Likewise, the score transitions from cowboy tunes of the West to national and even internationally resonant jazz melodies or battle marches as American interests intersect with the plains' fruitful potential. Through editing this escalating capitalist exploitation of the land produces an environment that, when threatened by drought, allows for the dust storms that follow.

In theory, Lorentz's indictment of capitalism should have appealed to his left-wing cameramen, which reveals that early twentieth-century liberalism encompassed a broad spectrum of viewpoints. Leo Hurwitz later spoke of his political temperament in the 1930s, reflecting, "at a time when all 'isms' – socialism, collectivism, communism – were suspect and un-American, one had to ask whether that other 'ism,' capitalism, was viable form of social living."⁸⁴ The tension we know existed between director and cameramen emanated in part from the varying degrees of their liberalism. Steiner, Strand, and Hurwitz, as representatives of the radical left, wanted not just to blame capitalism as a cause of the Dust Bowl but also to condemn the corporations, businessmen, and government who carried out an "anarchic rape of the land."⁸⁵ By contrast, Lorentz, who began his career critiquing private enterprise and corporate America, represents one of many liberals whose radicalism in the late 1920s was calmed by their growing support of the New Deal in the 1930s.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Leo T. Hurwitz, "One Man's Voyage: Ideas and Films in the 1930s," *Cinema Journal* 15, no. 1 (autumn 1975): 8.

⁸⁵ Ellis, "The Plow That Broke the Plains," 18.

⁸⁶ William Alexander, *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film from 1931 to 1942* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 91. This political shift is discussed on a broader scale in Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 78-85.

Lorentz's patriotism clashes with the story he crafts, resulting in a generalized assertion that capitalist consumption can cause environmental exploitation. Alexander rationalizes this product, asserting that Lorentz and Tugwell knew full well that "a film directly indicting not the whole social system but simply local western greed and money would cook up for the RA the kind of trouble it didn't need."⁸⁷ Lorentz could not criticize the government that was funding his picture because he also believed the New Deal was improving America, even though his film acknowledges human agency in causing the Dust Bowl.

The film functions at times as propaganda for the Resettlement Administration's efforts to aid Dust Bowl victims, yet in other instances it chastises those victims for depleting the grasslands and creating that disaster. This editorial juggling act managed to displease viewers from both sides of the political spectrum. Left-wing filmmakers argued the film did not go far enough to indict American capitalist exploitation. Conservatives felt the film stereotyped the whole of the Great Plains as an arid wasteland and offered few solutions to the crisis unfolding there. *The Plow* further managed to ruin many of its own propagandistic aims by promoting government programs that had been declared unconstitutional.

Despite these concerns, *The Plow* remains significant because it did not claim that the Dust Bowl was a purely natural disaster. It instead established a causal relationship between American environmental exploitation fueled by a capitalist ethos, and the drought that plagued the plains. The accusation was a generalized one; Lorentz does not attack John Deere, the flour industry, or any other member of private enterprise. Even if a viewer could understand the film's message that human actions and attitudes had helped produce the Dust Bowl, *The Plow* failed to offer any practical method to heal the conquered grasslands. Regardless of this flaw, *The Plow*

⁸⁷ Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 100, fn. cc. The footnotes in Alexander's text are numbered alphabetically.

still provided a valuable and innovative message about the environmental impact of human action that reached a nation-wide audience.

At a time when America's grasslands had turned to a Dust Bowl, Lorentz found the message of *The Plow* in the history of those plains. By resuscitating the jeremiad as a storytelling device Lorentz articulated not just the problems plaguing citizens of the plains, but the sinful behaviors that contributed to the punishing drought. As Tugwell said in 1936, "The tragedy lies not with our pioneer ancestors who cleared and settled the land in the only method they knew, but rather with us, their descendants, who have taken so long to recognize that conditions have changed."⁸⁸ The New Deal could not change the sins of the past, but it could "rechannel human effort and economic activity so that social sins could be avoided, if not completely, then certainly to such an extent that great depressions ... could be brought to an end."⁸⁹ *The Plow that Broke the Plains* reveals humanity's consistent tendency to exploit the land and exposes the increasing depth and breadth of that exploitation as ever-evolving machines turn over more ground. Lorentz persuaded viewers to acknowledge that their attitudes, and those of their forefathers, played a role in the creation of the Dust Bowl.

⁸⁸ In "Current History," September 1936, quoted in MacCann, *People's Films*, 59.

⁸⁹ Singer, *Theological Interpretation*, 234.

Chapter 4. “The Land’s Going Out From Us:” Alexandre Hogue and Eroded America

As news of the Dust Bowl spread from the Heartland to the rest of the nation, writers, artists, and filmmakers attempted to convey the scope and ferocity of the catastrophe. Logically, they recorded the dust itself: the way it darkened the skies and blanketed the plains with the ashy residuals of what had been the garden of the world. Some of these storytellers also tried to establish the causes of the tragedy by linking the dust-covered landscape to the plows that were used to cultivate the region. As the drought persisted, its connections to a broader, nationwide crisis related to land use and erosion became increasingly apparent. In the second half of the 1930s, the eroded landscape emerged as a subject that artists, writers, and scientists utilized to convey their anxieties about the current problems and uncertain future of their nation during the Depression.

One artist who produced some of the earliest and most enduring images related to the Dust Bowl was Alexandre Hogue. Hogue was born in Missouri in 1898 but almost immediately moved to Texas with his family, where he often visited his sister’s ranch near Dalhart.¹ After a few years working in New York in the early 1920s, Hogue returned to Texas with a renewed appreciation for the grazing lands of the Southwest. As the land changed its function from grazing country to farmland and as the fields dried up, Hogue noted in 1935, “it became heavier on my heart as I saw the lush grazing land of the Panhandle diminish before the plow Thirty years ago cattlemen warned that if they plowed up the sod the country would blow away. And it has.”² Hogue responded to the alteration of his homeland with paint and canvas; his *Dust Bowl*

¹ For Hogue’s biography, see Lea Rosson DeLong, *Nature's Forms/Nature's Forces: The Art of Alexandre Hogue* (Tulsa: Philbrook/University of Oklahoma Press, 1984).

² Alexandre Hogue, Letter to Robert Harshe, 1 May 1935. Alexandre Hogue papers, 1929-1992. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Reels 1480-1483, 3184. The version of Hogue’s papers held at the Archives represents photocopied material Hogue donated in 1992.

from 1933 not only represents a moving interpretation of the catastrophe but an early appearance of the term “Dust Bowl.”³

Hogue’s Dust Bowl subjects rapidly gained national recognition through exhibition and dissemination in the press. His *Dust Bowl, Red Earth Canyon* (1932), and *Drouth Stricken Area* (1934) were all reproduced in the March 1937 issue of *Soil Conservation*, the journal of the Soil Conservation Service, to help describe the “Tragedy of Wind Erosion.”⁴ Hogue’s paintings gained their greatest exposure through publication in *Life* magazine in 1937. *Dust Bowl, Drouth Stricken Area*, and *Drouth Survivors* (1936) were reproduced in the article, with Hogue’s explanation that these works represented a “scathing denunciation of man’s persistent mistakes.” The article also connected the wind erosion related to the drought to a more widespread calamity. While 50,000,000 acres of the Dust Bowl had been “reduced to desert” another 150,000,000 acres across the country were “seriously eroded.”⁵

The original papers can be found at the Department of Special Collections and University Archives, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa. These papers also contain Hogue’s unpublished autobiography (not cited here) and a few additional items donated in 1994.

³ *Dust Bowl*, 1933, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum. Hogue would later claim that his was the first use of the term, which he later described as stemming from the vernacular of the country, probably traceable to John McCarty, editor of the *Dalhart Texan*, and a joke about the recently popular bowl games in football. See Alexandre Hogue, Letter to John Baur, 9 November 1972, Alexandre Hogue papers. The painting is not titled or dated on the canvas and the current title and date were provided by Hogue as corrections from the previous “*Dust*, 1939.” See Alexandre Hogue, Letter to Merry Foresta, 12 March 1979, Alexandre Hogue papers. As late as 1936, Hogue titles the work *Dust* in correspondence but appears to have changed it to *Dust Bowl* at a later date. See for example Alexandre Hogue, Letter to Frank Logan, 6 November 1936. Alexandre Hogue papers. It is reproduced with the title *Dust* in Forbes Watson, “Is There – Will There Be – An American Art?” *The New York Times*, 24 May 1936. The title is reproduced as it is known today in “The U. S. Dust Bowl: Its Artist Is a Texan Portraying Man's Mistakes,” *Life*, 2 June 1937, 60-65. Therefore, the title remains an early use of the term but most likely not the earliest.

⁴ “The Tragedy of Wind Erosion,” *Soil Conservation*, March 1937. Alexandre Hogue papers. Hogue vehemently campaigned for the vernacular spelling of “drouth” in his titles and would correct any museum or newspaper that would alter his spelling to the more accepted “drought.”

⁵ “U. S. Dust Bowl,” *Life*, 62-63.

Hogue's images captured the imagination of a populace who were startled by their stark precision and calamitous settings. Hogue explained that in his images, "The underlying form is the thing that is time-enduring."⁶ Although this is an apt description for the regionalist aesthetic of Hogue and his fellow painters in Texas during the 1920s and 1930s, it can also describe Hogue's evocation of a Nature that endures despite the changes humans impose upon the surface of the land. Describing his style as "psychoreality," Hogue intended to provide a sense of reality through the use of arranged symbols.⁷ He felt his style was shaped by the local landscape and the ways he communicated those particularities. Throughout Hogue's career he was careful to identify his brand of regionalism with other artists from Texas rather than the Midwestern Regionalists or later generations of Taos Society painters.⁸ His landscapes were not documentary or surrealistic, but drew upon reality to produce a heightened message. Hogue's biographer, Lea Rosson DeLong, explains that this effect "seems to be based on his belief that accurate detailed forms, when presented in an unvarnished, straightforward way, have greater psychological impact than forms that have been invented."⁹ And indeed, Hogue's subjects related to the Dust Bowl and erosion have an explicit clarity to their visual construction and symbolism. Though symbolic in nature, Hogue's work was not intended to be mysterious: he offered a clear view of reality as he saw it, albeit through stylized representation.

After gaining recognition through press exposure, Hogue unveiled his painting *Mother Earth Laid Bare* (Fig. 69), which garnered attention and immediate association with the soil

⁶ Quoted in Rick Stewart, *Lone Star Regionalism: The Dallas Nine and Their Circle, 1928-1945* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 1985), 52.

⁷ Frances Kramer, "Splendid Fulfillment of an Art Prophecy," *Dallas Morning News*, 3 October 1937, sec. 3, p. 14.

⁸ One of Hogue's many rejections of the Social Realist or Regionalist label can be read in Alexandre Hogue, Letter to Howard Spencer, 4 August 1980, Alexandre Hogue papers.

⁹ DeLong, *Nature's Forms*, 26.

erosion crisis when it was first exhibited at the 1938 Carnegie International in Pittsburgh.¹⁰

Mother Earth Laid Bare was begun in 1935 and completed after numerous delays in 1938.¹¹

Hogue devotes about seven eighths of the canvas to land and compresses a narrow strip of storm clouds at the top of the image. In contrast to the thin upper register occupied by the sky, grass, and an abandoned farm, the land sprawls toward the viewer. The ground is almost devoid of vegetation with winding gullies that form waterways trickling into the foreground. The gullies expose the figure of a prostrate female nude. Her legs emerge from the ground at the knee and her body extends backwards as her thighs, belly, and breasts swell above the drainage pathways. Her arms reach out and settle back into the ground and her face looks to the right in a suggested profile. A gust of wind drifts the soil to form her chin or slash her throat.

An abandoned plow lies partially buried in the foreground of the painting and vies for the viewer's attention along with the more distant, yet far more alarming earthen nude. The plow is a classic, Deere-style steel walking plow with wooden handles (see Fig. 36 for comparison). By placing the abandoned plow so prominently before the ravaged landscape, Hogue deliberately implicates the actions of men in the desecration of the Earth, personified as a female figure. Dallas papers shared reproductions of the painting after its Pittsburgh debut, reporting Hogue's intended symbolic meaning for the plow and the eroded land in his "controversial" "painting of the year." Hogue explained, "Some may realize that the plow is a phallic symbol, but if they don't, it doesn't matter. They still can realize that the plow caused the erosion to begin and so

¹⁰ Dorothy Kantner, "Texas Soil Erosion Inspires Exhibitor at International," *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph*, 11 October 1938. Alexandre Hogue papers.

¹¹ The painting is inscribed 1936 on the canvas. Hogue clarifies the start date of 1935, related drawings dating to the 1920s, and the 1938 completion date in a letter to F.A. Whiting, circa October 1939. Alexandre Hogue papers.

Mother Earth is left bare.”¹² Hogue later traced the sources for his symbolism to childhood memories and a lifetime of experience growing up in the region that would become the Dust Bowl.

As a child, Hogue worked in the garden with his mother, who taught him about Mother Earth. Hogue recalled imagining “visions of a great female figure under the ground everywhere.” He connected this memory with a developing series of landscape drawings begun in 1926 that evoked the form of a female figure to produce a painting of not just eroded land, but an “eroded farm” portrayed through a sexualized metaphor of a ravaged landscape.¹³ Although anthropomorphic landscapes have been produced by artists since the Renaissance, Hogue’s evocation of Mother Earth is less of a visual pun and more of a plausible abstraction of eroded land into human guise. His treatment of land as animate or anthropomorphic space recalls Georgia O’Keeffe’s landscapes that evoke human flesh and limbs, or, conversely, Edward Weston’s photographs of nudes that suggest terra firma. Hogue’s earthen nude represents a very literal interpretation of a modernist trend to meld biological and geological expressions of the natural world.

Hogue’s knowledge of his changing agricultural environment was informed by annual trips to Taos which awakened his interest in indigenous cultures. In 1927, he published an article describing evidence of an ancient Pueblo civilization that vanished because of the “desiccation of [their once] bounteously watered country.”¹⁴ He recounted the story of the Tewa deity Awanyu,

¹² “Hogue Painting Invited to Show at Carnegie,” *Dallas Morning News*, 15 October 1938. Elisabeth Crocker, “Year’s Art In Retrospect,” *Dallas Morning News*, 11 June 1939. Alexandre Hogue papers.

¹³ The genesis story for *Mother Earth Laid Bare* is related in several places; the earliest description appears to be a letter to Boyer Galleries, 31 August 1938. Alexandre Hogue papers.

¹⁴ Alexandre Hogue, “Awanyu Withdrew Favor and an Ancient Race Was Destroyed,” *Dallas Times Herald*, 21 August 1927. Alexandre Hogue papers.

who grew angry with the civilization and departed from the people, taking their water with him. Hogue soon learned of an interpretation for *Mother Earth Laid Bare* related to Pueblo Indian beliefs from his friend, painter Andrew Dasburg. Hogue explained that, “The Indians symbolize the fruitful earth with the idea of the Earth Mother who is fertilized by the Sky Father. She is under the ground everywhere and in the spring when she is pregnant no iron wheels or other hand instruments are permitted to move over the ground.” After sharing the painting with a group of local Indians upon unveiling the finished canvas in Taos, Hogue proudly boasted that one old fellow “thought I had somehow managed a look-see into the secrets of their beliefs.”¹⁵ Although the female form in the landscape appears prominently in the painting, the first viewers who beheld *Mother Earth Laid Bare* apparently did not recognize the recumbent figure for several minutes, “as [he] had planned.”¹⁶ Despite the apparent obviousness of Hogue’s presentation, some still seemed to miss his point.

Hogue also explored the relationship between plowing and the grasslands in his lithograph *The End of the Trail* from 1938 (Fig. 72). The image first appeared as the concluding vignette to Frank Dobie’s 1936 novel, *The Flavor of Texas*. In the illustration and the lithograph, the combination of an abandoned plow, the drifting dust, mangled barbed wire fencing, and a cow skull suggest the end of the great cattle drives. These journeys across the open range largely ceased with the introduction of crop-based agriculture and necessity for fences, eliminating a more romantic and presumably harmonious relationship between men and the grasslands. Hogue unwaveringly portrayed the plow as the symbol of a harmful intrusion of mechanization in a land ill-suited for farming.

¹⁵ Alexandre Hogue, Letter to Boyer Galleries, 31 August 1938. Alexandre Hogue papers.

¹⁶ Ibid.

For those familiar with the dust storms, a concern about erosion by water in such a dry landscape might have seemed irrelevant. Images like *Mother Earth Laid Bare* helped demonstrate how the plow had eliminated the grass from the grasslands. Without the grass, the land could not hold water, or soil. The problem grew to such an extent that Stuart Chase, the man credited with coining the term “New Deal,” reported, “Floods in dry country have become increasingly severe and costly – ‘flash floods’ they have been called.”¹⁷ Pare Lorentz’s second film, *The River* (1937), helped demonstrate for viewers the interrelatedness of actions like deforestation and overplowing as contributors to flood conditions in America’s large Mississippi Valley. Lorentz and Chase suggested that flooding and water erosion were symptoms of a disharmonious relationship between man and Earth, represented by a loss of physical and even cultural rootedness.

Hogue was not the only artist to implicate the plow in the iconography of water erosion. Arthur Rothstein’s photographs frequently paired plows with landscapes eroded by wind but also water, including *Erosion. Jackson County, Alabama, 1937* (Fig. 73). The plow is conspicuously abandoned here, as it is in *Mother Earth Laid Bare*, and becomes not only the instrument of change, but the only reminder of the farmer who once wielded it. Margaret Bourke-White also acknowledged the plow as evidence of environmental degradation caused by absent men when she lamented, “this swirling dust is changing the agricultural map of the United States.” She saw the signifiers of devastation and abandonment in “a half-buried plowshare, [and] a wheat binder

¹⁷ Stuart Chase, “Disaster Rides the Plains,” *The American Magazine* 124, no. 9 (September 1937): 47, 68.

ruffled over with sand” that represented “stark evidence of the meager life, the wasted savings, [and] the years of toil that the farmer is leaving behind him.”¹⁸

Artists were far from alone in their exploration of dust and plows as evidence of erosion. The frequency with which writers and artists in the mid to late 1930s explored the crisis of an eroded America can be seen as a logical concern when acknowledging the fascination notions such as rootedness, soil, and place held for American moderns in the 1910s and 1920s. Wanda Corn identifies this tendency in her introduction to *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935*. Members of Alfred Stieglitz’s circle, including Paul Rosenfeld, Sherwood Anderson, Waldo Frank, and Georgia O’Keeffe, infused their rhetoric with words that expressed the immersive nature of their cultural nationalism. As Corn notes, “They wrote of being ‘rooted,’ of being ‘of the soil,’ of ‘ploughing our own fields,’ of being ‘in the earth,’ and of ‘growing’ and ‘maturing.’”¹⁹ The Regionalists would also use many of these words in their own rhetoric but intended them to reference smaller, rural communities and their shared values. The rhetoric used by both Stieglitz’s moderns and the Regionalists establishes a context for subsequent anxiety over erosion as a threat of divorce from nationalistic rootedness.²⁰

Sherwood Anderson, one of the modernist writers whom Wanda Corn credits with effusive production of “soil and spirit” writing in the 1920s, revisited his rhetoric of rootedness and adopted Hogue’s strategy to personify nature in his 1935 book *Puzzled America*. While travelling over the country to prepare the book’s essays, Anderson encountered not only a

¹⁸ Margaret Bourke-White, “Dust Changes America,” *The Nation* 140, no. 3646 (May 1935): 598.

¹⁹ Wanda M. Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 32.

²⁰ My primary resource to locate much of the discussion related to erosion during the Dust Bowl is Brad D. Lookingbill, *Dust Bowl, USA: Depression America and the Ecological Imagination, 1929-1941* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001).

senseless waste of the land, but a populace who seemed to say, “I want belief, some ground to stand on.”²¹ In South Dakota, he heard men recall that the neighboring land “was a farm until he plowed it,” but “then it blew away.”²² Anderson felt the farmers he encountered lacked “a personal feeling for the land on which [they] worked,” and he tried to awaken that feeling in them. He told one Ohio man a fanciful story about fields of his native Virginia that became people. One old ruined field whispered to him, “My richness has been drained way to the other fields.”²³

Anderson was one of many writers who personified the endangered land. Russell Lord’s *Behold Our Land* of 1938 proclaimed “All Earth is of one body and alive Water is Earth’s blood Rock is Earth’s skeleton. Soil is her skin, her entrails, and her womb.”²⁴ In his essay “White Man Versus the Prairie,” Raymond Pool chastised, “We must learn that Mother Nature is not a nudist by choice. If left to her own ways, she will clothe herself ... at least in a sarong of prairie grasses or weeds Man ... has been running away with her clothes so persistently and so completely that she has the greatest of difficulty preserving her modesty.”²⁵ The manifesto of a conservation organization, the Friends of the Land, echoed the homily, stating, “Any land is all of one body. If one part is skinned, bared to the beat of the weather, wounded, not only the winds spread the trouble, dramatically, but the surface veins and arteries of the nation, its streams and rivers, bear ill.”²⁶ Hogue’s depiction of eroded land as a denuded Mother Earth is part of a more

²¹ Sherwood Anderson, *Puzzled America* (New York; London: Scribner, 1935), xv.

²² *Ibid.*, 205.

²³ *Ibid.*, 249-50.

²⁴ Russell Lord, *Behold Our Land* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1938), 2.

²⁵ Raymond Pool, “White Man Versus the Prairie,” *Science* 91, no. 2351 (January 1940): 57.

²⁶ “Friends of the Land,” Morris L. Cooke Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library. Quoted in Randal S. Beeman and James A. Pritchard, *A Green and Permanent Land: Ecology and Agriculture in the Twentieth Century* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 22.

comprehensive strategy employed by 1930s writers to stress an environmental problem of catastrophic proportions.

Hogue's image of erosion was so visually familiar to some audiences that *The Magazine of Art* reported in 1939 that *Mother Earth Laid Bare* bore a suspicious resemblance to a still frame of erosion seen in Lorentz's 1938 short film, *The River* (Fig. 74).²⁷ Although the article inaccurately accuses Hogue of stealing his imagery and denounces his portrayal as weaker than the filmed still, a less sinister conclusion can be drawn from the commonalities between the two images. Their resemblance reflects not only the prevalence of erosion in the American landscape, but also demonstrates how frequently artists responded to the topic. The narration in *The River* reiterated the message as well as the iconography of *Mother Earth Laid Bare*, arguing "Poor land makes poor people. Poor people make poor land."²⁸ Hogue understood the problem of poor land to be pandemic, arguing "anyone who paints a landscape is dealing with erosion."²⁹

Another painter from this period who highlighted eroded land was Ross Braught. While living in Kansas City, Braught travelled to the Badlands of South Dakota in the summer of 1934. This trip to the Badlands, whose name derives from the Lakota name Mako Sica, or "land bad," inspired multiple images by the artist. The region contains mixed-grass prairie and naturally occurring, highly eroded buttes. The latter forms the subject for Braught's 1935 painting *Tschaikovsky's Sixth* (Fig. 75). The title refers to Tschaikovsky's *Pathétique Symphony*, a particularly emotive and tragic piece written at the end of the composer's life. Braught synesthetically melds the psychological turmoil associated with the symphony with the Badlands' tumultuous, eroded topography. A dove that flies through the landscape evokes

²⁷ "A Strange Coincidence," *The Magazine of Art*, August 1939.

²⁸ Pare Lorentz, "The River" (Farm Security Administration, 1928).

²⁹ Alexandre Hogue, Letter to Boyer Galleries, 31 August 1938. Alexandre Hogue papers.

associations with the Holy Spirit, the pregnancy of the Virgin Mary, and God's assurance to Noah that the waters of the deluge have receded. Combined, these meanings suggest a tone of potential promise despite the lack of any flora or water in the hollowed hills.³⁰ Other voices portrayed similarly eroded, overly farmed or deforested landscapes in less positive terms.

Archibald MacLeish's *Fortune* article from 1935, "The Grasslands," explored the need to save the "broken lands" afflicted by water erosion in addition to the dust storms, each caused by man, "that greatest of all abriders of the earth's hide." Utilizing erosion photographs from the Soil Conservation Service that strongly resemble Braught's impression of the Badlands captioned "Cancer of the Earth," MacLeish describes the land as the "ruted skeleton of the earth."³¹

A landscape that lacks even the glimmer of hope found in *Tschaikovsky's Sixth*, and one frequently mentioned in association with *Mother Earth Laid Bare*, is Missouri artist Joe Jones' 1936 painting, *Our American Farms* (Fig. 76). Although Jones is best-known today as a Regionalist painter of wheat threshing and harvest scenes, some examples of his work from the 1930s reveal the Social Realism of an artist who was a self-declared Communist.³² A lost

³⁰ Whether this optimism reveals Braught's sentiments about the environmental future of his setting or a hopeful resolution to a more personal psychological journey evoked through music and place is unclear. For more on Braught, see Randall Griffey, "Ross Eugene Braught," in *The Collections of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art: American Paintings to 1945*, ed. Margaret C. Conrads (Kansas City, MO: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2007), 156. The catalogue entry on this painting indicates that the presence of the dove "highlights the fact that this infertile landscape lacks the capacity to support life" but that reading does not follow based on the symbolism.

³¹ Archibald MacLeish, "The Grasslands," *Fortune*, November 1935, 60, 67.

³² The best resource about Jones is Andrew Walker, ed. *Joe Jones: Radical Painter of the American Scene* (St. Louis: Saint Louis Art Museum, 2010). Prior to the publication this monograph, the following publications represented the best resources available on Jones, although none of them specifically mention *American Farm*: Lisa Iarocci, "The Changing American Landscape: The Art and Politics of Joe Jones," *Gateway Heritage* 12, no. 2 (fall 1991); Karal Ann Marling, "Joe Jones: Regionalist, Communist, Capitalist," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 4 (spring 1987); Marling, "Workers, Capitalists, and Booze:

triptych from the early 1930s harshly critiques the New Deal, depicting starving mothers in the plains and plowed-under fields. In the spring of 1935 Jones traveled in Arkansas and southern Missouri to research the landscape in preparation for a mural commission. In the fall of that year the Resettlement Administration hired Jones to document the lives of typical people in wheat country. These experiences could have inspired *Our American Farms*. Lisa Dorrill has suggested that a Walker Evans photograph of eroded land in Mississippi taken in March of 1936 (Fig. 77) also inspired the composition.³³ Andrew Walker agrees that the image might have been familiar to Jones prior to his production of the painting, which debuted in the November Whitney Museum of Art's Biennial that same year.³⁴ If the resemblance between the two images is purely coincidental, like the similar iconography in *Mother Earth Laid Bare* and *The River*, the affinities between the Jones painting and Evans photograph demonstrate the pervasiveness of erosion as a visual trope in the 1930s.

In a decade where the fortunes of many seemed either blown or washed away, erosion had a deep symbolic resonance, particularly since the condition of the land echoed the economic ravages of the period. Erosion successfully functioned as a visual analogy to America's unsteady foundation and uncertain future during the Depression. "Bad," "poor," or "lost" land represented westward expansion gone awry and the destructive and wasteful consequences of capitalism. An eroded chasm symbolized the absence of a nationalistic connection to place that was vital to America's cultural well-being. And that disconnect, the writers feared, was becoming increasingly commonplace. It was difficult to ignore the "tragic gullies that are ever widening

The Story of the 905 Murals," in *Joe Jones & J.B. Turnbull: Visions of the Midwest in the 1930s* (Milwaukee: Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University, 1987).

³³ Lisa Dorrill, "Picturing the Dirty Thirties: Paintings and Prints of the Dust Bowl" (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 1998), 71.

³⁴ Andrew Walker, "Joe Jones and the Dust Bowl: A Search for Social Significance," in *Joe Jones: Radical Painter of the American Scene*, 67.

and deepening, carving out of the heart of our land a monument to national folly.”³⁵ For a liberal artist like Jones, the political implications of a completely eroded “American Farm” suggested a lack of confidence in New Deal agricultural policies intended to alleviate the consequences of drought. Somewhat ironically, Hogue generally insisted that his images, by contrast, were not social commentary, but the social implications were fairly apparent to most viewers of the period.

Hogue routinely declared that “Social comment is negative, my interest in conservation is positive.”³⁶ He stated, “I did the Dust Bowl paintings because I was there before, during and after the holocaust and could see the awesome terrifying beauty of it with my own dust-filled eyes.”³⁷ Presumably Hogue resisted the label of “social commentary” because it suggested affiliation with liberal Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographers such as Dorothea Lange or comparably liberal social realist painters like Jones. Hogue may have resisted associations with Jones in particular despite the similarity of their artistic treatment of soil erosion. Jones received a 1937 Guggenheim Fellowship to depict the Dust Bowl, a grant and project for which Hogue unsuccessfully applied in 1938 and 1939. Jones even solicited paintings from Hogue containing “social content,” presumably to no avail, in the 1930s.³⁸ Regardless of

³⁵ Chester Davis, "Lost Acres," *The American Magazine* 121, no. 2 (February 1936): 63.

³⁶ Alexandre Hogue, Letter to Matthew Baigell, 19 June 1967, Alexandre Hogue papers.

³⁷ Alexandre Hogue, Letter to Hal Glicksman, 1971, Alexandre Hogue papers.

³⁸ “My dear Alexandre Hogue, If you ever get your pants back up and think you have anything that will interest us with ‘social content’ let me know. We are opening a new gallery here for social content and our interests include the boys out here in the woods of the Mid-West. If you ever get a room this way I wish you would kick on my door.” Joe Jones, Letter to Alexandre Hogue, undated (about 1937). Alexandre Hogue papers. I am uncertain what Jones’s suggestive reference to Hogue’s pants implies, although I doubt Hogue responded positively to any inducement to produce works with social content.

Hogue's disavowal of social content in his work, its presence as part of a larger dialogue about erosion in America during the 1930s imbues the images with broader social implications.³⁹

The men who would develop New Deal strategies to combat the Dust Bowl recognized that the health of society depended upon the health of its land. Henry Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture, predicted that America's exploitation of the soil "threatened to destroy the physical foundations of national longevity."⁴⁰ Triple A Director Rexford Tugwell reiterated this statement, noting that "Fertility of the soil is the ultimate source of wealth. When that is gone, the civilization built upon it soon decays."⁴¹ Hugh Bennett, who would later be known as the father of soil conservation, could perhaps see the broadest ramifications of the dilemma, arguing that in an eroding society, it is "not just the land which goes. The people, the cities and towns, and the civilizations decay with the land. That's history. Not the kind of history you read in books, but the history you read in the land."⁴² These voices attempted to enact policy to respond to this national threat, with erosion as their principal foe. The plow by implication was more than complicit.

Largely in response to the Dust Bowl, a survey conducted in 1934 by the Soil Erosion Service (predecessor of the Soil Conservation Service) declared that, excluding cities and water, about three-fourths of the nearly two billion acres of land in the United States suffered from

³⁹ Hogue would eventually redact this stand and proudly proclaim himself "some 40 years ahead on this environment-ecology bit," a statement he perhaps made in response to the founding of Earth Day in 1970. Alexandre Hogue, Letter to Hal Glicksman, 1971, Alexandre Hogue papers.

⁴⁰ Henry Wallace, "Soil and the General Welfare," from *Whose Constitution: An Inquiry into the General Welfare*, quoted in Tim Lehman, *Public Values, Private Lands: Farmland Preservation Policy, 1933-1985* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 20.

⁴¹ Rexford Tugwell, *The Battle for Democracy*, quoted in Finis Dunaway, *Natural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 39.

⁴² Hugh H. Bennett, "Program of the Soil Conservation Service," file 8, box 10, Hugh H. Bennett Papers, Archives of American Agriculture, Special Collections, Parks Memorial Library, Iowa State University, quoted in Beeman and Pritchard, *Green and Permanent Land*, 14.

erosion of some kind.⁴³ By 1935, Tugwell had become the head of the new Resettlement Administration (RA). The RA earned its name because widespread erosion had made “such a convincing case against man’s handling of the soil” that the initial recommendation by governmental advisors was the removal of a quarter of a million inhabitants of the Great Plains.⁴⁴ Although the government did not direct such a migration itself, over one million Plains people left the region between 1930-35 and two and a half million left after 1935. Presumably, some of these citizens left for reasons other than the Dust Bowl; the exodus that officials had recommended was real.⁴⁵

Wallace and Tugwell’s first plan of attack to resolve the agricultural crisis was to remove land from use. Between 1933 and 1935, the best strategy available in regions deeply affected by drought or wind erosion was to list the fields or leave them alone all together.⁴⁶ Listing is a plowing process that utilizes a double moldboard plow to produce a deep furrow intended to capture limited moisture and resist excessive wind erosion. This strategy would be followed by land-use planning rehabilitation programs to educate farmers about new agricultural strategies, and the resettlement of displaced farmers and tenants. These projects began tentatively. When the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act replaced the Triple A, attention shifted from concern about limiting production to efforts to conserve the soil. The 1935 Soil Conservation Act allowed the Soil Conservation Service to conduct surveys and promote conservation. Of these

⁴³ Michael W. Schuyler and Abigail T. Siddall, *The Dread of Plenty: Agricultural Relief Activities of the Federal Government in the Middle West, 1933-1939* (Manhattan, KS: Sunflower University Press, 1989), 128.

⁴⁴ Frederic E. Clements, "Climatic Cycles and Human Populations in the Great Plains," *The Scientific Monthly* 47, no. 3 (September 1938): 199.

⁴⁵ Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (1979), 25th anniversary ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 49.

⁴⁶ Theodore Saloutos, *The American Farmer and the New Deal* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1982), 201-03.

plans, the adoption of new and improved farming methods would have the most lasting impact despite the challenges of implementing these methods. The problem of erosion was apparent but it was not easy to understand or to solve.

A comprehensive indictment of erosion written by G.V. Jacks and R.O. Whyte in 1939 helps situate the way in which the public understood erosion at this period, and the difficulties the populace faced in their attempt to solve the crisis. Titled *Rape of the Earth: A World Survey of Soil Erosion*, the book explained that society “is founded upon the measures taken to wrest control of the soil from wild Nature,” and yet “the soils upon which men have attempted to found new civilizations are disappearing, washed away by water and blown away by wind.”⁴⁷ The authors classified the global erosion crisis as “the modern symptom of maladjustment between human society and the environment.”⁴⁸ After listing ways in which erosion affected specific regions of the world, Jacks and Whyte described measures necessary to heal the breaches. For the farmers of the American prairie, they deemed that “the basis of a comprehensive plan for rehabilitating the prairies must be mass-psychological.”⁴⁹ Men there would have to alter the outlook they had learned from their fathers that was based on a more humid environment in the East, for that attitude had been “modified in the wrong way by the greater ease with which virgin prairie soils can be exploited by modern methods.” Unfortunately, the “suitable attitude” these farmers would need to adopt had not yet been determined. The Triple A had been unsuccessful, but a new plan was not yet clear.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ G. V. Jacks and R. O. Whyte, *The Rape of the Earth: A World Survey of Soil Erosion* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1939), 17, 18.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 292-93.

In addition to government scientists, writers and artists explored the many ways in which erosion threatened American culture. Russell Lord addressed the cultural side of the threat when he reflected, “Other forms of erosion accompany the occupation and despoliation of the soil, and that, as a land becomes older, more crowded, more worn and wounded, accelerated erosion may extend beyond the physical surface of the country and attack the free spirit.”⁵¹ MacLeish echoed uncertainty about American life and land in a sequel of sorts to “The Grasslands,” *Land of the Free*, a combination of prose, FSA images, and other photographs published in 1938. The book postulated that the western frontier and the grasslands represented America’s liberty, but “now that the land’s behind us we get wondering ... if liberty was land and the land’s gone.” He observed that all over the country, “the land’s going out from us,” and yet poignantly recognized “you need a continent against your feet.” These anxious observations gained urgency when paired with an image like Arthur Rothstein’s 1937 photograph *Eroded Land on Alabama Farm* (Fig. 78) depicting gullies active nearly to the doorstep of a home. MacLeish used alliterative rhythms with the words “furrow,” “fallow,” and “falling” to describe tractors that depleted the fields and crowded out the farmers.⁵²

In *Land of the Free*, MacLeish looked beyond the drought in the Great Plains to assess broadly the topographic and cultural implications of an eroding society. The Dust Bowl was primarily associated with wind erosion, but the press was quick to note that “more than the immediate calamity of dust storms, men fear a greater specter – soil erosion, which threatens to turn half of the United States into a desert.”⁵³ The country was in danger of losing its cultural heritage in the form of its “fruited plains.” Writers explained, “The roots of [native grasses] had

⁵¹ Lord, *Behold Our Land*, 10.

⁵² Archibald MacLeish, *Land of the Free* (New York: Harcourt, 1938), 23, 29, 46, 47, 53.

⁵³ “Agriculture: 500,000,000 Tons of Dust Cover Kansas and Points East,” *Newsweek*, 30 March 1935, 5.

been the straw in the brick of the Great Plains' soil. When they were destroyed the soil crumbled."⁵⁴ Crumbling soil could easily be equated with a crumbling society. Mervin Jules' lithograph *Erosion* from about 1936 (Fig. 79) expresses the despair or even terror the ruined land could inspire as his farmer recoils from his ravaged fields. Mechanization and industrialized farming were seen as only exacerbating an already calamitous problem.

Hogue explored the dangers inherent in mechanized farming in his 1939 painting, *The Crucified Land* (Fig. 70). The painting is quite similar in scale and vantage point to *Mother Earth Laid Bare* and, in fact, follows that work in Hogue's series depicting erosion by water. In this image the eroded, furrowed land forms orthogonal lines leading the eye to a tractor in the distance. A scarecrow rests on land that is rapidly becoming a peninsula in the eroded field. The scarecrow wears the traditional garb of a farmer – a blue work shirt and overalls. Hogue based *Crucified Land* on an outcropping near Denton, Texas. He consciously emulated the red color of the Vernon Redlands there to show that "water is cutting into the very flesh of the earth, draining it of its life-blood, crucifying the land."⁵⁵

Hogue explained the image as follows: "This is an abandoned field once farmed by the guy who plowed downhill, inviting water erosion to eat through the rows. All furrows point to the tractor which represents man's misuse of the land."⁵⁶ The field does not yield a crop, but rather needle grass, a native short grass that would have been understood as a weed despite the cover it provides in this instance.⁵⁷ Hogue painted the scene from experience although he heightened its allegorical impact. He recalled that he "spent much of [his] early life ... working

⁵⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁵ Alexandre Hogue, Letter to John O'Connor, 25 August 1939, Alexandre Hogue papers.

⁵⁶ Alexandre Hogue, Letter to Thomas M. Beggs, 8 February 1946, Alexandre Hogue papers.

⁵⁷ "Alexandre Hogue Paints at Home," *Dallas Times Herald*, 22 September 1940. Alexandre Hogue papers.

and painting on a Panhandle ranch near Dalhart. This ranch ... has been, like many others, literally 'plowed in' on all sides by the 'suit-case' farmers whose uncontrolled loose dirt, pushed before the wind, has gnawed away every sprig of grass that dares show above ground."⁵⁸

Through the title and symbolic use of the scarecrow as a cruciform symbol, Hogue layers his erosion motif with Christian symbolism to convey that the land and the individual farmer has been sacrificed to atone for the sins of men. The prospect for salvation in the image unfortunately appears less certain.

The distant tractor in *Crucified Land* has been identified as a McCormick-Deering Farmall from the 1930s, possibly an F-20 or F-12 model.⁵⁹ The Farmall was one of America's most popular mass-produced tractors designed for general farm use, particularly with row crops. A tractor powering a disk plow such as this depiction greatly increased productivity. For farmers, a tractor's use generally meant increased acreage in cultivation, which in turn meant that the tractor could now join the plow as the symbolic villain in the destruction of the grasslands. Tractors, of course, enabled plows to be bigger and disk plows became common.⁶⁰ A disk plow consists of steel disks attached to a common axle or bolt. A four-foot model of the popular Angell "One-Way" disk plow can be seen in Fig. 80. Most disk plows were ten feet wide and

⁵⁸ "Plans for Work," Guggenheim Fellowship statement, 1938, Alexandre Hogue papers.

⁵⁹ Identified in Mark Andrew White, "Alexandre Hogue's Passion: Ecology and Agribusiness in 'The Crucified Land,'" in *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History* ed. Alan C. Braddock and Christoph Irmscher (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009), 176. International Harvester is usually the brand associated with the Farmall, although they marketed a specialized version of the tractor designed for industrial and utility purposes sold under the McCormick-Deering brand. These Farmalls can be distinguished by a wider front axle and a lower ground clearance. As the tractor in the painting is only about three inches tall and therefore difficult to see in detail, I am inclined to give the specificity of this attribution the benefit of the doubt.

⁶⁰ For information about the popularization of the disk plow, see E. Morgan Williams, "The 'One-Way' Disk Plow: Its Historical Development and Economic Role" (MA thesis, University of Kansas, 1962).

could be hooked together for even greater plowing potential. The chief difference between a disk and moldboard plow is the nature of soil disruption: a moldboard plow deeply cuts and turns the soil over in the form of a furrow, while disk plows shallowly disturb the soil while preserving plant residue in the form of stubble.

Many farmers sought disk plows as an alternative to their moldboards after a scathing indictment of the older implement by an iconoclastic ex-county extension agent and “experimental farmer” named Edward Faulkner. In the 1943 book *Plowman’s Folly*, Faulkner argued that the moldboard plow should be considered “the villain of the world’s agricultural drama,” due to its capacity to sever and bury the plant material adhering topsoil together, leaving the exposed soil devoid of necessary nutrients and prone to erosion.⁶¹ Faulkner’s accusation was hotly debated in *The Land*, a journal focused on agricultural ecology. Russell Lord, its editor, asked pointed questions about the challenges inherent in adopting such a radically divergent perspective about agriculture:

How can a people who seem for the past four centuries to have been doing the wrong things to their land, ever harder, ever faster, and with ever greater power, –how can such a people turn in their tracks, change their minds, their basic designs of groundline culture, their implements, their ways? Can we turn now and build up soil with the same speed, energy and ingenuity with which we have maimed and weakened soil? And can we do this in time?⁶²

The Land’s authors agreed that tillage ultimately damaged the soil but questioned whether or not farmers should completely follow Faulkner and abandon all their longstanding beliefs regarding cultivation.

⁶¹ Edward H. Faulkner, *Plowman's Folly* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1943), 157.

⁶² Russell Lord, "If My Land Cry," *The Land* 3, no. 1 (summer 1943): 70. *The Land* devoted significant portions of its summer and fall issues for 1943 to debating “the Evil or Virtue of Turning the Mould” directly in response to Faulkner’s publication.

Paul Chapman, the Dean of Agriculture at the University of Georgia, echoed Lord's recognition that Faulkner's argument represented a profound departure from pervasive beliefs, noting that Faulkner's accusation against the moldboard plow was leveled at "the recognized symbol of farming throughout the civilized world," a symbol used by the U. S. Department of Agriculture, the Farm Bureau, and the Future Farmers of America. Chapman speculated that if Faulkner successfully convinced farmers that the turning plow functioned as "an implement of destruction," he might transform this symbol of American agriculture.⁶³ Hugh Bennett of the Soil Conservation Service lent credibility to Faulkner's thesis in the moldboard debate, acknowledging that "some twenty years ago we went out with turning plows on a particularly lavish spree, and awoke to find ourselves in a delirium of monstrous dust storms and yawning gullies." While still supporting the use of a moldboard plow for some practices, Bennett concluded that, "if three-fourths of the cropland of the country never again felt the bite of the turning plow for ordinary farm tillage, it would be a gain to rural America."⁶⁴ Disk plows were a gentler alternative, harrowing the land rather than turning it, and thereby producing "immensely richer crops."⁶⁵

Disk plowing would steadily gain acceptance during and after the Dust Bowl because the stubble it creates tends to prevent wind erosion and collect moisture. Still, as this new implement became more widely adopted in the 1930s, it earned detractors. First, the practice was not considered plowing by some purists, who pointed out that the disks only tilled, but did not turn the soil. The "trashy" appearance of plant stubble on the fields also lacked the aesthetic purity of

⁶³ Paul W. Chapman, "Shall We Change the Symbols?" *The Land* 3, no. 1 (summer 1943): 78-79.

⁶⁴ Hugh Hammond Bennett, "The Abolition of the Plow," *The New Republic* 109, no. 14 (October 1943): 453-54.

⁶⁵ "Science: Down with the Plow," *Time*, 26 July 1943, 46.

moldboard furrows.⁶⁶ Practitioners of dry-farming (farming without irrigation in regions with low levels of precipitation) were advised to use these plows to stir up the moisture in their fields after rains, which they apparently did all too readily. The increased use of disk cultivation was cited as yet another probable cause for the Dust Bowl.⁶⁷ Like any agricultural implement, disk plows could easily be misused and overused by operators. But the ramifications of misusing a ten-foot disk plow powered by a tractor were much greater than the old horse-drawn plows simply because of its efficiency and effectiveness. Hogue, for example, cast the tractor thusly in his Dust Bowl painting *Drouth Survivors* of 1936 (Fig. 81). As he explained, be it through dust or gully, he could “use erosion forms as an idiom of expression” in order to “record the manifold aspects of this ‘revolt of nature’ against the stupid acts of man.”⁶⁸

Hogue believed this revolt was the great crisis of his era. In 1939, he passionately declared “as far as we in America are concerned the ‘war’ against erosion both by wind and water, makes the threatened one in Europe pale in insignificance.”⁶⁹ He recognized that his art helped draw attention to the problem, boasting that his “paintings [had] done much to influence photography and point up interest in water erosion and wind erosion problems.”⁷⁰ Although Hogue generally disavowed any socio-cultural commentary in his imagery, scholars have insisted that paintings like *Crucified Land* consciously highlight the social changes laborers experienced due to increased agricultural mechanization.⁷¹ Rather than dwell in the murky realm of Hogue’s intentionality, I think it is fair to argue that, due to the variety of ways in which

⁶⁶ Carl Frederick Kraenzel, *The Great Plains in Transition* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), 303.

⁶⁷ Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 91.

⁶⁸ Alexandre Hogue, Letter to F.A. Whiting, circa October 1939. Alexandre Hogue papers; “Plans for Work,” Guggenheim Fellowship statement, 1938, Alexandre Hogue papers.

⁶⁹ Alexandre Hogue, Letter to Margaret Varga, 29 May 1939, Alexandre Hogue papers.

⁷⁰ Alexandre Hogue, Letter to F.A. Whiting, circa October 1939. Alexandre Hogue papers.

⁷¹ White, “Hogue’s Passion,” 176.

mechanization was associated with human and topographical erosion, these sorts of connections could be understood by audiences then and now.

The displacement of land and people via industrialized agriculture was perhaps best articulated in Paul Taylor and Dorothea Lange's collaboration *American Exodus* from 1938. Many artists and writers noticed that erosion was affecting the land as well as the people. As an agricultural economist, social scientist, and field director of the Rural Rehabilitation Division of California's emergency relief administration in 1935, Taylor asked Lange to add a photographer's vision to an explanation of the need for cooperatives in the state's labor system. The couple continued to collaborate while working for the RA, and later the FSA. While shooting in California, Lange and Taylor encountered disenfranchised Dust Bowl migrants and became aware of the role of mechanization in driving these farmers off the land. They then traveled east to see the problem at its source. Lange's images, her transcribed statements from the people they encountered, and Taylor's observations formed *American Exodus*.⁷²

Lange and Taylor found eroded land and mechanized farming all over the country. They saw that the landowners and tenant farmers who seemed most culturally disconnected from their land resided in the most imperiled regions. In the Dust Bowl and much of the Southern Plains, many farmers were actually tenants who paid rent from the returns on their crops to a landlord. Taylor observed, "The roots of Oklahomans in the land are shallow. By a curiously symbolic coincidence Oklahoma is the worst wind-blown state in the country, its newly broken red plains are among the worst eroded, and its farm people among the least rooted to the soil."⁷³ The very

⁷² For biographical details on Taylor and Lange's collaboration see Karin E. Becker, *Dorothea Lange and the Documentary Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 40-76.

⁷³ Dorothea Lange and Paul Schuster Taylor, *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion in the Thirties*, revised and extended ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 56.

idea of farm tenancy stood in stark opposition to the ideal of a hardy, Jeffersonian yeomanry. Reports in the 1930s noted with concern that half of American farmers did not own the land they worked, with even higher percentages of tenancy in the South.⁷⁴ In *Rich Land, Poor Land*, Stuart Chase explained that a temporary hold on the land led to unstable, poor ground, for on a farm run by tenants and suitcase farmers who lacked any hope of owning the property, “land runs down the gullies.”⁷⁵ Ownership meant rootedness, and increasing tenancy was yet another sign of an eroding country.

The most notorious description of Oklahoma tenant farmers confronting social and topographic erosion was John Steinbeck’s best-selling 1939 novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. *Grapes* opens with descriptions of Oklahoma “red country” with its plows, tractors, drought, “water-cut gullies,” and the scarcity of any remaining tenant farmers who had not been either “dusted out” or “tractored out.”⁷⁶ This latter expression also serves as the title for one of Lange’s images in *American Exodus*. Taylor’s caption accompanying the photograph, also titled *Power farming displaces tenants from the land in the western dry cotton area. Childress County, Texas Panhandle* (Fig. 82), reads: “Tractors replace not only mules but people. They cultivate to the very door of the houses of the men they replace.”⁷⁷ Taylor, Lange, and Steinbeck all cast the machine as a menacing force that contributes to the uprooting, erosion, and decay of society.

In Steinbeck’s fictionalized account of human erosion and displacement, the land is worn out, but it used to be fertile. As Tom recalls, “Grampa says she was good the first five plowin’s,

⁷⁴ See for example Howard A. Turner, “Farm Tenancy Distribution and Trends in the United States,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 4, no. 4 (October 1937), 426-27.

⁷⁵ Stuart Chase, *Rich Land, Poor Land: A Study of Waste in the Natural Resources of America* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1936), 227.

⁷⁶ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: The Viking Press, 1939), 4, 12.

⁷⁷ Lange and Taylor, *American Exodus*, 64.

while the wild grass was still in her.”⁷⁸ Tenants like the Joad family were being replaced by tractors that came “straight down the country, across the country, through fences, through dooryards, in and out of gullies in straight lines.”⁷⁹ The tractors operate disk plows “cutting the earth with blades – not plowing but surgery.”⁸⁰

Many writers of the 1930s praised tractors, arguing that they “had changed a farmer from a clod to an operator.”⁸¹ Other witnesses judged the overall effects of these big machines on nature to be violent. Steinbeck, for example, described the way in which plows sliced the earth and then the seeders penetrated and raped it until “the land bore under iron, and under iron eventually died.”⁸² For environmentally conscious observers, such machines brought about the ruin of the land and the eviction of its tenants for “the tractor does two things – it turns the land and turns us off the land.”⁸³ Once a plow exposed the soil to the harsh sun, “[the winds] loosened the hold of settlers on the land and like particles of dust, drove them rolling down ribbons of highway.”⁸⁴ In *American Exodus*, Lange recorded the statement of a Dust Bowl migrant who said, “The Farmall is knocking our renters out of their places and scattering them all over.”⁸⁵

The migratory labor that characterized industrial-scale farming the Joads encountered in California had its counterpart in the system of tenant farming they had left behind in Oklahoma. The Joads appear to have previously mortgaged their land to the bank to keep their footing in an agricultural cycle built on speculation for next year’s crop. *Grapes and American Exodus* strongly suggested that, in addition to tenants who were bankrupted by the drought, land owners

⁷⁸ Steinbeck, *Wrath*, 37.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁸¹ Morrow Mayo, "The Man with a Tractor," *Harper's Magazine*, November 1938, 624.

⁸² Steinbeck, *Wrath*, 49.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁸⁴ Lange and Taylor, *American Exodus*, 82.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 135.

in the Southern Plains increasingly used tractors to replace and therefore displace their tenants. Unlike the 1936 findings of a federal report on farm tenancy that did not mention mechanization as a factor in the displacement of laborers, Taylor recognized and set out to prove that the machines were radically changing society as well as the land.⁸⁶ He wrote, “The process of displacement from the land, started by depression and drought, is now receiving impetus from the machine.”⁸⁷

Taylor and Lange observed that industrialized farming displaced laborers and endangered the land wherever they encountered it. Lange developed a visual vocabulary to indicate the ordered, massive scale of mechanized farms in any part of the country. Apart from the lack of a home amidst the furrows, the endless repetition of plowed acres seen in a photograph like *Salinas Valley, California, Large Scale, Commercial Agriculture*, 1939 (Fig. 83) resembles the Texas fields that fill the landscape in *Tractored Out*. Even more striking is a comparison between Lange’s documentation of the commercial agriculture in California and Julius Woelitz’s 1941 murals for the Federal Courthouse and Post Office in Amarillo, *Gang Plow* (Fig. 84) and *Disk Harrow* (Fig. 85). Unlike these images that appear to revel in the power and efficiency of the machines that organize the landscape into regimented stripes of paint, Lange portrayed the tractor as part of a system that uprooted men and left fields deserted.⁸⁸ Despite the impressive effect Woelitz’s machines have upon the fields as efficient harbingers of progress, the prevalence of critical imagery and rhetoric related to agricultural industry from the same time period tempers the triumph of these tractors with undeniable menace.

⁸⁶ Becker, *Documentary Tradition*, 76.

⁸⁷ Lange and Taylor, *American Exodus*, 70.

⁸⁸ Linda Gordon, "Dorothea Lange: The Photographer as Agricultural Sociologist," *The Journal of American History* 93, no. 3 (December 2006): 708.

In the late 1930s and into the 1940s, erosion represented more than just soil blowing or washing away. It also symbolized the people who were cut adrift from their homes and livelihoods by the drought and the tractor and the potential loss of American rootedness. These associations were fluid in the writing and imagery of the day. When the FSA reproduced perhaps the most famous image from the Dust Bowl, Lange's *Migrant Mother* in their *Midweek Pictorial*, the photograph of a Depression-era Madonna with her children contained a caption that ignored this particular mother and her troubles. Instead, the text stressed a connection between migrants and their environment, stating, "The rise of tenancy devastates the soil itself. The nomad farmer is a stranger in the land."⁸⁹ Americans were attempting to eke out a living by raising cash crops on land they did not own, and those tenants were in turn being excised from the land by tractors. Neither option afforded agricultural prosperity to American's yeoman farmer in the depressed economy.

Images of agricultural laborers as representatives of human erosion were ubiquitous in the late 1930s. Elizabeth McCausland's evaluation of Russell Lee's FSA photograph depicting the hands of a homesteader's wife (Fig. 86) for example, shows how the land and the human were sympathetically in tune as both suffered. McCausland wrote that the image "is a human and social document of great moment and moving quality. In the erosion of these deformed figures is to be seen the symbol of social distortion and deformation: waste is to be read here, as is read in the lands washed down to sea by floods, in dust storms and in drouth bowls."⁹⁰ Lee crops his subject into a topographic study as wrinkles emanate outward from the woman's abdomen in the

⁸⁹ *Midweek Pictorial*, 17 October 1936, reproduced in Lawrence W. Levine, "The Historian and the Icon: Photography and the History of the American People in the 1930s and 1940s," in *Documenting America, 1935-1943*, ed. Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 34.

⁹⁰ Elizabeth McCausland, "Documentary Photography," *Photo Notes*, January 1939, 7.

folds of her gathered skirt, her sleeves, and of course her gnarled, worked fingers. Lee and McCausland appear to be emphasizing the effects of labor and hardship on the physical body, the toll of toil. The “waste” McCausland bemoans can be better understood by viewing other photographs from Lee’s shoot and learning that the Ostermeyers, who homesteaded in Iowa, have now lost their farm to a loan company.⁹¹ Mrs. Ostermeyer’s worn hands, hands that symbolize labor, carry no lasting yield.

The numerous and interrelated meanings that erosion imagery and rhetoric held during this period all ultimately emphasized a critical threat to American cultural identity as defined by their connections to homeland and Heartland. Even in the realm of popular culture, affirmations of the need for a home, rootedness, and property confirmed the psychological significance of land for Americans. In *Gone with the Wind*, Scarlett O’Hara’s father rebukes her sternly: “land is the only thing in the world that amounts to anything ... for ‘tis the only thing in this world that lasts.”⁹² This theme is a critical lesson in the 1936 novel and 1939 film. Land’s value is also affirmed for its emotional significance in the other blockbuster film of 1939, *The Wizard of Oz*, in which Dorothy of Kansas affirms the country’s need to believe that, be it ever so humble or sepia-toned, “there’s no place like home.” The Dust Bowl and the nationwide soil erosion crisis threatened the Jeffersonian values of agrarianism and American rural identity. The effectiveness of erosion rhetoric as portrayed during the Dust Bowl and Depression in paint by artists like Hogue, in documents by photographers like Lange, and in prose by writers like MacLeish depended on their ability to reveal the vulnerability of the American farm, the American landscape, and American liberty. Erosion had a symbolism that was palpable; the quintessence of

⁹¹ Maren Stange, "Symbols of Ideal Life': Tugwell, Stryker, and the FSA Photography Project," in *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890-1950* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 123-28.

⁹² Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 23.

dust suggested the larger issue of human mortality. If dust was from whence we came, the “Dirty Thirties” argued it might be our inevitable return.

Chapter 5. Steward-in-Residence: John Steuart Curry and Soil Conservation

Although many of the artistic products of the Dust Bowl intentionally reconstruct the plow as a symbol of exploitive agricultural practices, a few images from this period maintain faith in agrarian technology. The difference in these works is an advocacy for new agricultural methods developed by proponents of an emerging notion of ecological stewardship. Although he is not routinely associated with environmental art, John Steuart Curry depicted agricultural technology as a means to environmental and social betterment. Curry, despite his rural upbringing in Kansas and standing as part of the so-called “Regionalist Triumvirate” along with Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood, was unable to use his progressive attitude toward agricultural innovation to cultivate popularity in his native state during the early 1930s. The paintings of tornadoes and religious rituals that established his fame also alienated the Kansans he endeavored to portray. Despite the disapproval Curry garnered among some residents of his home state, his national reputation was that of an artist connected to the spirit of rural life. This passion was cited as the rationale for Curry’s selection as the artist-in-residence for the College of Agriculture at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the first title of its kind in the country.

Curry embraced technology as a tool to achieve greater harmony with the land. Curry’s work at the University of Wisconsin and its connections to the mission of the College of Agriculture demonstrates this interest. His connection to the emerging soil conservation effort can be better understood by exploring the first Soil Conservation Service demonstration site in Coon Valley, Wisconsin. When considered in concert with projects like Coon Valley, Curry’s Wisconsin landscapes can be considered as reflections of a conservation ethic. This interest can also be seen in Curry’s subsequent commission to paint murals for the Kansas Statehouse in Topeka, a project that included unrealized designs intended for the Rotunda emphasizing themes

of dust storms, erosion, and soil conservation. Curry's connection to Wisconsin and soil conservation influenced his approach to the Topeka mural commission. The public response to Curry's interest and intended execution adds further intriguing clues as to why the Rotunda panels were never realized.

Curry's appointment at the University of Wisconsin reflects one expression of the school's long-standing commitment to the "Wisconsin Idea," a notion that the University's borders are the borders of the state.¹ Wisconsin nurtured this idea by providing its students with a broad education in the humanities and through outreach programs directed towards the larger populace. Guided by the vision of President Glenn Frank and the Dean of Agriculture, Chris Christensen, the College of Agriculture established a program of study in the 1930s that integrated the University into the lives of Wisconsin farmers. Frank and Christensen initiated and supported a curriculum that provided not only a liberal arts curriculum for full-time students, but also an abbreviated preparatory program of study for those seeking a career in agriculture called the Farm Short Course. Christensen revised the Short Course so that it addressed the social and economic challenges of farming and expanded its curriculum to include more of the humanities.² At the time of Curry's appointment in 1936, Christensen's responsibility encompassed the sometimes separate spheres of town and gown as he supervised the College, Wisconsin's Agricultural Experiment Station, and its system of Cooperative Extension.³ Christensen believed in a broad education that could improve all of society, stating, "Our goal is to help farmers create

¹ Charles McCarthy, *The Wisconsin Idea* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1912).

² John W. Jenkins, *A Centennial History: A History of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at the University of Wisconsin-Madison* (Madison: College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, 1991), 107.

³ Today's Extension system aids the public with research-based knowledge to improve daily living and is a partnership between land-grant colleges and the United States Department of Agriculture. This partnership and subsequent reduction of collegiate authority occurred during the 1930s as a result of New Deal programs.

a rural economy and culture that will enable honest, industrious and intelligent people to live upon the land with their full share of joys and satisfactions.”⁴

In each aspect of the College, Christensen was committed to fostering a complete culture of rural life. For this reason, he created a position within the College for an artist who could serve as a cultural liaison between the University, the students, and the larger community. With this vision in mind, Curry became the first formally designated artist-in-residence in American history.⁵ His presence within the College of Agriculture, rather than the field of visual arts, reflects its truly innovative and liberal approach to education. Although the benefits an artist would bring to agricultural instruction might seem negligible, University President Frank praised the compatibility between Curry and the purpose of the College of Agriculture. He declared that Curry, like his fellow Regionalists, produced art that “draws its strength from the very soil of America,” and hoped that he “may come to think in terms of the roots and soil of Wisconsin, just as he has of his native Kansas.”⁶ Curry’s rootedness suited the curriculum at the agricultural college, and his commitment to rural life fit Frank and Christensen’s larger aims.

Prior to his residency in Wisconsin, Curry had demonstrated experience with agricultural subject matter. One of his earliest known paintings from 1917, for example, was titled *Corn Plover*. He painted his father amidst the family’s livestock in *The Stockman* in 1929. The Curry farm appears through a window between portraits of his parents in *The Old Folks*, also from

⁴ Chris Christensen, quoted in “Art Becomes a Part of Rural Education in Wisconsin,” Series 3: Correspondence and Project Files. University of Wisconsin. Rural Art Program, circa 1934-45 (Box 3, Folder 22). Curry papers.

⁵ For additional details on Curry’s time in Wisconsin, including a discussion of the “Wisconsin Idea,” which stressed the importance of education even beyond the classroom, see Lucy J. Mathiak, “A Stranger to the Ivory Tower: John Steuart Curry and the University of Wisconsin,” and Patricia A. Junker, “Twilight of Americanism’s Golden Age: Curry’s Wisconsin Years, 1936-46,” in *John Steuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1998).

⁶ “Curry Is Named ‘Artist in Residence’; Wisconsin Acts to Aid ‘Rural Culture’,” *The New York Times*, 20 September 1936, N2.

1929. In *The Death of Ray Goddard*, circa 1931 (Fig. 87), farm life becomes the source of rural drama as fellow farmers remove the crushed body of Ray Goddard from the upturned remains of his tractor.⁷ This negative perspective towards modern farm machinery groups Curry with his contemporaries Alexandre Hogue and Dorothea Lange. Here, the tractor has taken the life of an innocent farmer.⁸ The toll of the tractor on the land is less explicit here, although the bluff landscape suggests the possibility that eroded farmland played a role in causing the tractor to turn over.

Curry drew upon his existing knowledge of Kansas farm life in his work for the College of Agriculture in Wisconsin. He became an extension of the College's mission, or to be more accurate, was a part of the College's mission of extension. Through advocacy of the Short Course program and emphasis on the demonstration of agricultural research, Christensen committed the University to sharing its expertise with the farm community. He deemed such instruction necessary for the betterment of all because he felt that "farming is no longer an individual enterprise ... now it requires increasing skill and wise distribution of labor."⁹ Curry similarly used his position and the resources of his academic setting to serve the community. One of his goals was "to establish and develop a feeling for art among the agricultural students by discussing with them agricultural as well as art problems. He want[ed] to eliminate the

⁷ *The Death of Ray Goddard* is dated circa 1939 in Drew Kane, "John Steuart Curry (1897-1946)," in *Coming Home: American Paintings, 1930-1950, from the Schoen Collection* (Athens: Georgia Museum of Art, 2003), 112. The painting was noted in an appraisal of Curry's December, 1931 exhibition at the Kansas City Art Institute, hence the circa 1931 date. Letter from Mrs. Henry J. Allen to William Allen White, 16 December 1931. Series 3: Correspondence and Project Files. Allen, Mr. and Mrs. Henry J., 1931, 1946. (Box 1, Folder 24). Curry papers.

⁸ Tractor-related deaths were not uncommon during this period, particularly death caused by tractors rolling over and crushing their drivers. By 1945, the fatality rate for agriculture was estimated to be twice that for manufacturing. Robert C. Williams, *Fordson, Farmall, and Poppin' Johnny: A History of the Farm Tractor and Its Impact on America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 134-35.

⁹ Christensen, quoted in Jenkins, *Centennial History*, 93.

inhibitions with which non-urban residents look[ed] upon painting.”¹⁰ Curry did not formally teach classes, but instead gave lectures to students in the Short Course and became a critical participant in the Rural Art Program, visiting artists and answering their questions.

The manner in which the Rural Art Program at Wisconsin operated parallels the structure of the Extension Service. The program offered support and guidance to rural practitioners of the arts, most of whom lacking formal training. In many cases the farmers’ only connection to the University came through extension agents who made new developments in agriculture and home economics available to them. The Rural Art Program utilized this existing network of communication, with Curry functioning as a kind of special agent for the arts. Upon his arrival in Madison, newspapers were quick to report this development, marveling that “the hand that wields a plow may soon be painting scenes of rural Wisconsin” under Curry’s guidance.¹¹

Curry enacted this headline in the watercolor *Rural Artist* (Fig. 88). This image of an artist sketching in a landscape characterized by contemporary conservation treatments reveals that the subject being painted might be the very land the College of Agriculture was researching. By lecturing, visiting the homes of rural artists, sharing supplies, answering questions via mail, and making his studio in Madison available to visitors, Curry could provide artists with the advice and encouragement they sought.¹² The College viewed this artistic, rather than agricultural, instruction as an important component of the rural culture it wished to nurture, and Curry helped bolster connections to the rural community that had previously been maintained only by the extension agents.

¹⁰ "Resident Artist: John Steuart Curry Takes Unique Post to Encourage Rural Painting," *The Literary Digest*, 17 October 1936, 23.

¹¹ "Plowhands May Turn Artists," *The Sioux City Journal*, 6 December 1936. Series 3: Correspondence and Project Files. University of Wisconsin. Rural Art Program, circa 1934-45 (Box 3, Folder 22). Curry papers.

¹² Mathiak, "Curry and Wisconsin," 190-91.

The soil conservation techniques depicted in *Rural Artist* emerged as a topic of general discussion in Madison around the time Curry became affiliated with the University of Wisconsin. During interviews promoting his appointment Curry joked, “Maybe my painting of the Wisconsin scene, including soil erosion, will make more grass grow, which in turn will make Wisconsin’s cows give more milk.”¹³ Curry then seriously declared his hopes “to get to know and understand and paint the soil and landscape of Wisconsin.”¹⁴ Soil conservation was such an important aspect of the College’s research that it is only natural Curry would be interested in exploring the topic pictorially. The *Literary Digest* also reported Curry’s intentions to “do murals and paintings of current agricultural topics, particularly soil erosion, which is a pet project of Dean Christensen’s.”¹⁵ The article stressed that these products would not serve as propaganda. Curry promised he did not “come ... to wreak good” on the people of Wisconsin.¹⁶

The press’s denial that Curry would produce propaganda was valid when considering how often he painted the praises of the University while in Wisconsin. He created murals on campus extolling “The Social Benefits of Biochemical Research” and produced a painting celebrating UW discoveries related to the use of Vitamin D in the elimination of rickets. Both works demonstrated the ways that the University’s interdisciplinary research benefited human and animal nutrition as part of its land grant mission. His portrait of Chris Christensen captures the dean striding confidently through a cornfield that is undergoing experiments in the

¹³ "Curry, U. W. 'Artist in Residence,' Here; Believes Plan Great Step Forward," *The Capital Times*, 4 December 1936.

¹⁴ Morris H. Rubin, “Impatient to Feel Spring and the State’s Soil, Curry Comes to Campus,” *The Madison State Journal*, 4 December 1936. Series 3: Correspondence and Project Files. University of Wisconsin. Rural Art Program, circa 1934-45 (Box 3, Folder 22). Curry papers.

¹⁵ "Resident Artist," 23.

¹⁶ John Steuart Curry, “American Painting,” Address before the Art Association of Madison, 19 January 1937. Series 5: Notes and Writings. Lectures on American Painting, 1937 (Box 4, Folder 28). Curry papers.

development of hybrid breeds. Curry's faith in agricultural research as beneficial to rural culture was so great, in fact, that it thoroughly informed his artistic identity. Patricia Junker argues that Curry felt he was part of a golden age "when Americans saw that their most important act of self-reliance was cultivation of the land and when American art ascended to new heights by serving and celebrating that agrarian culture."¹⁷ While the celebration of agrarian life was a common theme in art of the 1930s, the notion that the artist could serve that culture through art, outreach, and attitude was not.

Curry's service to agrarian culture could be found in his art, his public interactions at Wisconsin, and occasionally his words. Although we have numerous statements on record from Curry in support of agriculture, opinions on environmental issues are less common. While he did not often use the rhetoric of the influential environmental reformers of his day, the evidence that does exist demonstrates his concern about the dangers of bad farming. During a lecture on American painting given in Madison, for example, Curry voiced allegiance toward the American farmer while addressing this unease, stating: "My own family have been farmers for generations, and as you can see ... were beautiful and noble, but from the amount of good top soil they and their farmer neighbors have sent down the Mississippi or up in the air, I doubt their wisdom."¹⁸

Curry also revealed conservationist rhetoric during an assessment of a composition of women cavorting in a pine forest in Edwin Blashfield's mural at the Madison capitol. He argued that, while plenty of maidens remained in Wisconsin, the population of pine trees had severely declined. He continued, "If this mural had been presented in truth the early settlers, Civil War veterans and beautiful ladies would have been shown whacking down the pine trees and the

¹⁷ Junker, "Curry's Wisconsin Years," 196.

¹⁸ John Steuart Curry, "American Painting," Address before the Art Association of Madison, 19 January 1937. Series 5: Notes and Writings. Lectures on American Painting, 1937 (Box 4, Folder 28). Curry papers.

Missionary Father shown praying for the future of the state.”¹⁹ This statement reflects not only the influence of new developments in conservation he absorbed at Wisconsin, but also a longer-standing interest in soil erosion. While visiting the Heart Ranch in south central Kansas in 1929 and again in 1930, for example, he had recorded in detail a gully on the ranchland in *Barber Co., Kansas #1*, 1929 (Fig. 89). Once the artist learned about innovations in soil conservation, Curry would observe and document methods of healing this kind of rift in the landscape.

Any discussion of conservation in the United States, specifically soil conservation, must begin outside Wisconsin with an acknowledgement of the achievements and contributions of Hugh Hammond Bennett. While isolated instances of support for soil conservation occur prior to the 1930s, Bennett’s evangelical fervor toward the cause brought it to national attention.²⁰ His work on soil surveys, first in the South and then throughout the country, led Bennett to determine that America lacked collective understanding about the threat of erosion as well as knowledge about how to combat it.²¹ Bennett’s crusade prompted President Roosevelt to establish the Soil Erosion Service which Bennett then headed in 1933 as a division of the Department of the Interior. Roosevelt was so swayed by this work that in 1937 he would write to all the state governors, warning them “the nation that destroys its soil destroys itself.”²²

Curry found himself working at one of the country’s most innovative educational communities for agricultural research and advocacy of rural culture, which also happened to be a center for research in the emerging field of environmental conservation. In 1933, President Frank

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ For information about the history of soil conservation prior to Bennett, see R. Burnell Held and Marion Clawson, *Soil Conservation in Perspective* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), 29-40. For the history of the conservation movement at Wisconsin in the 1920s, see Tim Lehman, *Public Values, Private Lands: Farmland Preservation Policy, 1933-1985* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 9-11.

²¹ Held and Clawson, *Soil Conservation*, 41.

²² Roosevelt quoted in Lehman, *Public Values*, 28.

and Dean Christensen approved a recommendation to hire wildlife ecologist, environmentalist, and future author of *The Sand County Almanac* (1949) Aldo Leopold as the first chair of the new Department of Game Management.²³ In this new job, Leopold served as an extension advisor at an experiment station established on the Coon Creek watershed near the city of La Crosse. This station, more commonly known as the Coon Valley Demonstration Project, was a partnership between the College of Agriculture and the U. S. Department of Agriculture in which advisors helped farmers utilize new agricultural practices to reduce erosion and increase productivity.²⁴ After the formation of the Soil Erosion Service, Wisconsin farmers and University leaders advocated that Coon Valley become the first experiment station of the new agency. Federal support provided money and labor in the form of the Civilian Conservation Corps to assist researchers and farmers in conserving the local landscape.

Although both Christensen and Leopold sometimes disagreed with the methods New Deal agencies employed to address agricultural issues and sometimes resented how federal policy reduced their authority at the state level, each agreed that Coon Valley represented the very best of federal, state, and local cooperation.²⁵ Christensen proclaimed that, “instead of blundering expensively into means of control, the federal government is there seeking to cope

²³ Curt Meine, *Aldo Leopold: His Life and Work* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 300.

²⁴ For a good summary of the Coon Creek project, see Douglas Helms, "Coon Valley, Wisconsin: A Conservation Success Story," *NRCS History Articles* (1992), <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/about/history/articles/CoonValley.html>. By the early 1930s farmland in Coon Creek was overworked and eroded. Planners anticipated that soil conservation solutions developed in Coon Valley would also assist much of the unglaciated region of the Upper Midwest.

²⁵ For a general discussion of this tension see J. C. Headley, "Soil Conservation and Cooperative Extension," *Agricultural History* 59, no. 2 (April 1985): 290-96. For discussion including statements from Christensen see Robert J. Morgan, *Governing Soil Conservation: Thirty Years of the New Decentralization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), 11-39.

with natural problems in a most natural manner.”²⁶ Leopold also grudgingly commended the project, saying, “I suspect that the Soil Erosion Service, perhaps unwittingly, has recreated a spiritual entity which many older conservationists have thought long since dead.”²⁷ Beyond acknowledging a more balanced division of authority at Coon Valley than was typical of New Deal policy, both men approved of the diverse and complete approach to conservation employed at the station. The farmers ceased grazing or plowing steep hillsides on their properties. Flat and gently sloping lands were cultivated to compensate for hilly acreage removed from use. Coon Valley employed crop rotation, wildlife management, forestry, and flood control in its practices. The agricultural changes in the countryside took the form of contour plowing, strip cropping, and repairs to gullies.

These changes kindled Curry’s continuing fascination with technology and its benefit to rural life, and this can be witnessed in his work. During an interview in his Wisconsin studio, Curry described an image on view:

I did this one day when I went out on the Coon Valley project with Dean Christensen. See, it shows every phase of what the government is doing out there. There are dams, constructed to stop that ditch zig-zagging through the field, and over there are samples of strip farming. I’m going to paint that project, but first these sketches must be photographed and enlarged.²⁸

Erosion and Contour Strip Cropping, circa 1937-40 (Fig. 90) appears to relate directly to this description. When formal characteristics of the painting are paired with erosion control measures articulated in manuals produced in the 1930s, Curry’s awareness of these practices becomes

²⁶ Christensen quoted in Jenkins, *Centennial History*, 100.

²⁷ Aldo Leopold, "Coon Valley: An Adventure in Cooperative Conservation (1935)," in *The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays*, ed. Susan Flader and J. Baird Callicott (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 223.

²⁸ Curry, quoted in “John Steuart Curry: He Puts Farm Life on Canvas” [radio interview with Blanche Overlein on the program “Homemakers’ Hour.” Broadcast on Wisconsin’s state stations WHA and WLBL], Series 5: Notes and Writings, circa 1911-1946 (Box 4; 0.3 linear feet). Curry papers.

apparent. The now-familiar gully in the foreground could be controlled by “plant[ing] the entire ravine to stabilizing vegetation,” which can be seen on the right portion of the gully.²⁹ The gully has been reinforced with sticks in some sections in a similar manner to Fig. 91, an image of Wisconsin farmland produced by the Soil Conservation Survey for didactic purposes. These measures, combined with the culvert at the middle of the gully, suggest an attempt to fill the eroded area and convert it to a stable drainage channel.³⁰

In the middle ground we see contour plowing, strip cropping, and terracing. Contouring refers to “any tillage practice ... applied across the slope” in contrast to the customary practice of plowing in straight lines parallel to field boundaries regardless of slope.³¹ Additional measures such as strip cropping (rotation of crops in strips) allowed crops that naturally hold the soil to buffer those more prone to erosion. A similar model of land use can be seen in Fig. 92, a Wisconsin photograph in which the steepest slopes are used for forest only while the more level ground below is strip cropped along the contour. Terracing diverts runoff and conserves soil on slopes by grading fields into even terraces with channels and ridges to collect excess rainwater. A profile view of a terraced hill can be seen in both Fig. 93 and in Lee Allen’s 1939 mural *Soil Erosion and Control* from the Onawa, Iowa, Post Office (Fig. 94).³² Contour strip cropping could even be employed in Texas, as witnessed by Jerry Bywaters’s mural *Soil Conservation in*

²⁹ Hugh Hammond Bennett, *Soil Conservation* (New York, London: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1939), 512.

³⁰ Although it is difficult to identify all elements of the painting clearly, it appears the right side of the gully has been partially dammed and is connected to a drop-inlet culvert, allowing some water to pass through to the other side, which appears to be more stabilized. G. V. Jacks and R. O. Whyte, *The Rape of the Earth: A World Survey of Soil Erosion* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1939), 141.

³¹ Bennett, *Soil Conservation*, 434.

³² Allen’s mural is particularly intriguing because he not only illustrates the labor necessary to enforce these conservation practices but also contrasts the terraced hillside with a conventionally plowed field on the left that is clearly eroding right into a ditch.

Collin County, 1941 (Fig. 95). Like these post office mural counterparts, with their examples of contour plowing, strip cropping, and perhaps even terracing, Curry's *Erosion and Contour Strip Cropping* demonstrates many of the conservation techniques employed at the Coon Valley demonstration site.

Why would Curry make such an effort to record these techniques? In addition to his commitment to painting the social and environmental benefits of agricultural technology discussed previously, I suspect that as an artist Curry appreciated these techniques from a design perspective. When asked a question related to the notion of divisions between professional art, amateur art, and craft, Curry tellingly replied, "... if a man builds a better house or barn, or cement tank that is good in design and functional in use, that is an applied art in the best sense of the term."³³ Curry argued that the merit of any construction lies in good design. This relates to Leopold's belief that conservation necessitated improving the land through "a positive exercise of skill and insight."³⁴ It, too, required good design to be successful.

The notion that contour plowing and other conservation techniques served as an expression of good design was held by other "Friends of the Land," a group established in 1941 consisting of the leading proponents of soil conservation in America. Writer Russell Lord, one of the leaders of this group, expressed satisfaction upon viewing the contoured landscape of the

³³ Series 5: Notes and Writings. Works Progress Administration Recreation Project Questionnaire, 1940 (Box 4, Folder 32). Curry papers.

³⁴ Aldo Leopold, "The Farmer as Conservationist (1939)," in *The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays*, ed. Susan Flader and J. Baird Callicott (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 258. This essay was first presented as a speech on the Madison campus in 1939. Although there is no certainty that Curry was in attendance for the speech, Leopold and Curry did interact at Wisconsin. In correspondence between Leopold and Albert Hochbaum, a colleague who studied wildlife management and was also an artist, Leopold tells Hochbaum that he shared his drawings with Curry to obtain Curry's opinion. Letter from Aldo Leopold to Albert Hochbaum, 1 March 1944. The Aldo Leopold Archives, University of Wisconsin Digital Collections. <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/AldoLeopold>

Muskogee, Oklahoma demonstration site in his 1938 book, *Behold Our Land*: “It is exciting and beautiful; and it looks right the way those crescent rows take endlessly varying form from the long slow slopes; the way those new-formed fields ... hug that soil, protect it, and support each other. Each embracing strip is a rotated garment, cut to the lay of the land.” Although beauty was not the object, the artistry of redesigning the land into new curvilinear rows rather than “a grid imposed on a round surface” was a new a source of pride for conservationists.³⁵

Louis Bromfield, another Friend of the Land who garnered national exposure toward conservation through his writings about Malabar Farm, the Ohio acreage he began to restore in 1939, also emphasized this topographic transformation as artistry. Bromfield argued, “The Farmer may leave his stamp upon the whole of the landscape seen from his window, and it can be as great and beautiful a creation as Michelangelo's David, for the farmer who takes over a desolate farm ... and turns it into a Paradise of beauty and abundance is one of the greatest of artists.”³⁶ The reclamation of America’s eroded farmland through cutting-edge agricultural technology and practices garnered the attention of the SCS, land grant colleges, and civic groups alike in the late 1930s into the early 1950s. The necessary transformation now needed only to gain acceptance in the mindset of the nation.

Curry’s subject matter, work as artist-in-residence, and artistic methodology all complemented the College of Agriculture at Madison’s mission to educate the public about a new relationship between people and the land. This fact was recognized by his colleagues. Leopold, for example, noted that: “One of the self-imposed yokes we are casting off is the false

³⁵ Lord, *Behold Our Land*, 226. For more about the Friends of the Land, see Randal S. Beeman and James A. Pritchard, *A Green and Permanent Land: Ecology and Agriculture in the Twentieth Century*, Development of Western Resources (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 66-69.

³⁶ Louis Bromfield, *Out of the Earth* (New York: Harper, 1950), 299.

idea that farm life is dull. What is the meaning of John Steuart Curry, Grant Wood, Thomas Benton? They are showing us drama in the red barn, the stark silo, the team heaving over the hill, the county store, black against the sunset.”³⁷ In addition to expressing the value of the arts in rural life, Leopold charged his audience to consider the conservationist ramifications of their own role as designers of the rural landscape by stating, “The landscape of any farm is the owner’s portrait of himself.”³⁸ No local image represents that concept more clearly than the Elmer Manske farm (Fig. 96). The Manskes were some of the earliest practitioners of soil conservation in Coon Valley and their productive farm quickly became the promotional image for the Soil Conservation Service in Wisconsin. Its ribbons of contour strip crops that undulate across the land challenge long-held associations of straight furrows with an orderly farm. The grid of Jefferson is gone, but the desire for order and control remains.

Curry was also commissioned to paint the “portrait” of a Wisconsin farm. A reference photograph (Fig. 97), preparatory drawing (Fig. 98), and final painting, *Donald Rockview Farm*, 1940 (Fig. 99) all relate to this project. The Donalds lived a few miles away from Madison in Dane County on an estate that included adjacent “Donald,” “Rockview,” and “Sweet” farms.³⁹ The family patriarch, John Sweet Donald, served as president of the Wisconsin branch of a conservation group, the Friends of Our Native Landscape, from its formation in 1921 until his

³⁷ Leopold, “Farmer as Conservationist,” 263.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Most information about this commission was found in the Chazen’s curatorial file for this painting and through conversation with curator Maria Saffiotti Dale. Junker mistakenly identifies the photograph as a reference photograph for the painting *Wisconsin Landscape* (collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art). Junker, “Curry’s Wisconsin Years,” 202. The distinctive rock outcropping visible in the left background of the photograph, sketch, and painting unites the group.

death in 1934.⁴⁰ Donald also bequeathed the rock outcropping landmark seen in the distance of Curry's painting to the state for use as a public park.⁴¹ Like many area farmers, the Donalds took pride in their property and the measures they took to keep it productive. They typified Leopold's belief that conservation represents "harmony between men and land," and Curry's representations of the Wisconsin landscape, including *Donald Rockview Farm*, share that message.⁴²

This harmony is evident when Junker describes the sweeping vista of Curry's *Wisconsin Landscape* (Fig. 100) as "beautiful in a visual and an ethical sense."⁴³ I would argue that this conservation ethic informs the majority of Curry's landscapes completed while working at Wisconsin, including the mural commission he received for the Kansas Statehouse in 1937. Although Curry depicts contour plowing in *Rural Artist* and *Erosion and Contour Strip Cropping*, this imagery does not appear in an integrated landscape identifiable as a farm until his 1946 painting *Valley of the Wisconsin* (Fig. 101). Painted near the end of his life, the image incorporates shocks of corn readied for the winter with contour strip cropping that hugs the hillside in the middle distance on the right side of the image. Curry's earlier images might be

⁴⁰ William H. Tishler and Erik Ghenoju, "Conservation Pioneers: Jens Jensen and the Friends of Our Native Landscape," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 86, no. 4 (summer 2003): 2-15. Donald was also a former Wisconsin Secretary of State and Agricultural Economics Professor at Madison.

⁴¹ "Famed Rock Site to Be Park," *The Capital Times*, 28 January 1934. The Donald family donated 105 acres of farmland to become a recreational area in the 1990s and now Donald Park consists of 700 acres. Donald's daughter Delma took the farm Short Course at Wisconsin from 1938-40 where she most likely encountered Curry and arranged the commission. Her children donated the painting to the museum in memory of their parents.

⁴² Leopold, "Farmer as Conservationist," 255.

⁴³ Junker, "Curry's Wisconsin Years," 202. Junker devotes a large portion of this essay to a discussion of *Wisconsin Landscape*. The image was commissioned by the Farm Foundation of Chicago in honor of its founder and Dane County native, Alexander Legge. Although this foundation championed land stewardship, specific soil conservation practices found in other Curry images are not "demonstrated" in this particular composition.

seen as their own sort of demonstration projects, while this composition is a fully realized vision of man designing his farmland in harmony with nature.

As Curry's successful explorations of rural land use bore the fruit of popular acceptance in Wisconsin, at least one noted Kansan voiced regret that Curry's native state lost out on the "seed of his genius." William Allen White lamented, "Kansas would have been able to hold her head a little higher if she could have taken John Curry under her wing."⁴⁴ In 1937, after a long campaign by prominent citizens such as White to garner support for Curry in his home state, the Kansas Murals Commission agreed that Curry should receive a commission to create murals for the Topeka Statehouse, provided he submitted sketches that met with the committee's approval.⁴⁵ The completed Statehouse murals consist of two compositions, *The Tragic Prelude* and *Kansas Pastoral*. Additional murals planned for the Statehouse Rotunda were submitted to the Commission, but these were never executed.

Curry submitted a series of oil sketches depicting his plans for the entire mural program to the Commission in the fall of 1937. These designs were approved on 12 November 1937 and quickly publicized in local and national newspapers. The mural concept consisted of three themes. *The Tragic Prelude* included events in Kansas's often violent history and featured a portrait of fiery abolitionist John Brown. *Kansas Pastoral* represented the domestic harmony accessible to a farm family utilizing the most contemporary agricultural technology and practices. Curry also planned to create a third series of images to fit in the Capitol's Rotunda that

⁴⁴ William Allen White, Editorial, *Emporia Gazette*, 30 September 1936; quoted in M. Sue Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism: John Steuart Curry and the Kansas Mural Controversy*, *New Directions in American Art* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1986), 37-39.

⁴⁵ For a wonderful account of this project, see Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism*. Kendall's discussion of the Rotunda panels inspired me to explore the notion of Curry as an environmentally conscious artist in greater depth.

would explore historical and contemporary significant events for Kansas and the West.⁴⁶ This third portion of the mural scheme is generally described as “the Rotunda panels,” although Curry gave titles for most of the individual panels he sketched for the space. The sketches for all three components of the murals prompted considerable debate, from concern over the depiction of John Brown to derision over the perceived inaccuracies of the Hereford bull’s stance in *Kansas Pastoral*.

Although most discussion about the Topeka murals emphasizes John Brown, the other elements of the mural project better represent the influence of Curry’s work as artist-in-residence and his intention to depict “those who live and depend on the soil for life and sustenance.”⁴⁷ In *Kansas Pastoral*, Curry’s vision of a family farm seems typical and even nostalgic by contemporary standards, but in 1937 the agrarian scene appeared idyllic compared to recent hard times. The crops have been harvested, and the livestock graze contentedly at an orderly, well-kept farm that has not been mortgaged. A soaring concrete grain silo in the distance indicates the farm’s high yields, and the farmer stands at ease, gazing at his acreage rather than working the fields. Curry believed that modern agricultural techniques and practices would reduce the labor necessary to run a farm, leaving more leisure time for farm families.

In the Rotunda sketches (Fig. 102 & Fig. 103), Curry also selected imagery pertinent to the history of an agrarian people. These sketches were presented as pairs with a common horizon

⁴⁶ Curry’s initial plan to complete the murals in fresco was forgone in favor of painting on canvas mounted to wood – a technique better suited to the humidity of Kansas, and more convenient for Curry, who could complete much of the work from his home in Wisconsin. He then refined the submitted oil sketches through additional drawings, eventually creating exact scale drawings. These drawings were photographed, projected on the installed canvas via lantern slides, and traced in charcoal pencil before being painted in tempera and oil. Most of the on-site work for *Kansas Pastoral* and the *Tragic Prelude* took place from 18 May 1940 through September of that year. Curry intended to install and complete the Rotunda panels in the summer of 1941.

⁴⁷ Maynard Walker, “John Steuart Curry (1897-1946),” *The Kansas Magazine* (1947): 73.

line. Paired topics included cattle drives and a funeral scene memorializing lives lost on the Santa Fe Trail, as well as Native Americans watching trains enter the landscape paired with men building the barbed wire fences that ended the open range. Not all of the pairs are thematically cohesive, though several represent critical transitions in frontier life. While Kendall characterizes these Rotunda panels as “a less than idyllic view of the Kansas past,”⁴⁸ in truth many of these prospective topics seem positive or at least innocuous at first glance. Imagery of agriculture can even be exultant, as seen in *Corn and Wheat*, 1937 (Fig. 104). Another pairing provides an alternative perspective of farmland seen in ruin and repair, as indicated by scenes of soil erosion and the necessity for contour plowing (Fig. 105).

Curry describes the soil erosion pairing as follows:

Sheet erosion and the shoestring gully are two of the greatest calamities of our nation, and in the midwestern plains can be added wind erosion. In the foreground of this panel is the clutching hand of erosion directed toward the abandoned farm home. Beyond is the threatening cloud of dust. This panel is designated as a significant warning of violence and voices the concern of government and educational forces interested in preserving the nation’s resources. Panel two shows the utility and necessity of soil erosion control.⁴⁹

Curry’s description of the dust storm image is fairly complete. The “clutching hand of erosion” is actually quite similar to the form of a shoestring gully as seen in this photograph of Wisconsin farmland from 1937 (Fig. 106).⁵⁰ The gully extends its ominous tendrils back towards a simple farmstead as a dust cloud surges menacingly forward on the verge of engulfing the home. In this sketch and a larger painting Curry gave to Hutchinson journalist and Mural Commission member John P. “Jack” Harris, *Erosion and Dust* (Fig. 107), the artist combines the pictorial threats of

⁴⁸ Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism*, 107.

⁴⁹ Series 3: Correspondence and Project Files. Kansas State House Murals. Narrative Description and Contract (Box 2, Folder 47). Curry papers.

⁵⁰ Soil erosion caused by water can take the form of sheet erosion, where thin layers of the soil are washed away fairly evenly, or gully erosion, where runoff cuts incisions into the soil.

black clouds typical of dust storm photographs with the distressing sight of eroded land suggestive of Alexandre Hogue.⁵¹

The partner to the erosion scene receives less explanation in Curry's narrative. Once again, although the preliminary character of the painting makes pictorial content difficult to discern, this landscape reveals evidence of contemporary soil conservation practices. Before investigating this content, it is useful to consider the image Curry might have used instead. Draft versions of the mural descriptions pair *Soil Erosion and Dust* with an image captioned "Like ancient Egypt, Kansas is at times beset by plagues" with a heading called "The Plagues."⁵² As seen in the lower left corner of Figure 103, this image consists of stripped corn and an incoming cloud of grasshoppers. Several descriptions for the Rotunda panels exist in Curry's papers and they all include "The Plagues," except one which instead pairs the image of erosion with "necessity of soil erosion control."⁵³ The variant descriptions reveal that Curry either originally intended to pair "Soil Erosion and Dust" with "Plagues" and then decided to replace the plague image with one of soil conservation, or originally intended to paint a conservation scene and then replaced it with one of plagues.⁵⁴ Although either option is possible, the first scenario of

⁵¹ I thank Curator Ron Michael at the Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery in Lindsborg, Kansas for bringing the larger painting to my attention.

⁵² Series 5: Notes and Writings. Description of Murals for Kansas State House, circa 1937-1942 (Box 4, Folder 23). Curry papers.

⁵³ The first item in the "Narrative Description and Contract" section of the Curry papers concerning the Topeka murals is a supplemental agreement between the artist and the Commission, executed 28 March 1938, regarding changes to the contract involving payment and insurance. The next three items in this folder are three undated descriptions of the mural program. The first description pairs "erosion" with "conservation." The next two pair "erosion" with "plagues." Other descriptions filed elsewhere pair "erosion" with "plagues," but are also undated. All descriptions note that the Rotunda designs are not complete. Series 3: Correspondence and Project Files. Kansas State House Murals. Narrative Description and Contract (Box 2, Folder 47). Curry papers.

⁵⁴ Curry published the soil erosion image paired with the plague image in the March 1938 issue of *Kansas Teacher*. Depending on one's interpretation, either he had not yet decided to replace

conservation imagery replacing plague scenes seems more likely. Curry's pairing of "crisis" with "cure" would appear more optimistic and perhaps more appealing to viewers than two images of devastation.

In the soil conservation image (the left portion of Fig. 105), moving from front to back, we see a tree framing the left side of the image. Other scrubby paint strokes appear in the foreground – indicating perhaps shocks of wheat or brush. In the background, a farm sits atop a hill encircled by concentric strips of ground, alternating between green and brown. These strips continue as horizontal registers in the background up to the horizon where the land meets a sky filled with white clouds. Extrapolating from Curry's pictorial exploration of soil conservation techniques elsewhere, it appears likely that this sketch depicts a farm that has deterred wind erosion by erecting a shelterbelt, and has also thwarted soil erosion by terracing the hillside and planting crops in strips on the contour. The shelterbelt would combat the dust storm and the terracing would stop the gully. The pairing of recent environmental strife with emerging solutions to those problems resonates perfectly with Curry's confidence that research and technology could be used to improve rural life.

Curry was unable to present pictorially his belief in conservation methods in Topeka due to a variety of unfortunate circumstances. By 1940, a maelstrom of controversy already surrounded content of the installed *Tragic Prelude* and *Kansas Pastoral* murals. Some Kansans were also concerned about the negative tone presented in several of the Rotunda panel sketches that Curry intended to execute on site in the summer of 1941. That spring, the Senate decided not to remove Italian marble that partially covered the Rotunda walls, curtailing Curry's plans to

"plagues" with "conservation," or he had already decided to replace "conservation" with "plagues." John Steuart Curry, "Description of Murals for Kansas State Capitol," *Kansas Teacher* 46, no. 4 (March 1938): 37-39.

paint there. Without the Rotunda panels, Curry considered the mural project unfinished and left the work unsigned.⁵⁵

This explanation from the Legislature seemed inadequate to Curry, who could not help but wonder what really motivated the Executive Council's objections to removing the marble.⁵⁶ Many different factors may have contributed to the decision. Public backlash against Curry's depiction of John Brown and criticism of technical inaccuracies in the murals has been thoroughly discussed in Sue Kendall's book. However, such distaste for the murals already on the walls does not fully explain the Legislature's action, because such a measure would hardly make John Brown disappear. Unless Kansans wished simply to punish Curry for the murals he had completed (a possibility), the content of the Rotunda panels must have also motivated the decision to halt the project.

Fellow Regionalist Thomas Hart Benton argued that the opposition to the murals related more to their content than the marble, proclaiming that "men [did not like to be reminded] of the too common realities of their culture."⁵⁷ Objections certainly were made to some of the Rotunda panels, especially those depicting the "realities" of dust and conservation. Well after the project was curtailed, for example, the *Topeka Capital Journal* reported, "Council members, thinking of possible uprisings of the voters against projected displays of lands blighted by drouths and later

⁵⁵ It should be noted that the Legislature's decision indicated an unwillingness to tear down the marble, not a cease-and-desist order for the project. The marble remains in place to this day and in 1976 Lumen Winter created murals in the wall spaces above the marble. There are no indications Curry considered the possibility of adapting to the constraints of the space, although it is somewhat unlikely that funds would have been appropriated to pay for the rest of the work even if Curry had compromised on the matter.

⁵⁶ John Steuart Curry, Letter to Betty Dickerson, 5 June 1939. Series 3: Correspondence and Project Files. Kansas State House Murals. circa 1937-1943 (Box 2, Folder 41). Curry papers.

⁵⁷ Thomas Hart Benton, "John Curry (1946)," in *John Steuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West*, 75.

blooming in glory, hastily voted to retain the marble exhibits. [They] shivered at the sight of eroded soil, of the fight to possess a prairie that was to feed the world.”⁵⁸

Curry initially thought that an exploration of contemporary agricultural issues would serve as compelling subject matter, but the collective raw nerves in Kansas were apparently more sensitive than those in the upper Midwest. In 1937, during a visit to Topeka, he noted, “Take a look at Kansas last year and again this year. Last year the drought ravages were everywhere while this year the landscape is almost sensuous in its luxuriance. I think these contrasts will be effective in showing the struggles and success of the Kansas people.”⁵⁹ Kansans might have tolerated scenes of success, but the Dust Bowl was more than most could bear to view. The *Kansas City Star* also reported, “Kansas has had a tragedy in the dust bowl, a losing fight with nature ... we do not want them [evidence of the dust storms] painted on the walls of the statehouse.”⁶⁰ The fact that Curry had already established a career by depicting his native state in some of its melodramatic moments might also have contributed to the general hostility he encountered.

Another factor motivating opposition to the panels could have been popular resistance to the very idea of government-sponsored soil conservation promoted on the walls of the state capitol. One Kansan supposedly responded to such government intrusion by declaring, “If God can’t make it rain in Kansas, how can the New Dealers hope to succeed?”⁶¹ Kansas experiment

⁵⁸ A. L. Schultz, “Nebraska Seeks Murals Scuttled in Art War Here,” *The Topeka Capital Journal*, 30 August 1946, Series 7: Print Materials. Clippings. 1946 (Box 4, Folder 68). Curry papers.

⁵⁹ *Kansas City Star*, 4 August 1937, quoted in Calder M. Pickett, “John Steuart Curry and the Topeka Murals Controversy,” *Register of the Museum of Art, The University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas* 2, no. 3 (December 1959): 5.

⁶⁰ *Kansas City Star*, 3 August 1937, quoted in *Ibid.*

⁶¹ R. Douglas Hurt, *The Dust Bowl: An Agricultural and Social History* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981), 76.

stations attracted many farmers to witness demonstrations of conservation techniques, but their efforts lacked the reinforcement of long-standing cooperation between farmer and researcher associated with Coon Valley in Wisconsin. Also, if the idea of government intrusion in farming was not enough of an obstacle for Kansans, local people might have noticed that the conservation techniques promoted by Curry were not ideally suited to the flat, wind-eroded ground that covered the western part of the state so stricken by the Dust Bowl. The deep-plowing technique known as listing, for example, was utilized twice as much as contour plowing in Kansas in 1936.⁶² This practice produced a visual effect in the fields that differed markedly from Curry's gently sloping Wisconsin hills, as seen in Arthur Rothstein's 1936 photograph of Liberal, Kansas for the Farm Security Administration (Fig. 108). At the same time, the contour plowing Curry advocated was implemented in many areas, including eastern Kansas, which Rothstein also documented in his 1936 photo *Contour plowing. Douglas County, Kansas* (Fig. 109).

Opposition to the existing murals, unwillingness to relive Dust Bowl imagery, and resistance to conservation propaganda all might have contributed to the Legislature's decision. The final blow could have been from Curry himself. Some Kansans may have perceived him as an outsider because, while he grew up in the state, he spent most of his life on the East Coast or in Wisconsin. At any rate, his representations of Kansas subjects rarely satisfied the state's inhabitants. Nitpicking criticisms from so-called "cantankerous, meddlesome, and nihilistic" locals about the skirt length, bull stance, or pig tails depicted in the *Kansas Pastoral* mural implied that, if Curry could not accurately interpret these particulars, he could hardly be expected to evoke more universal Kansan truths.⁶³ That those barbs found their target is strongly indicated

⁶² Ibid., 73.

⁶³ Walker, "John Steuart Curry."

by Curry's eventual declaration that the mural incident forced him to "escape beyond the borders of the state."⁶⁴

Why were Lee Allen's and Jerry Bywaters's public murals of soil conservation (Figures 94 & 95) successful while Curry's failed? Their commissions for the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture were intended for post offices in rural communities in contrast to Curry's need to represent the identity of an entire state. Additionally, both artists lived in their respective states (Allen in Iowa, Bywaters in Texas) at the time of the commission, and both artists produced products that adhered to specific guidelines suggested by their respective postmasters. Allen was instructed to promote the evils of all mechanized farming in his image and demonstrate soil conservation achieved through horse-drawn plows.⁶⁵ Bywaters was not allowed to paint any tractors producing his contour-plowed landscape.⁶⁶ Even with these restrictions, Allen's and Bywaters's depictions of contemporary soil conservation practices remain anomalous compared to the bulk of post office murals produced for the Section that stressed stable, timeless imagery rather than contemporary issues.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Letter from Curry to W. G. Clugston, 20 August 1942. Series 3: Correspondence and Project Files. Kansas State House Murals. circa 1937-1943. (Box 2, Folder 46). Curry papers.

⁶⁵ Lea Rosson DeLong and Gregg R. Narber, *A Catalog of New Deal Mural Projects in Iowa* (Des Moines: L.R. DeLong, 1982), 57.

⁶⁶ Francine Carraro, *Jerry Bywaters: A Life in Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 141. Philip Parisi, *The Texas Post Office Murals: Art for the People* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 55.

⁶⁷ For additional discussion of the Section, see Karal Ann Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post-Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982). Although several states have books devoted to their WPA and/or Section murals, a comprehensive publication with reproductions does not exist. A fittingly populist solution can be found in a website on the image sharing service Flickr, devoted to these murals: <http://www.flickr.com/groups/pomurals/>. With over 1,500 images, the group is becoming an increasingly thorough resource for the perusal of these murals. Although Allen's and Bywaters's soil conservation imagery is uncommon for the majority of the murals produced across the country, a small handful of other murals from southern states also address the conservation efforts of the Tennessee Valley Authority.

Ultimately, even though Curry's depictions of contour plowing and other examples of conservation techniques did not appear in his Statehouse murals, his contribution to the field of conservation is still clear. Curry's advocacy supported his belief that art and good design could function as part of a larger effort to improve rural life and was demonstrated repeatedly in his Wisconsin work. In short, he was an advocate for environmental stewardship well before the current popularity of environmental art. His environmental awareness is concurrent with some of the most influential ecological thinking of the twentieth century.

Environmental art in the 1930s often took a religious tone. This is clear in the apocalyptic style of *The Plow that Broke the Plains* and the allegory inherent in Hogue's *Crucified Land*. These ecological sermons perhaps climaxed in Soil Conservation Service Assistant Chief Walter Lowdermilk's 1939 declaration of an Eleventh Commandment, first delivered via radio address. Lowdermilk proclaimed, "Thou shalt inherit the Holy Earth as a faithful steward If any shall fail on this stewardship of the land thy fruitful fields shall become sterile, stony ground and wasting gullies, and thy descendants shall decrease and live in poverty or perish from the face of the earth."⁶⁸

Lowdermilk's proclamation has a connection to Curry. In 1946, a former Rural Artist Program participant and SCS employee suggested that the artist might produce an image for the SCS of delivering his message of the Eleventh Commandment.⁶⁹ Curry replied that he had "just the thing," and seems to have had his new illustration for a new edition of Stephen Vincent

⁶⁸ Walter C. Lowdermilk, "The Eleventh Commandment," *American Forests* 46 (January 1940): 12.

⁶⁹ Letter from Anita Zentner to Curry, undated [1946]. Series 3: Correspondence and Project Files. Miscellaneous Y-Z, 1945-1946. (Box 3, Folder 46). Curry papers. I suspect the SCS sought to illustrate a pamphlet by Lowdermilk titled "Conquest of the Land Through 7,000 Years" published in 1948 (with photographs instead of illustrations) and reissued by the Department of Agriculture in 1953, 1975, and 1994 with minor revisions in subsequent printings.

Benét's epic poem "John Brown's Body" in mind.⁷⁰ *John Brown as a Saint*, 1945-46 (Fig. 110), was not used in Benét's publication, but does resemble historical representations of Moses far more than those of the abolitionist.⁷¹ If the image is reconsidered as an image of Moses, and is paired with Lowdermilk's new commandment it evokes the spiritual equivalent to Uncle Sam prompting acts of patriotism. By the 1940s, such patriotic motivation was steadily drawing more sway as a propagandistic tool, notably marked by America's entrance into World War II in 1941. These circumstances drastically altered cultural attitudes toward agriculture and the tone adopted by conservationists.

As war raged, farmers were once again called upon to support the effort through crop production. Good farming was appreciated as a patriotic act. Hugh Bennett expressed this notion in 1943 when he rallied, "Let's fight this war through for civilization and for our lives and for our kind of government. Taking care of the land – husbanding it and cherishing it and fighting for it – will keep it free and permanent and great."⁷² Curry, unsurprisingly, supported this sentiment. Rather than depict American farmers under threat of enslavement by Nazi forces as suggested by Reeves Lewenthal, he decided to show farmers as a symbol of strength. His farmer marches alongside soldiers and plows the fields at home with his tractor just like tanks driving across the battlefields of Europe. In a letter to Lewenthal defending his concept for *The Farm is a Battleground, Too*, 1942 (Fig. 111), Curry noted that farmers already have a strong work ethic

⁷⁰ Letter from Curry to Anita Zentner, 10 June 1946. Series 3: Correspondence and Project Files. Miscellaneous Y-Z, 1945-1946. (Box 3, Folder 46). Curry papers.

⁷¹ Kendall proposes this image as Curry's suggestion for an illustration of Moses and the Eleventh Commandment. Most of Curry's depictions of John Brown do resemble Moses, but John Brown as a Saint is the only example to do so in biblical guise. Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism*, 124. Curry notes that he just finished the Benét illustration project in a letter to Stanley Young, dated 29 January 1946. Series 3: Correspondence and Project Files. Miscellaneous Y-Z, 1945-1946. (Box 3, Folder 46). Curry papers.

⁷² Hugh H. Bennett, "Conservation Farming is High Production Farming" (speech presented in Athens, GA, 1 March 1943), quoted in Beeman and Pritchard, *Green and Permanent Land*, 70.

and that “they do not need to be threatened by some fear complex in order to do their best. They are responding to incentives that are on a much higher plane and more effective than fear.”⁷³

The war effort and the development of new practices that better utilized agricultural equipment allowed the machine to become a symbol of progress again. Soil conservation techniques allowed practitioners to exercise their artistry over the “earthworks” they had made.⁷⁴ Even Henry Wallace embraced tractors and plows intended to fight erosion by the 1940s, stating, “We know better now; and we have new equipment. We have machine equipment. It has helped tear soil down, but may also be turned, we see now to the task of defense, to build soil up again.”⁷⁵ Robert Flaherty’s government-sponsored documentary *The Land*, which premiered in 1942, shared this optimism. The conclusion of the film featured aerial photography of terraced and contoured farmland with narration written by Russell Lord, praising “the face of the land made over, made strong again, made strong forever. We are saving the soil. With our fabulous machines, we can make every last acre of this country strong again.”⁷⁶ The old plow was a relic of past mistakes but faith in new forms of agricultural technology was restored.

Our notion of agricultural stewardship arose out of the historical moment of the Dust Bowl and through successful recovery programs like those developed by innovative thinkers at the University of Wisconsin and in the Soil Conservation Service. Although Curry did not fashion himself as an artist-environmentalist as many artists do today, he participated in an aesthetic transition in which depictions of the land shift from the rigid order of the section line

⁷³ Letter to Reeves Lewenthal, 7 October 1942. Series 3: Correspondence and Project Files. Associated American Artists. 1937-1946. (Box 1, Folder 41), Curry papers.

⁷⁴ Lord refers to man-made manipulations of the earth designed to thwart erosion by this term. Lord, *Behold Our Land*, 147, 49, 244.

⁷⁵ Hugh Hammond Bennett, "Soil Defense," *The Land* 1, no. 1 (winter 1941): 50.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Finis Dunaway, *Natural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 105.

toward the thoughtfully curving line of the contour plow's furrow, a new symbol of stewardship and agricultural prosperity in a post-Dust Bowl world. Curry's embrace of scientific ingenuity as a means to redeem marginal land offers a potential answer to the unresolved jeremiad of *The Plow That Broke the Plains*: improved technological mastery over the earth could redeem the transgressions of the past.

Epilogue: Marks on the Land

The contoured terraces that began to be utilized in the 1930s as soil conservation measures continue to fill prairie horizons today. When I drive on Kansas county roads, I notice pastureland that initially appears untouched by human hands, only eventually to spot the indication of these subtle ridges. Many farmers have maintained their use of terraces, including those visible in Lawrence artist Robert Green's watercolor *Earth Song* from 1988 (Fig. 112). Green's image of terraced farmland not only reveals evidence of a contour plow along a hillside, but also helps the viewer to see a pattern in the field that has been derived from the landscape's topography rather than an arbitrary grid. *Earth Song* recently caught the attention of Rex Buchanan, Interim Director of the Kansas Geological Survey. Buchanan noted the way this image resonates with his memories of growing up on a farm and tending to terraces on his family's property.¹ Beyond serving as a physical reminder of a conservation movement, contour plowing also is part of a rooted heritage of stewardship for many contemporary artists and writers who explore agricultural and environmental themes.

Farming has changed dramatically since the Dust Bowl. The number of Americans who farm has decreased as the amount of land devoted to agricultural production has increased. Contemporary industrial agriculture emphasizes monocultures and "factory-farmed" livestock. Farmers and corporations often use chemical fertilizers derived from fossil fuels to restore nutrients to the soil instead of rotating their crops. Repeated planting of the same crop also necessitates increased use of pesticides and herbicides. Although recent advances in no- or low-till farming avoid disturbing the soil to produce new crops amidst the plant residue of the prior

¹ Rex Buchanan, "The American West." Radio broadcast. Kansas Public Radio, Lawrence, KS: KANU, 20 July 2010.

seasons, which reduces soil compaction and erosion, it too requires specialized equipment and increased use of herbicides.

A critical component to the success of industrial agriculture on the High Plains has been irrigation derived from the Ogallala Aquifer, a groundwater reservoir that underlies the region. Large-scale exploitation of this water source has occurred since the development of rural electrification and affordable pumping systems in the 1930s, as evidenced by Russell Lee's photograph from 1939 showing drilling near Garden City, Kansas (Fig. 113). Water from the Ogallala currently lends stability and security to agriculture in this arid region, and it has transformed the landscape in dramatic ways. Chicago painter Roger Brown's *Irrigation of Eastern Colorado* from 1981 (Fig. 114) captures the looming circles that characterize the appearance of center-pivot irrigation: disks filling a formerly rectilinear grid. The artifice of these circular green plots circumscribed upon diamonds with dead patches at the corners is clear. In nearly all locales, we have depleted Ogallala at faster rates than the reservoir can naturally replenish itself.² The Dust Bowl region remains vulnerable and arid, but human intervention helps mask any threats to the fecundity of the garden.

Until the Dust Bowl, the moldboard plow served as a symbol of American agriculture's beneficial function as a settling and civilizing force. During the 1930s, however, the cataclysmic results of a legacy of extractive, commodity-based agriculture prompted a reconsideration of the nation's relationship with its soil, and the plow came to reflect that reassessment. Contemporary agriculture lacks such a succinct or positive symbol because the industry has become far more complex. The moldboard plow also lost its symbolic clarity as it faded from use on the farm. Yet, the marks of the plow have stayed with us. As agriculture develops into an increasingly intensive

² For a comprehensive history of the Ogallala and speculation regarding its future, see John Opie, *Ogallala: Water for a Dry Land*, 2nd ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).

system practiced by a decreasing percentage of the population, it is less clearly understood by the public. Consumers do not know where their food comes from or how it is produced. What is perhaps the most critical human activity has been rendered foreign to the majority of the population. Yet as agriculture becomes increasingly industrialized and corporate, counter trends toward more sustainable practices have emerged. Writers, scientists, artists, and other voices strive to raise awareness about our use of the land and the ramifications of that use. The artistic, literary and cinematic practices of the 1930s then illuminate the new emphases of the present.

Many artists investigate agricultural land use through the physical evidence of that relationship, specifically, by the marks we have made on the land. The popularization of air travel and aerial photography reveals these patterns to us in ways that were once more difficult to recognize. Jefferson's grid functions as the first of those marks, and artists have helped expose the impact of this system of squares on the grasslands. A photographic series by Joe Deal, titled *West and West: Reimagining the Great Plains*, consciously acknowledges the role of the grid in the transformation of the prairie landscape. Deal describes the physical origin of the 1855 surveyor's lines in Kansas Territory as emerging from the fortieth parallel (the Kansas-Nebraska border) westward to the Sixth Principal Meridian (an arbitrary surveyor's line which passes through the state west of Abilene and south through Wichita). In *Approaching Storm, 40th Parallel, Looking West*, 2006 (Fig. 115), and the other images in this series, Deal equates the square frame created by his camera to the surveyor's grid to reenact the demarcation that has since ruled so much of the landscape.³

Deal's ability to express the history of the plains through its topography reflects a broader trend to turn a more critical eye toward the complex history of land use. Deal, for example,

³ Joe Deal, *West and West: Reimagining the Great Plains* (Chicago: Center for American Places at Columbia College, 2009).

participated in the watershed 1975 exhibition at the George Eastman House titled *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, which acknowledged an emerging style of landscape photography that employed a detached and sometimes cynical perspective on human interaction with place.⁴ As an outgrowth of New Topographics, *West and West* sets (or resets) the stage in which the settlement of the plains was enacted. The view revealed by Deal's lens appears undisturbed by human interference even as the frame functions as a reminder of how this place and the whole of Kansas Territory was ordered, divided, and purchased.

Other photographers who participated in or were linked to New *Topographics* have explored patterns within the frame of the surveyor's grid. Art Sinsabaugh earned recognition for his use of a large-format camera capable of capturing an expansive window on the world.⁵ When he used that camera to record the flat landscape of central Illinois, the result was his *Midwest Landscapes* series from the early 1960s. *Midwest Landscape #34*, 1961 (Fig. 116) uses an emphatic horizon line as an organizational framework, allowing the furrows of intensive farming to form orthogonal lines that prove the depth of field for Sinsabaugh's composition and his subject. His minimalist representation of human interaction with place suggests an American cultural landscape emphasizing the resources we exploit, rather than the commodities we produce.

⁴ The exhibition did not tour extensively or attract large audiences, but its legacy has attracted considerable and ongoing scholarly attention. William Jenkins, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (Rochester, NY: International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, 1975). In 2009-10, *New Topographics* was reprised as a touring exhibition with a catalogue that includes new essays by Britt Salvesen and Alison Nordström, reproduces the original exhibition catalogue, and provides the 1975 exhibition checklist. *New Topographics* (Tucson, AZ: Center for Creative Photography, 2009).

⁵ For information on Sinsabaugh, see Keith F. Davis, *American Horizons: The Photographs of Art Sinsabaugh* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2004).

Sinsabaugh's furrows suggest the monotony of the agricultural landscape, a theme that also applies to the work of Frank Gohlke. In *Large Grain Elevators, Enid, Oklahoma*, 1973 (Fig. 117), Gohlke's cylindrical elevators form another rendition of a corrugated landscape, although this time the rows act as transversals. Each of these pictorial compositions represents the challenges Sinsabaugh and Gohlke faced when confronting the scale of modern, industrialized agriculture situated on the unobtrusive topography of the plains. Gohlke describes travels in the wheat country of Kansas where the grain elevator in each small town confronted the horizontality of that landscape as revelatory for his process. His perspective shifted "from a pictorial space bounded by the frame to an unbounded space to which the frame served as an entrance."⁶ This notion encapsulates the way recent landscape photography concerning the plains addresses the impact of the plow: it acknowledges the role of humans in altering the landscape and the agency of the photographer as a communicator of that transformation. The resulting images serve as evidence of the region's cultural geography and the heritage, both positive and negative, of the past.

Terry Evans's *Inhabited Prairie* functions as a particularly relevant pictorial exploration of plains' land use that emerged out of the context of the *New Topographics* exhibition. Evans began her work on the prairie by investigating the unplowed prairie, including extreme close-ups of native grasses that verge on the abstract in their linear confusion, and gentle vistas of the Konza Prairie photographed from the air. Evans has recalled how a point of departure in her work originated after considering the altered landscapes that surrounded the virgin prairie, stating, "I realized that the inhabited prairie was part of the body of the prairie and that I could

⁶ Frank Gohlke, *Measure of Emptiness: Grain Elevators in the American Landscape* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 19.

not understand prairie if I didn't look at the whole of it."⁷ Her subsequent photographs focus on the interaction between humans and grassland, raising important ecological concerns for viewers. *Terraced Plowing with Grass Waterway*, 1991 (Fig. 118), demonstrates the profound way that soil conservation practices transform traditional, rectilinear evidence of the grid. The terraced ridges undulate across the subtle hills in patterns that conform to the topography of the site. Although the techniques vary in terms of effect on topsoil and runoff, Evans's terraces represent alteration to the landscape as much as Sinsabaugh's straight rows. Evans argues that her images are not inherently critical of land use, but instead "show marks that contain contradictions and mysteries that raise questions about how we live on the prairie."⁸

Evans's particular focus on the agricultural landscape of the prairies near her then-home in Salina, Kansas, drew influence from her proximity to and association with Wes Jackson's Land Institute. Jackson founded The Institute in 1976 to develop a sustainable agricultural system better suited to the plains consisting of perennial polycultures rather than the current soil-eroding system based on annual monocultures such as corn and wheat. His geneticists work to develop perennial versions of existing annual crops and to domesticate perennials. Through its journal, *The Land Report*, its Prairie Writers Circle, and annual gatherings such as the Prairie Festival, The Land Institute seeks to support and enrich rural life, functioning in many ways as an heir to the sentiments of the Friends of the Land from the 1940s and '50s.⁹ The Institute's actions have garnered attention for demonstrating viable sustainable solutions to contemporary

⁷Terry Evans and Donald Worster, *The Inhabited Prairie* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), ix.

⁸ *Ibid.*, x.

⁹ For more on Jackson and The Land Institute, see Wes Jackson, *New Roots for Agriculture* (San Francisco: Friends of the Earth, 1980); Jackson, *Becoming Native to This Place* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994); Jackson, *Consulting the Genius of the Place: An Ecological Approach to a New Agriculture* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010).

agricultural problems that draw upon nature as a model.¹⁰ Evans's representation of the prairie around Salina supports this mission because it reveals the successes and failures of that trajectory through the marks of land use itself.

While photographers have expressed cultural geography through topography, the Earth Art movement utilizes the land itself as a medium. Although some of the most memorable earthworks, such as Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, or Michael Heizer's *Double Negative*, 1969-70, do not specifically engage agricultural processes, the movement can be understood as a component of broader cultural interest in the environment and the impact of human action upon the planet that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Many earthworks, however, do specifically relate to agriculture, plowing, and crop production. Dennis Oppenheim's *Cancelled Crop*, 1969 (Fig. 119) confronts the human impulse to commodify nature by orchestrating the production of a crop of wheat, harvested in the shape of an X. Oppenheim created the "cancelled" crop expressly so that it would not become a commodity. The earthwork circumvents a system of production that positions art and crops as commodities available for sale and exchange, essentially growing the plant material for its own sake.

Unlike Earth artists who manipulate the landscape, Swiss photographer Georg Gerster captures the art farmers inscribe on the land, either consciously or unconsciously, when they tend their fields. Gerster argues that farmers draw with their plows and harvesters, and he intends simply to record those compositions and draw attention to their interaction with the landscape. Gerster's 1990 publication, *Amber Waves of Grain: America's Farmlands From Above*, primarily consists of aerial views, but its captions provide an important agricultural and environmental context for the frequently abstract designs and patterns farmers have created in

¹⁰ For an example, see Richard Manning, *Grassland: The History, Biology, Politics, and Promise of the American Prairie* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995).

the landscape. Fig. 120, a view of soil conservation practices during a dry spell in Oklahoma, is described as follows:

Scrawling a crosswork pattern on fields “ready to blow,” a farmer near Chickasha, Oklahoma, fights to save the sandy topsoil. Normally these fields would be shielded from wind erosion by winter wheat, but either the fields weren’t sown in the fall or the crop has failed. When wind threatens, the farmer resorts to emergency tillage, using a chisel plow to bring up clods without turning the earth. The roughened surface withstands the force of the wind and reduces its speed. Farmers usually work strips at right angles to the prevailing wind. This farmer is prepared for an attack from any quarter.¹¹

Gerster finds beauty and harmony as well as discord in these inadvertent earthworks. For crop artist Stan Herd, cultivated landscapes become earthworks by design. Herd became enamored by the pictorial potential of the landscape after flying over Kansas in 1976. He noticed a tractor travelling diagonally across a quarter section where "the field had been 'worked' earlier and following a rain had crusted over to a light tan color. The farmer's barely discernable movement was now marked by a rich dark line of freshly turned soil."¹² Like Gerster, Herd equated this dark path to a paint stroke across a canvas. Herd creates his images not with a camera, but with planted crops, native grasses, and the earth itself. The scale of his compositions, often created on 160 acres, is so grandiose that they cannot be properly viewed unless seen or photographed from the air. In 1992, the state of Iowa and the University of Iowa commissioned him to create an earthwork in honor of the state’s Sesquicentennial. *Iowa Countryside* (Fig. 121) celebrates local agricultural traditions inspired by the compositions of Grant Wood. While Wood’s paintings could be considered nostalgic even in their own time, a contemporary recreation of Iowa’s preindustrial farm vistas, executed with modern tractors, expresses the complexities and occasional contradictions of current regional identity and agricultural ethics.

¹¹ Georg Gerster, *Amber Waves of Grain: America’s Farmlands from Above* (New York: Harper Weldon Owen, 1990), 166.

¹² Stan Herd, *Crop Art and Other Earthworks* (New York: Abrams, 1994), 12.

Artistic production after the Dust Bowl and World War II concerning issues of cultivation tends to critique, question, or explore the exploitative relationship between humans and the environment. Art that engaged agricultural land use in the 1930s and more recent investigations of this theme share a tendency to utilize human-engineered marks on the land as evidence of our conquest of nature. These images and earthworks help us understand that our relationship with the land, particularly in the arid grasslands of North America, imposes an unsustainable agricultural system on the environment. Voices that acknowledge this inequity are crucial to society as our culture becomes increasingly distanced from the land and unaware of how we utilize its bounty in our daily lives.

The crisis of the Dust Bowl represented a moment in which Americans began to reconsider the effectiveness of their attempts to order the landscape of the trans-Mississippi West. The plow became an effective symbol for the ethos of Manifest Destiny that had prompted the breaking of the grasslands into plains. In closing, I want to contemplate a final image about plowing, but not a contemporary one. The image I reference prefigures late-1960s earthworks by over thirty years. When measured by the standards of its era, the work seems intriguingly anachronistic, but when considered in relation to contemporary art and agriculture, it reveals the drama, poignancy, and even the hubris of our cultural connection to place. In 1933, the year Roosevelt passed the Triple A to attempt to curb overproduction in the farmlands of America, Isamu Noguchi, a Japanese-American artist, honored the plow in a sculpture designed for another WPA project, the Public Works of Art Program. Noguchi described his *Monument to the Plough* (Fig. 122) as an earthen triangular pyramid with sides 1,200 feet in length, consisting of one side plowed in furrows radiating from one of the base corners. A second side would be planted in wheat, and a third side divided in half, with one half plowed with furrows radiating

down from the apex and the other half barren and uncultivated. The sculpture would be capped by a block of concrete with a monumental stainless steel plow at the peak.

Noguchi intended this proto-earthwork to be executed in wheat country where crop curtailment had been instigated by the Triple A – land that in a few months would be called Dust Bowl country. He explained that his motivation for the monument stemmed from learning that the invention of the steel plow had allowed for the occupation and settlement of the western plains, noting, “My model indicated my wish to belong to America, to its vast horizons of earth.”¹³ Somewhat ironically, the PWAP rejected his proposal because it lacked a sufficiently sculptural character. Although unrealized, Noguchi’s design represents a perfect monument to the plow. The plow did enable Americans to own and transform the grasslands and Noguchi effectively expresses the magnitude of that achievement. Noguchi’s sculpture would have altered the topography of the landscape through manipulation of the soil to produce a structure that would be aesthetically striking, yet impossible to maintain due to the impermanence of his materials in their intended configuration. This proposal can be seen as a quintessential expression of a non-native, or outsider conception of the plains. In Noguchi’s wish to become a true American he evoked the actions of past settlers whose conquest irrevocably marked the grasslands. As a sculpture that prefigures use of soil as an artistic medium and also evokes the colossal scale of intensive agriculture, *Monument to the Plough* exalts the human impulse to remake nature to suit our own interests.

¹³ Isamu Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 22.

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