

The Dome above the Open Spaces of the Llano Estacado

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The sheer grandeur of the Great Plains extending outward in every direction to a single line where the ground and the great dome of the atmosphere meet is for many a breathtaking and awe-filled experience. As noted by Gretel Ehrlich, the hundred mile view of these vast plains "lose distinction between foreground and background" (Solace 2). A vast ocean of windswept grasses and small shrubs flows to the horizon as a single plate with little dimension for the orientation of an observation. This vastness is mirrored on the Llano Estacado, the mesa at the southern tip of the Great Plains. The view of the landscape is not dominated by vast geological features, nor by swaths of vegetation. Rather, visual dominance is established by the sky resting on the ground's template. Upon this sapphire blue dome stands a dynamic architecture providing both a visual differentiation between foreground and background and an enclosure for the visual expanse of the Llano Estacado.

There exists, within the vast landmasses of the continental United States, a great expanse of extensive flat land elevated far above the lowlands of the Mississippi River Valley. These Great Plains stretch outward in every direction, most times bounded only by the sky or a far-off mountain range at the

horizon. Grasses dominate the landscape; the grasses decrease in height as one traverses the hundreds of miles from the eastern to western border, providing a majority of the carpet for this landscape's architecture. Waves of wind, in this windswept country, compress this flowing carpet as each gust moves by an observer. It is here we find Ehrlich in the 1980s herding sheep in Wyoming, acclimating herself to the flatness of this giant country. Observation of the landscape revealed little shelter can be found out on the plains as storms march across this austere landmass. At times, Ehrlich sleeps under sagebrush for protection against the elements. Even this, however provides little repose as dark banks of clouds release their fury on the stark brush landscape. Ultimately, lacking vertical interruption, the landscape is a stark environment upon which the atmosphere violently performs (Solace 1).

At the most southern portion of the Great Plains the 30,000 square mile mesa of the Llano Estacado rises high above Central Texas. Along its large width, the Llano increases in elevation at a snail's pace, thus appearing almost completely flat. The ground, to an observer, is one solid plane,



especially in time of dimmed light; it is a textured surface upon which perception falls, and looks outwards, beyond the blowing wheat and cotton. This perceived contiguous carpet lacks the dichotomy of background and foreground. Near and far are the same object upon the flowing field. This perceptual flatness, stretching into the

infinite, thus bounds itself, not with vertical projection from a base plane, but from the expanse of condensed water vapor above. These projections of water contrast with the dry environment below and bring with them a potential of life giving water often needed in the Staked Plains. Stretched across the sky in multiple layers, the sapphire dome is replaced with the built forms of water vapor, miles and miles above and below each other. The plane of the Llano Estacado sets a stage for the drama above. Light

plays across the clouds, and the sky becomes an architecture with a foreground and background, as shadows from the structures blocking the sun extend their hands over an ethereal, light-drenched landscape. Clouds thus become a force driving a perception of structural dome's ever-changing variety. Liberated from the perceptually expanding plains, the human becomes transfixed by the wonder of clouds that dominate the landscape, providing depth to the endless blue sky.

The horizon is where these divergent forces, the carpeted floor and the multilayered vaporous dome, join in a coherent boundary on the Llano Estacado. Due to the curvature of the Earth, clouds parallel to the ground vanish behind the horizon. The dome's base resides on the plain, and from this distinct zone clouds move above the observer. Thus, two parts, the floor and the dome, distinct in their materiality, become one solid architecture with the horizon as the meeting point.



Each cloud layer is stratified by the wind currents, barometric pressure, and a plethora of interlocking, invisible forces. There is order to these striations. Cold frontal systems create towering monoliths stretching above the landscape, ivory pillars of water extending to the highest reaches of the troposphere, ten miles above the human. It is this architecture that appears as a mere ominous line on the horizon, Ehrlich observes. First established as a boundary, the clouds extend ominous hands above those below. Upon this exposed land, the individual must hide from the ferocity of the built architecture, some hiding, as Ehrlich recounts, under the table for fear of structural collapse. Ehrlich says that the storm "inks dry washes and broad grasslands with quiet," as the sheer strength of the storm departs the battered landscape (Solace 126). In contrast, the continuous blanket of a warm front provides a more gentle architecture. An architecture that wraps the sky in soft layers of crystallized water does not produce the intimidation of the towering monoliths, but rather a drowsiness, a secure comfort.

The dome of the sky, built of many interlocking layers, establishes boundary to the seemingly infinite landscape. The towers of the cold front produce a trap, a dome of fear and exhilaration upon the plain as nature's fury is laid bare to the inhabitants of the natural architecture. In contrast, the dome of the warm front provides a feeling of security and haven, securing the extensive landscape for a moment of rest.

The architecture predominant on the Llano Estacado, and the Great Plains in general, is thus the cloud, and the frontal systems which create them. The landscape below functions as a floor to the



multifaceted architecture above. Clouds preside over the filtering of light, and the depth that is thus created. Clouds establish the sapphire dome's boundaries. Clouds are an architecture that build the perceptual change of the landscape of the Llano Estacado for those that inhabit it. The dome above

the open extensive spaces of the Llano Estacado, a boundary and enclosure to the land, is thus a construct of flowing, ever-changing striations of condensed water that establish prominence upon the stage of the geographical landscape. Clouds are the architectural dome above the perceptually limitless landscape.

Endnotes

Ehrlich, Gretel. *The Solace of Open Spaces*. New York: Penguin, 1986.

All photos courtesy of the author.