

This Place, These People: Life and Shadow on the Great Plains, photographs by Nancy Warner, text by David Stark, New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. 114 pp. \$39.95 (paper). ISBN: 978-0-231-16522-8.

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Visual images are increasingly important materials by which we access and understand the world around us, and they are perhaps even more important for those worlds we less frequently encounter. David Stark and Nancy Warner's *This Place, These People: Life and Shadow on the Great Plains* incorporates the visual into a thoughtful consideration of abandoned places in rural Cuming County, Nebraska, in an effort to shed light on this important, yet increasingly forgotten, American landscape. The book is an interesting collaborative project, with black-and-white photographs (Warner) and text (Stark) combining to make a compelling case for the lasting significance of this decaying landscape, a landscape quite deeply engrained in American cultural memory.

Stark and Warner's work is unlikely to serve as a classroom text, but would certainly be a welcome addition to the collection of any scholar interested in this unique American landscape. The work is accessible to virtually any reader, with the photographs providing the primary material of the book; these photographs are only accompanied with brief "voices," short passages from local residents describing memories of past life in the region. These quotes are not necessarily connected to the image to which they are juxtaposed, which occasionally leaves the reader wanting the specific story attached to the image being viewed. Those more intimate and particular stories, however, may well be lost to time. Emerging instead is the impression that these interview snippets from local residents act as the oral history for the whole of the experience of past denizens of the Great Plains, that there are many more commonalities in the experience of living a life on a twentieth-century small family farm than unique qualities. It is interesting to then note that both authors have a personal connection to Cuming County, Nebraska. Stark and Warner are cousins who share a common ancestor in their great-grandparents, who homesteaded in this area at the end of the nineteenth century.

This book's publishing seems particularly timely, especially given the success of 2013's *Nebraska*, the Academy Award-nominated film by Alexander Payne that also took a black-and-white look at the people and places of the Great Plains. As the book's title implies, the project chronicles what remains in this region now (*Life*) but also depicts it as a place with ever-diminishing light (*Shadow*), most likely with its best years behind it. Warner's photographs were collected throughout this Nebraskan county from 2001 to 2008, and offer a moment of recognition for the memories and stories beyond the lens. The subject matter of Warner's images are mostly farms and assorted farm buildings, both inside and out, though later sections of the book venture into town to show those left-behind commercial buildings that have fallen

out of use as well. The photographs are emotional to witness, and largely portray abandoned buildings, broken glass, crooked doors, peeling wallpaper, leaning stairwells, fallen roofs, and deserted objects, small as a leaflet or rolling pin, as large as an upright piano. The foundations of these old farmhouses seem very much intact; the structures built on them are failing with time. It seems an apt metaphor for the challenges of rural communities across America.

The voices that appear next to the book's images give an emotional reaction from those who know this place best. Seeing the photographs seems to have led to an abundance of shared memories and stories: a telling of the life that occurred in these kinds of places, as well as a conjuring of those images and objects not depicted in this particular work. Several of the interviewed participants in the publication are family members of Stark and Warner, continued residents of the family's old homestead and surrounding farms, and yet it still seems as though a fairly universal story of rural life is being told here. Those stories most frequently tell tales of connection to the buildings and homes on farm properties, but also of the land itself. There is a common thread in the narratives about an understanding of the soil, the equipment used to ply the land, and animals that lived there as well, both of the farm and household variety. The theme of land and locale is a strong one throughout the text. As noted by the authors, locations in this region are never referred to as "farms" but always as "places" ("the Stark place, the Ott place . . ."); this small distinction only serves to reinforce the deep connection felt to this landscape as an inhabited, meaningful space (91). The accompanying voices also present glimmers of the economic uncertainty and debt associated with family farming. While never explicitly stated, it certainly acts as a harbinger for the decomposition and abandonment found in the photographs.

Stark's principal contribution to the piece lies in the afterword. Here, the sociologist's eye emerges, as he proffers an abridged social history of life on the plains. Special attention is given to the details of demographic change in this region: economic changes, technological improvements, and increased urbanization being just a few of the interlocking pieces that have contributed to the decay visualized in the preceding photographs. Stark's contribution offers an additional, more scholarly, narration of the region to complement the interview snippets that accompany the photographs. Yet the afterword truly corroborates and reinforces the personal anecdotes shared by local residents; it does not negate the value in those personal, individual experiences in the interest of academic pursuit.

Ultimately, *This Place, These People* leaves its readers with a commemoration of the disappearing places, peoples, and voices of these most rural communities on the Great Plains. The book reads as a memory as much as a reality, and tends to its subject matter with a tenderness that speaks to the personal connection of the authors. It is a portrait in black and white, and serves well to highlight the shades of gray that come with experiencing the fade of a community and a way of living in America.