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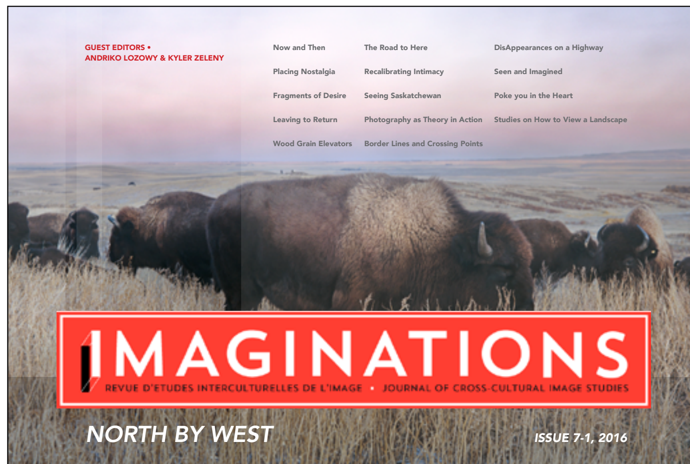

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Publication details, including open access policy
and instructions for contributors:
http://imaginations.csj.ualberta.ca

North By West

Editorial Team: Brent Ryan Bellamy, Daniel Laforest, Andriko Lozowy,
Tara Milbrandt, Carrie Smith-Prei, Sheena Wilson

November 23, 2016

To cite this article:

Saltzman, Vera; et al. "Placing Nostalgia: Affect And Photography In The New Saskatchewan." Imaginations 7:1 (2016): Web (date accessed) 22-41. DOI: 10.17742/IM-AGE.NBW.7-1.3

To link to this article:

http://dx.doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.NBW.7-1.3

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PLACING NOSTALGIA: AFFECT AND PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE NEW SASKATCHEWAN

VERA SALTZMAN, VALERIE ZINK & JON PETRYCHYN

Saskatchewan has been reborn into a bustling hub of economic and cultural activity. Saskatchewan is now in motion.

Résumé

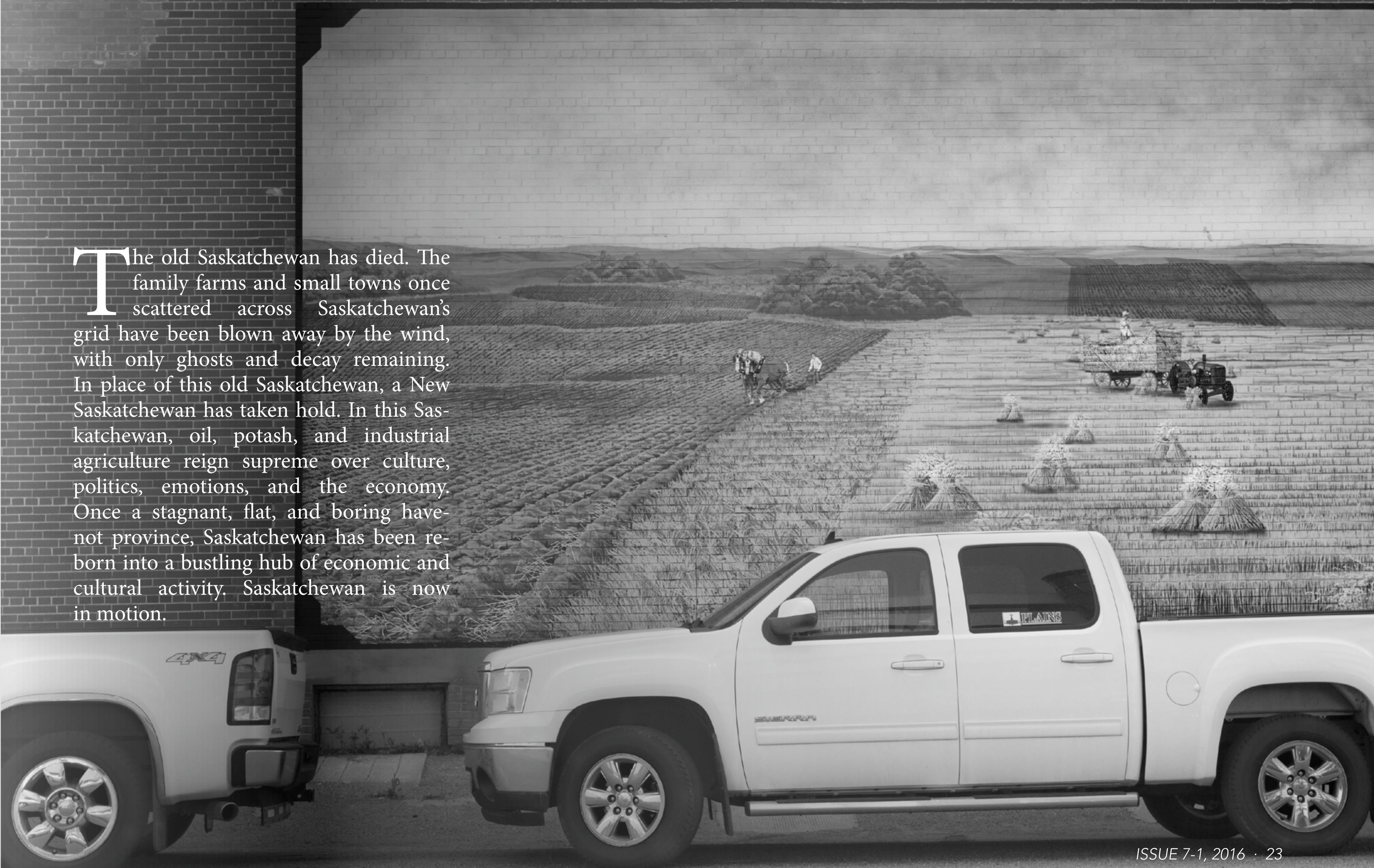
L'ancienne Saskatchewan socio-démocrate est morte. A sa place une Saskatchewan néolibérale a pris en main la culture, la politiques les émotions et l'économie. Cet article met en contexte les œuvres des photographes saskatchewanaises Valerie Zink et Vera Saltzman au cœur de ce changement vers une économie néolibérale reposant sur l'industrie du pétrole dans cette nouvelle Saskatchewan. J'avance que Zink et Saltzman utilise une approche reparative dans leurs œuvres, contre les stratégies de construction d'espace tournées vers le futur du néolibéralisme et construisent de nouvelles économies affectives à travers un engagement critique avec le concept de nostalgie. Mises côte à côte, les images de Zink et Saltzman nous rappellent la place des peuples autochtones et l'importance de l'eau dans l'épanouissement de la vie. Leurs images développent une économie affective alternative dans laquelle la circulation de la nostalgie en tant qu'affect spatial et temporel ôte tout optimisme au néolibéralisme, chamboule ses téléologies bien nettes, détruit ses distinctions régionales et prend en considération les couts humains et environnementaux de l'optimisme sans limite de la nouvelle Saskatchewan. En mettant en contexte et en jouant avec la nostalgie, Zink et Saltzman renversent l'orientation vers le futur de la nouvelle Saskatchewan et produisent une économie affective alternative qui portent attention à ceux qui sont laissés de côté.

Abstract

The old social-democratic Saskatchewan has died. In its place, a neoliberal New Saskatchewan has taken hold over culture, politics, emotions, and the economy. This article situates the photography of Saskatchewan-based photographers Valerie Zink and Vera Saltzman within this shift to the oil-based neoliberal economies of the New Saskatchewan. I argue that Zink and Saltzman both work reparatively against the future-oriented place-making strategies of neoliberalism, constructing new affective economies through a critical engagement with nostalgia. Placed side by side, Zink's and Saltzman's photographs remind us of the place of Indigenous peoples and the importance of water to the flourishing of life. Their photographs develop an alternative affective economy in which the circulation of nostalgia as both a spatial and temporal affect unsticks optimism from neoliberalism, scrambles its neat teleologies, collapses regional distinctions, and accounts for the human and environmental cost of the New Saskatchewan's unbridled optimism. By playing with and placing nostalgia, Zink and Saltzman invert the New Saskatchewan's future-orientation, producing an alternative affective economy attentive to those left out of the New Saskatchewan.

Fig. 1. *Zink, "Cultivating"*, Oxen to Oil

DOI : http://dx.doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.NBW.7-1.3



The old Saskatchewan has died. The family farms and small towns once scattered across Saskatchewan's grid have been blown away by the wind, with only ghosts and decay remaining. In place of this old Saskatchewan, a New Saskatchewan has taken hold. In this Saskatchewan, oil, potash, and industrial agriculture reign supreme over culture, politics, emotions, and the economy. Once a stagnant, flat, and boring have-not province, Saskatchewan has been reborn into a bustling hub of economic and cultural activity. Saskatchewan is now in motion.

This is the discourse of the New Saskatchewan, which places itself as the dominant term in multiple sets of binaries: old and new, past and future, stagnation and prosperity, socialism and neoliberal capitalism, public and private. The phrase "New Saskatchewan" first appeared in the province as the moniker under which Ross Thatcher's Liberal Party swept to power in Saskatchewan in the 1960s, but its political and emotional history stretches on both sides of it, from Wilfrid Laurier's promise of a "last, best West," to the centre-right Saskatchewan Party's resurrection of the phrase in 2003, and to current Saskatchewan Premier and Saskatchewan Party leader Brad Wall's 2016 election slogan Keep Saskatchewan Strong (Enoch 193). In its current formation as a discourse of neoliberalism, the New Saskatchewan situates itself as the hegemonic, logical, obvious, and common-sense solution to the so-called problem of ideological socialism. Any attempts by the left to generate alternatives to social, economic, or cultural problems of neoliberalism are often labelled regressive by neoliberalism's proponents. Leftist artists and activists often pre-emptively disavow any emotional or nostalgic connection to the past so as not to be labelled regressive, in part as a reaction to neoliberalism's critiques, but also as a rejection of an idealized past that erases the severe inequality and genocide of Indigenous peoples that allowed the settlement and development of the province. We can see this leftist rejection clearly in Saskatchewan-based artist and activist Valerie Zink's photography series' *Oxen and Oil*. Zink asserts that her critique of effects of oil on Saskatchewan communities is "[m]ore than a didactic lament for a pastoral plains"; it is a call to action (Zink, *Oxen*). Likewise, her series *Ghosts and Daily News* "attempts […] to examine our susceptibility to nostalgia in the context of demographic upheaval" (Zink, *Ghosts*). As a discourse with such a hold on the emotional and political landscape of the province, the New Saskatchewan's demand for progress permeates attempts to undermine it. In the New Saskatchewan, new supersedes old and prosperity supersedes stagnation. In the New Saskatchewan, the failures of social democracy are gone. In their place are neoliberal capitalism and the promise of prosperity.

The fact that this promise of prosperity is not offered to everyone is rarely, if ever, mentioned in this discourse, and is used to wash away accusations from activists on the left of an impending environmental or social crisis. In this way, the discourse of the New Saskatchewan differs from other neoliberal discourses, which tend to institute the necessity of neoliberal policies through the spectre of crisis. Simon Enoch, Director of the Saskatchewan Office of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, notes that since the publication of Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* it has become almost fashionable and perhaps cliché to make this observation (Enoch 192). Still, for Enoch, the supposed emphasis on the manufacture of crises under neoliberalism poses an interesting problem for neoliberalism in Saskatchewan specifically. When the Saskatchewan Party—the political offspring of the Saskatchewan Liberals and Progressive Conservatives—came to power in 2007, they were hardly inheriting a crisis, nor would they be able to manufacture one without seriously undermining their credentials with a social democrat-leaning populace. The province was by all accounts beginning to experience a boom brought on by the development of its natural resources oil and potash, growth that would help the Saskatchewan economy weather the 2008 global financial crisis. If there is no crisis, Enoch asks, how can the Saskatchewan Party successfully sell neoliberalism? The answer: through the New Saskatchewan, "a discourse of prosperity that promises to unleash the full economic potential of the province" (Enoch 193).

Yet the New Saskatchewan is hardly new; it has a long genealogy in the cultural and political history of Saskatchewan. The New Saskatchewan is another iteration of what Dale Eisler calls the "myth of

Saskatchewan." Eisler's essay, published just a few years before the Saskatchewan Party was first elected into government, describes the myth as the belief that "Saskatchewan was a promised land of abundance and opportunity for all" (71-2). The Saskatchewan myth emerges first during the settlement of the West and shifts and morphs throughout the 20th century as it meets the social gospel of Tommy Douglas and the Co-Operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), Thatcher's Liberals, and Grant Devine's Progressive Conservatives, while still retaining its essential character of believing in the possibility that Saskatchewan can be better. For Eisler, this myth of Saskatchewan is summarized best by former Premier Grant Devine: "There's so much more we can be" (qtd. in Eisler 83). This sentiment is vague: who is promised abundance and opportunity? What can we be and become? The myth of Saskatchewan is an empty yet overflowing category. It can mean absolutely everything to everyone, an empty container that can be filled with individual fears and desires and picked up by the left and right to suit their cultural, political, and emotional needs.

For Enoch and Eisler, the discourse of the New Saskatchewan and the myth of Saskatchewan circulate most apparently and readily through successive governments. However, to paraphrase Devine, there is so much more to the New Saskatchewan. This mythological and discursive shift from old to new, stillness and stagnation to movement and growth, dead and dying to vibrantly living is as much a material, political, and economic shift as it is an emotional and affective shift. The discourse of the New Saskatchewan and the myth of Saskatchewan circulate not simply as discourse, thoughts, ideas, and policies, but as *affects* and *emotions*.

Eisler recognizes the importance of emotion to the myth of Saskatchewan and tries to capture the ineffable aspects of Saskatchewan that are so hard to represent in language:

> *There can be no denying the strength of this attachment Saskatchewan people feel towards their province. It has an emotional, almost spiritual dimension to it. No other western province has the same sway over its people. […]. It is this notion of Saskatchewan on an abstract, emotional level that is the most fascinating. Frankly, it is not a consistently conscious sort of thing. It manifests itself as more a kind of underlying awareness of the special bond between the people and the community we call Saskatchewan. It is expressed in various ways: pride in the province; a deep attachment to the land; a strong sense of community; and, a powerful belief in the potential for a better future. (Eisler 67-8)*

What Eisler calls the "spiritual" or "not conscious," I would instead call *affect*: the emotions that circulate between people, the attachments we have to others and to objects, and the unconscious and physiological intensities between bodies. The New Saskatchewan is more than simply a "way of making sense of a senseless world" (May qtd. in Eisler 70). The New Saskatchewan is embodied in the circulation of emotions and affects and their stickiness to bodies and signs, what Sara Ahmed calls "affective economies." In an affective economy, emotions and signs are "sticky," adhering to and sliding off each other as they circulate (Ahmed 46). Affects are not essential features of objects—that is, certain objects are not essentially optimistic or essentially hopeful—but instead emerge through their circulation between objects, here conceived of broadly as political ideologies, signs, bodies, governments, and photographs. As such, the stickiness and form of affects are contingent both on the objects encountered and the historical context (Ahmed 18n13). In the New Saskatchewan, optimism and hope circulate between objects, sticking to neoliberalism and sliding off social democracy. In Douglas's Saskatchewan the reverse was true: optimism stuck to social democracy and slid off capitalism.

Affects can emerge from and stick to more than the objects of governance, policy, and economics discussed by Enoch and Eisler: the circulation of photography provides its own affective economy, one that speaks back to the New Saskatchewan and develops alternatives to its neoliberal feelings. As Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu note, photography has always had a close relationship to affect theory, providing a fruitful ground from which much of the literature on emotion and affect emerges (Brown and Phu 8). Inspired by Eve Sedgwick's turn to photography in her theorization of touching and feeling, I hope to enact what she calls a "reparative reading" of some recent photography produced within the New Saskatchewan. By reading reparatively I am reading locally, conducting close readings of the photographs in an aim to counter the "paranoid" deconstructive gesture of exposure enacted by much cultural criticism where everything is connected to everything (Sedgwick 145). This does not mean that my readings will not connect the photographs to the larger project of neoliberalism in Saskatchewan. Rather, I want to position these photographs as objects that critique neoliberalism's affective economies by imagining another perspective on Saskatchewan, feeling their way toward another future outside of neoliberal capitalism (Sedgwick 146). If at times a photograph begins to slip into a paranoid position—that is, if it attempts to critique without posing alternative futures—I attempt to reposition the photograph reparatively, to look for other futures and other possibilities. I hope that in photography we can begin to feel another Saskatchewan.

Nostalgia in the New Saskatchewan is not a longing for a better past, but rather instead the longing for the feeling of a better future.

For the remainder of this article, I want to focus on the work of two Saskatchewan photographers: Valerie Zink and Vera Saltzman. Their photographs develop an alternative affective economy in which the circulation of nostalgia as both a spatial and temporal affect unsticks optimism from neoliberalism, scrambles its neat teleologies, collapses regional distinctions, and accounts for the human and environmental cost of the New Saskatchewan's unbridled optimism. That is to say, if the New Saskatchewan depends not only on the discursive form of a better and more lively future but also on a future that necessarily exists in Saskatchewan, then nostalgia explodes the New Saskatchewan's narrative of exceptionalism. By playing with and placing nostalgia, Zink and Saltzman invert the New Saskatchewan's future-orientation, producing an alternative affective economy attentive to those left out of the New Saskatchewan.

Feeling Saskatchewan

In the government rhetoric analyzed by Enoch and Eisler, the primary affects that circulate are optimism and hope. These affects are produced by evoking the potential of a better future, a Saskatchewan that can "be so much more." Valerie Zink's photographs in *Oxen to Oil* point towards the human and environmental effects of such an affective economy and to an alternative affective economy all together.

Across all of Zink's photos is an attempt to grapple with nostalgia without becoming "a didactic lament for a pastoral plains" (Zink, *Oxen*). Engaging with feelings in Saskatchewan can quickly and very easily become a nostalgic longing for a pastoral, pre-industrial, agricultural past. This longing emerges not only on the anti-capitalist left, whose longing we can perhaps intuitively understand as a longing for the social democracy of Douglas's CCF, but also on the popular and populist right—consider the popularity of the television program *Corner Gas*, a show that traffics heavily in a nostalgia for rural small-town life and the way it has been commemorated and institutionalized by the Saskatchewan Party government ("Premier Brad Wall"). Yet this longing for the past is absent in the discourse of the New Saskatchewan, where the agrarian past is dead and gone while the future built on oil is just around the corner. This temporality is the key spatial, political, cultural, and affective conflict of the New Saskatchewan: the simultaneous rejection of and longing for an agrarian socialist and communal past within the industrial capitalist present and coming oil future.

This tension is clear in Zink's photograph "Cultivating" (fig. 1) and its visual juxtaposition of the oil and oxen of Zink's title. In the foreground are two nearly identical half-tonne trucks, while the background is dominated by a mural of horses plowing and cultivating a field of wheat. However, the photo evokes more than the literal foregrounding of oil over oxen and the overtaking of the past by a present directed toward an oily future. The mural also traffics in a nostalgic mode in this small oil town as a commemoration of the pre-industrial past. The openness of the field contrasts the brick wall, which fills the frame and blocks out Saskatchewan's landscape. Within this juxtaposition, optimism and nostalgia circulate within the photograph between mural and truck. Optimism is not just the domain of oil futures but, as the mural reminds us, was also the key motivator of the first wave of immigrants and homesteaders who came to "the last, best West" on Laurier's promise of land and prosperity. Nostalgia operates here in service of the optimism that circulates within the affective economy of the New Saskatchewan. Nostalgia in the New Saskatchewan is not a longing for a better past, but rather instead the longing for the feeling of a better future. Nostalgia and optimism feed into each other. We long for optimism.

The circulation of the future-oriented optimism is gradually unstuck from the New Saskatchewan as the past-oriented nostalgia overtakes the affective economies of the photographs. "Adrian's Trailer" (fig. 2) inverts "Cultivating," as the horse appears as the only object in focus. "The Crush Kitchen" (fig. 3) could be mistaken as an archival photo of the quintessential mid-century prairie kitchen if not for the inclusion of contemporary fluorescent bulbs hanging above the kitchen sink. "Drilling Rig" (fig. 4) reimagines the horses plowing the surface of the fields in "Cultivating" as huge mechanical pumpjacks drilling deep below the surface. These photos do not merely depict the clean and easy movement from old Saskatchewan to New Saskatchewan, from agricultural dust bowl stagnation to industrial oil prosperity. In both the visual framing and the affective circulation, *Oxen to Oil* reminds us of the old cliché that as much as things may change, they still seem to stay the same.

Zink's photographs remind us of the stagnation that underpins the New Saskatchewan and its oil economies. *Oxen to Oil* unsticks optimism from the New Saskatchewan and in its place re-sticks that which it tries to avoid: nostalgia. The black-and-white colour of *Oxen to Oil* casts an almost deathly pallor over the whole series, as if the lives depicted there have been drained of the optimistic promise of the New Saskatchewan. Here the New Saskatchewan begins to

Fig. 2. *Zink, "Adrian's Trailer"*, Oxen to Oil

Fig. 4. *Zink, "Drilling Rig"*, Oxen to Oil

Fig. 3. *Zink, "The Crush Kitchen"*, Oxen to Oil

almost take on a *Pleasantville*-esque aesthetic: while the promise of colour in that film suggested a kind of modernisation of 1950s middle America, the draining of colour—from the typically vibrant skies, the lush green of the grass, and the vibrant colors of the kitchen magnets in Zink's photographs—suggests almost a turn backward, that the promise of prosperity by neoliberal capitalism, instead of providing life, provides the slow death of prairie culture. Nostalgia drains the New Saskatchewan of life. *Oxen to Oil* thus does not wax nostalgic about the loss of an idealized past that never was, but instead mobilizes nostalgia, as Zink writes, to "urge […] viewers to consider the complexities of rural communities' entanglement with the oil industry, and the form and consequences of place-making in the oil economy" (Zink, *Oxen*). In the oil and affective economies of the New Saskatchewan, this optimistic and oily place-making is not without consequences: the price of oil is notoriously volatile and economies built on oil revenues boom and bust with frightening frequency. These busts do more than wreak havoc on the economy; they affect the very people that oily place-making is supposed to help.

Oily place-making and unfettered optimism has human costs. In "Hunger Strike," (fig. 5) Zink is interested specifically in its effects on Indigenous populations and cultures in Saskatchewan. "Hunger Strike" documents the physical resistance of Charmaine Stick, a woman from Onion Lake Cree Nation, to the re-election of Chief Wallace Fox and the effects of oil on her community (CTV Saskatoon). According to one report, Stick believes not only that the election was fixed, but that under Chief Fox's leadership, over $500 million in oil revenues were mismanaged while the members of the band lived in poverty (Sperling). Stick's hunger strike is an affective reminder of Canada's policy of the forced starvation of Indigenous peoples during the settlement of the West, documented recently by James Daschuk in *Clearing the Plains*. Only now instead of being forced to starve because of agricultural settlement, Stick's starvation occurs because of the effects of oil. While such a demonstration obviously inspires feelings of anger, sadness, and perhaps even pity, it reminds us of the complex and contested relationship that settlers and Indigenous populations have with the land. Onion Lake is only a 30-minute drive north of Lloydminster in Treaty 6 territory, where the agriculture-themed refrigerator magnets of "Elaine and Terry" (fig. 6) place the photograph. This is not a merely a story of European settlers coming to the West and colonizing Indigenous peoples, but moreover a commentary on the complex relationship between oil and agriculture and the high emotional and material stakes when oil is allowed to govern the cultural and affective economies of a place.

Fig. 5. *Zink, "Hunger Strike"*, Oxen to Oil

ELAINE'S
KITCHEN

Grandpa & Grandma's House
xox

EAT
CHICKEN

FORTANT

The best man
for the job
is a woman.

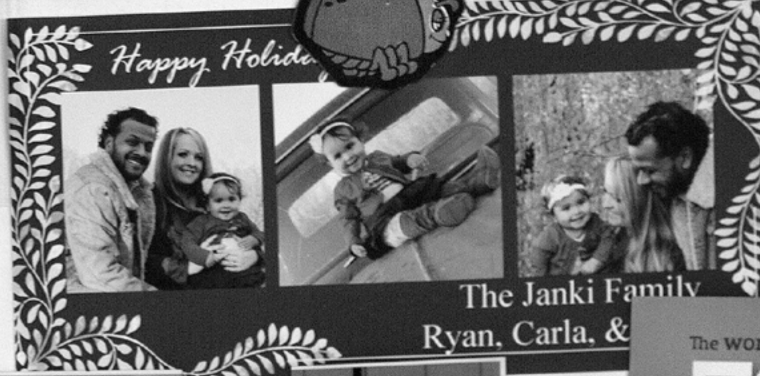
LLOYDMINSTER
SASKATCHEWAN / ALBERTA
Elaine

LLOYDMINSTER
SASKATCHEWAN / ALBERTA
Terry

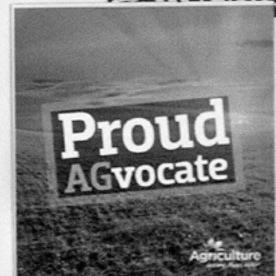
provincial bird
the Mosquito

Tell me
what to do,
but please
don't tell me
how to
do it.

Merry Wishes
Love & Cheer

KITCHEN CLOSED DUE TO ILLNESS
CLOSED
I'M SICK OF COOKIN'

The Janki Family
Ryan, Carla, &

happy holidays
25698
25697
from the usual suspects


Proud
AGvocate

The story and image of Charmaine Stick on her hunger strike leaves open a number of questions about the kinds of political actions Zink wants her viewers to consider against such oil affectivities. Returning again to the image of Stick on strike, a striking composition emerges. On the left of the photograph, the Onion Lake Cree Nation sign frames power lines stretching across an empty landscape; on the right, new buildings and the ubiquitous white half-tonne truck emerge from the landscape. Caught in the middle of all this—in the middle of nostalgia for agriculture, optimism for a neoliberal future, the ravages of the oil economy on the land, the power lines that were once a symbol of rural modernization—is Charmaine Stick, the umbrella in her hand protecting her from the rain while she protects her community from poverty and corruption. The hunger strike occupies a middle place between agriculture and oil and emerges as one place from which a politics against neoliberalism, the New Saskatchewan, and oil can be mobilized.

Stick's political action is an exercise in optimism. In putting her body on the line, Stick must remain optimistic about the effects of her hunger strike. If she did not believe it would work, would she do it at all? An anti-oil politics can emerge from this optimism and from being open to the possibility that the future might be different than the present in ways that we cannot expect. The nostalgic impulse of *Oxen and Oil* unsticks optimism from the New Saskatchewan, allowing optimism to stick elsewhere. As the history of Saskatchewan shows, optimism is rather indiscriminate about where it sticks. Insisting on the mobility of optimism and the openness of its possibilities, instead of demanding that it stick to one object or another, would allow for the imagining of a future that is truly open to new possibilities. Remaining open is the only way another Saskatchewan may be able to emerge.

Remaining open is the only way another Saskatchewan may be able to emerge.

Finding Home

In an essay published for the occasion of Saskatchewan's centennial in 2005, Mark Abley observes that many places across Canada, separated not only by kilometres but by cultures, are characterized by the fact that their populations leave for large urban centres: "Newfoundland, Cape Breton Island, Gaspésie, Saskatchewan: the history of all these places suggests that Canada requires a mythology of departure" (Abley 357). Rarely are Saskatchewan and the Maritimes thought together in the cultural imaginary of Canada, let alone are both characterized as having the same mythology. Yet in the photographs of Saskatchewan by Cape Breton-born Vera Saltzman, this mythology of departure collapses in on itself in her search for a place to call home. While Zink's photos use nostalgia critically to mobilize optimism in the name of an anti-oil politics, Saltzman's series *trans. plant* revels in the longing and belonging of nostalgia to collapse the distinctions between regional places, to place Saskatchewan and Cape Breton on the surface side-by-side.

By suggesting that Saltzman's photographs connect Saskatchewan and Cape Breton, I am bringing her photographs into dialogue with Elspeth Probyn's work on space and nostalgia. Perhaps more than any other affect within the New Saskatchewan, nostalgia is particularly adept not only at circulating feelings across time but across space as well. As Probyn reminds us, nostalgia is not just simply a longing for any past, but, as its Greek etymology suggests, is also "a painful yearning to return home" (Hofer qtd. in Probyn 114). Probyn traces the genealogy of nostalgia as a term that "begins its conceptual career as a discrete objective state, is [then] pathologized, and then falls under the scrutiny of psychology and psychoanalysis to be interiorized as a form of neurosis" (115-6). No longer restricted to psychological discourses, nostalgia, she notes, is free to circulate in new cultural economies. In these cultural economies, nostalgia allows us to reconfigure the lines that move from memory to culture and past to present, spatializing a given economy's affects:

> *Nostalgia [reconfigured] not as a guarantee of memory but precisely as an errant logic that always goes astray. Nostalgia performed in that empty dimension of childhood freed of its moorings in time. Nostalgia as the impossibility of placing true origins; nostalgia for an irretrievable childhood. A perfidious use that theoretically and affectively constructs a space of experimentation and upsets the space and time of childhood, the naturalness of heterosexual and generational ordering. (103)*

Probyn's reimagining of nostalgia as an affect that can unsettle space and time runs counter to the distrust Zink has for nostalgia in her own photographs. This articulation of nostalgia not as something to be avoided because of its apoliticization, but rather as a structure of feeling to be embraced that scrambles chronology and produces its object, gives us the possibility of opening up an object to imagine better presents and futures. When the present is no longer beholden to a simple chronology it can shift and change and be reimagined (117-8). The past and present do not occur chronologically but instead are placed spatially beside each other on the surface.

Perhaps unexpectedly then, Saltzman's photographs, in their attempt to spatialize her childhood home in Cape Breton within the Saskatchewan landscape, may point the way towards the open-ended politics that Zink searches for in her photography, a politics that scrambles the neat teleologies of the New Saskatchewan and its oily affective economies. In her search for what she calls her "primal landscape," an attempt to produce photographs of Saskatchewan that remind her of Cape Breton, Saltzman produces photographs that are remarkable in their ability to collapse spatialities and temporalities (Saltzman). In Photo 09 (fig. 7) she reimagines a grain elevator as a "prairie lighthouse" and in Photo 10 (fig. 8) she turns a lake into an ocean vista (Saltzman). Though the province does have a single lighthouse in the small town of Cochin, there are no oceans in

Fig. 8. *Saltzman, "Photo 10"*, trans.plant

Fig. 7. *Saltzman, "Photo 9"*, trans.plant

Saskatchewan. We are the only province with no natural borders, and with Alberta one of Canada's only land-locked provinces. As the horizon of the water in Photo 10 recedes, it meets up with clouds. Or are they the shadow of hills? The narrow depth of field makes it impossible to tell. The photo shifts. Saltzman's photo moves. At one moment we are in Saskatchewan, the hills on the other side of the water likely the hills of the Qu'Appelle Valley where Saltzman lives. The next, we are transplanted back to Cape Breton, to Saltzman's home, the clouds obscuring what should have been an infinite ocean horizon. Saltzman's narrow depth of field upsets the clear lines of spatiality and temporality between Saskatchewan now and Cape Breton in Saltzman's past. We are not quite sure where or even when we are. Are we still in the New Saskatchewan, or are we somewhere else entirely?

The placelessness of water in Saltzman's photographs challenges the narrative of oil-based exceptionalism that runs through the New Saskatchewan. If oil is the signifier of neoliberal progress within the New Saskatchewan, then is it really so surprising that

left to right:

Fig. 9. *Saltzman, "Photo 4"*, trans.plant

Fig. 10. *Saltzman, "Photo 5"*, trans.plant

Fig. 11. *Saltzman, "Photo 6"*, trans.plant

Fig. 12. *Saltzman, "Photo 7"*, trans.plant

Fig. 13. *Saltzman, "Photo 8"*, trans.plant

its cultural and political other, the object that challenges the hegemony of oil, may indeed be something as simple and common as water? There is political possibility in taking seriously this kind of aphoristic claim. Like the interdigitating of Sedgwick's paranoid and reparative positions, oil and water intermingle in the cultural, political, and economic landscapes of the New Saskatchewan without ever truly emulsifying. In Saltzman's photographs, water collapses space and scrambles temporalities. In searching for places that remind her of her childhood home, Saltzman is often drawn to water—to lakes, streams, sloughs, puddles, and snow. She is drawn to these locations because they remind her of home. Water has no teleology; its value is in its cycling and recycling whereas oil's value is in its ability to be burned. Oil ends. Water does not, unless oil makes it unusable. Water is a place of departure, a place that transplants Saltzman and her viewers elsewhere, to another place, another time. Water is nostalgic, a site of longing, the place of what Probyn might call Saltzman's irretrievable childhood. If, as Probyn argues, nostalgia can reconfigure temporalities, then the nostalgic impulse toward water in Saltzman's photographs has the potential to scramble and move past the progress that underpins so much of the rhetoric of the New Saskatchewan.

Water is also the site of environmental activism in Saskatchewan, Western Canada, and elsewhere in the world. The danger that oil poses to water mobilizes actions against off-shore drilling. The devastating effects to the environment catalyze public outrage when oil tankers spill their cargo into the ocean. The profoundly unwatery nature of the tailings ponds and tar sands developments that fill northern Alberta, captured by photographers such as Edward Burtynsky, mobilize us to act against the human damage they have done to Indigenous communities' water supplies. Water, a substance that is necessary to life, is actively corrupted by oil. That Saltzman returns to water in her attempts at place-making is no simple act; her work is a reminder of the necessity of water to the flourishing of communities and publics, a reminder that water sustained the crops of our agrarian socialist past, and a reminder that oil is not the only technology that connects people. In Photo 09, her prairie lighthouse looks over a railway track instead of over an ocean, a reminder that the small towns that pepper the Saskatchewan landscape are located not just at sites where oil flows, but also where rivers flow and where the railway bends. When considered alongside Zink's *Oxen to Oil*, Saltzman's photos remind us that we can make a home without oil. Beyond the politics of oil, of oily affective economies, of neoliberal capitalism and the New Saskatchewan, is water.

The Affective Politics of Water

Is Saskatchewan really moving toward the future or is it receding quietly into the past? Saltzman's photos make such a question difficult to answer. When Saltzman turns her gaze towards objects—cars, houses, buildings, play structures—they are worn and ragged (figs. 9-13). Paint chips off the siding. The car's tires are flat, its body rusted, abandoned somewhere in a field. Zink's series *Ghosts and Daily News* (fig. 14) suggests the same decay: the paint is wearing off the buildings; the only signs of human life in the photographs are found in the memories of Carl Olson, the 1947 world champion saddle bronc, and Mark Roy, the 1992 world champion steer wrestler. These signs assert, as Zink suggests, that things do happen in Saskatchewan, that these small towns that pepper the landscape contribute to the world, not just in the relatively recent past of these sports triumphs but in the ongoing present (Zink, *Ghosts*). These signs are metonymic of communities that continue to make homes in Saskatchewan, communities that are affected by the boom-and-bust cycles of oil economies and their environmental costs. Despite the rhetoric that things can be better in a New Saskatchewan that runs on oil, the increased speed of oil economies and the demands that we must always progress into a prosperous future built of oil often forget the human and environmental costs that such a future holds.

In the hegemonic affective economies of the New Saskatchewan the future under oil is cast as prosperous and optimistic while our agrarian socialist past is remembered, at best, through a naïve nostalgia that leads to cultural, economic, and political stagnation. Yet, as I have tried to show here through a discussion of the affective economies of Zink's and Saltzman's photographs, nostalgia need not necessary be naïve and regressive. Nostalgia, freed from its pathological and psychological origins, circulates and wanders within the New Saskatchewan, unsticking the optimism from oil, reminding us of its human and environmental costs, and mobilizing a watery affective politics embedded within environmental and social activism. The rain that falls down on Charmaine Stick in her hunger strike against the effects of oil on her community falls too on ponds and lakes that remind Saltzman of her ocean-side home and on the grain fields that were once the defining feature of Saskatchewan's culture and economy. In considering the affective politics of water, I advocate here not for a regressive return to the past, but rather for a future that remembers the aphoristic opposition water has to oil and the necessity of water to a flourishing physical, historical, and affective life.

Fig. 14. *Zink, "World Champs",*Ghosts and Daily News

FIR MOUNTAIN
HOME OF
MARK ROY
1992 WORLD CHAMP
STEER WRESTLER

FIR MOUNTAIN
HOME OF
CARL OLSON
WORLD SADDLE BRONC
CHAMP 1947

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Image Notes

Figure 1. Zink, Valerie. “Cultivating.” *Oxen to Oil*.

Figure 2. Zink. “Adrian’s Trailer.” *Oxen to Oil*.

Figure 3. Zink. “Crush Kitchen.” *Oxen to Oil*.

Figure 4. Zink. “Drilling Rig.” *Oxen to Oil*.

Figure 5. Zink. “Hunger Strike.” *Oxen to Oil*.

Figure 6. Zink. “Elaine and Terry.” *Oxen to Oil*.

Figure 7. Saltzman, Vera. “Photo 9.” *trans.plant*.

Figure 8. Saltzman. “Photo 10.” *trans.plant*.

Figure 9. Saltzman. “Photo 04.” *trans.plant*.

Figure 10. Saltzman. “Photo 05.” *trans.plant*.

Figure 11. Saltzman. “Photo 06.” *trans.plant*.

Figure 12. Saltzman. “Photo 07.” *trans.plant*.

Figure 13. Saltzman. “Photo 08.” *trans.plant*.

Figure 14. Zink. “World Champs.” *Ghosts and Daily News*.