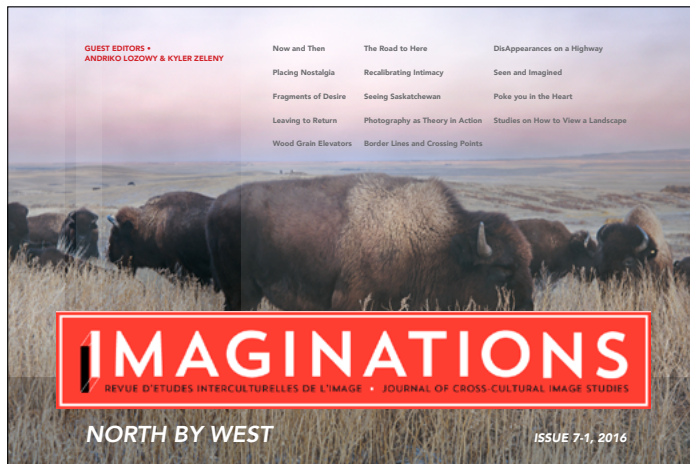


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Résumé

Dans cet essai, j'examine l'attachement personnel au lieu, tout particulièrement les Prairies. Mon attachement aux prairies de la Saskatchewan tient en partie à une affection pour l'abstrait et le minimal. Plus précisément, c'est ce que les philosophes appellent un engagement esthétique c'est-à-dire une participation et immersion active dans un espace. Psychologiquement, mon attachement aux Prairies est le résultat de souvenirs personnels significatifs que je porte en moi, de mon investissement émotionnel pour ma maison (d'adoption) et des liens sociaux et du sens de la communauté que j'y ai développés. Être en plein air dans les Prairies évoque aussi chez moi une certaine mélancolie réflexive et contemplative ; une expérience émotionnelle qui bien que parfois déplaisante, je recherche et apprécie toujours.

Un nombre d'artistes ont réfléchi sur l'influence profonde que grandir dans les prairies a eu sur leur œuvre. Les peintures de Georgia O'Keeffe sont une réflexion sur la beauté infertile des plaines. Wright Morris a dit que les prairies « ont conditionné ce que je vois, ce que je recherche et ce que je découvre et dont je parle dans le monde. Les plaines sont un paysage métaphysique...ou il n'y a presque rien à voir, ou l'être humain observe le plus. »

Abstract

In the accompanying essay, I examine attachment to places, particularly to the prairie. My attachment to the Saskatchewan prairie is partly a fondness for the abstract and minimal. More deeply, it is what philosophers have called an aesthetic engagement, that is, an active participation and immersion in a place. Psychologically, my attachment to the prairies is a result of the significant personal memories I carry with me, my emotional investments in my (adopted) home, and the social ties and sense of community I felt living there. Being out on the prairie also evokes a certain contemplative, self-reflective melancholy in me, an emotional experience, while not always pleasant, I also cherish and court.

A number of artists have reflected on how growing up on the prairies has had a profound influence on their work. Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings reflect the "barren beauty" of the plains. Wright Morris said that the prairie "conditioned what I see, what I look for, and what I find in the world to write about. The plain is a metaphysical landscape...Where there is almost nothing to see, there man sees the most."

opposite page

left: Somewhere in Saskatchewan
right: Somewhere in Mexico



The camera eye is the one in the middle of our forehead, combining how we see with what there is to be seen. (Morris 11)

I have photographed the Saskatchewan prairie for close to 40 years. Though I came to the prairies “from away,” as they say in Atlantic Canada, I developed a strong attachment to the landscape. Why, I have wondered, have I grown so fond of

driving, walking, and photographing the prairie? What about being on this land attracts me? Or, perhaps, this attraction is more about me than the land, that is, something about my psychological make-up has led me to become attached to the prairie rather than to mountains or forests.

I began to realize how profoundly the prairie landscape influenced my seeing when, early on, I spent a year in California and could only

photograph the sea, its strong horizontal divide near the middle of my viewfinder. I could not photograph landscapes there as they were so unlike my beloved prairies. Traveling over the years, I have often photographed landscapes reminiscent of the prairie. In these 10 diptychs, I place Saskatchewan prairie landscapes alongside photographs from other landscapes that are reminiscent of the prairie—Tuscany, Costa Rica, Mexico, the United States, and other Canadian provinces.

Forty years ago, I began to photograph the prairie landscape as an outsider, as a tourist or newcomer, in a distant and detached way. Over the years, my view gradually evolved into that of an insider—a participant engaged in the place. As a tourist in these other places where I have travelled, my view is as an outsider, an outsider looking inward to a remembered landscape of his (adopted) home place.

I left Saskatchewan nine years ago, returning regularly to photograph my prairie homeland. Photographing the prairie is a great passion of mine, but also a limitation, as I seem to have lost interest in photographing much else.

In this essay, I examine attachment to places, particularly the prairie, and the influence of attachment to the prairie landscape on my art work.

The Prairie: Love It or Leave It

The prairie landscape certainly does not appeal to everyone. How many do you know who have driven across southern Saskatchewan on the Trans-Canada for the first time and raved about the beautiful landscape?

Lured by cheap land and extravagant promises of fertile soil, early settlers typically found the prairies a harsh place.¹ For example, a Welshman on his way to his homestead in Saskatchewan wrote home in 1910:

This was so unlike what we had imagined back in Wales. We had visualized a green country with hills around. There was something so impersonal about this prairie, something that shattered any hope of feeling attached to it or even building a home on it. (qtd. in Rees 157-158)

Near St. Denis, Sask.



Long Beach, B.C.



Rural Municipality of Vanscoy, Sask.



Northern New Mexico, U.S.



To enrich their understanding of the problems of adjustment to an alien environment, American astronauts at one time were required to read Walter Prescott Webb's classic study, *The Great Plains*.

Many newcomers find the prairies to be barren, desolate, and alienating, a "vast nothingness"; they feel exposed, vulnerable, frightened in the emptiness of the prairie, as if they were "on the edge of the earth" (de Witt 36).

Others are immediately taken by the prairie landscape. Albert Pyke, traveling in Texas in 1831-1832, wrote:

The sea, the woods, the mountains, all suffer in comparison with the prairie....The prairie has a stronger hold upon the senses. Its sublimity arises from its unbounded extent, its barren monotony and desolation, its still, unmoved, calm, stern, almost self-confident grandeur, its strange power of deception, its want of echo, and, in fine, its power of throwing a man back upon himself. (qtd in Haley)

Walt Whitman referred to the prairie as "that vast Something, stretching out on its own unbounded scale, unconfined ... combining the real and ideal, and beautiful as dreams". He spoke of the "grandeur and superb monotony of the skies," and "how freeing, soothing, nourishing they are to the soul" (qtd. in Milton 59).

Old Man on His Back Ranch, Sask.

Near Wounded Knee, South Dakota

Rural Municipality of Perdue, Sask.

Southern New Mexico, U.S.



Aesthetic Attachment to the Prairie Landscape

Geographers have studied what they call a sense of place—the affective bond between people and place or setting. Such ties may vary in intensity, subtlety, and mode of expression. Responses to the environment may be aesthetic, tactile, or emotional (Tuan; Relph).

My attachment to the Saskatchewan prairie is partly aesthetic. Connoisseurs of the “picturesque” in the 18th century used a special device through which they viewed natural landscapes: the “Claude Glass,” a tinted convex mirror that framed and reflected the view, transforming it into something like a miniature painting (Brady 316).

Looking through my camera viewfinder is not unlike this kind of “picturesque” or “scenic” aesthetic appreciation. I appreciate, aesthetically, many visual art works of the prairie landscape, including my own photographs. My aesthetic appreciation of a landscape has to do with the abstract minimalism of the expansive prairie land and sky.

However, standing out in the middle of a prairie landscape evokes something more than a two-dimensional, visual appreciation of a scenic place. There is a strong sense of the tremendous vastness and the power of the open prairie. The experience can be both exhilarating and, with a storm approaching, overwhelming and frightening. The experience, for me, has been what Brady describes as the “sublime” in nature (318).

My experience of the prairie is what Berleant has described as an aesthetic “engagement.” Such engagement in a landscape involves active participation and immersion in a place. Many times I have stood in the middle of a vast prairie landscape immersed in the vista, the smell of wheat, the song of a meadowlark, the feel of the wind on my face.

Being in the natural environment, unlike looking at works of visual art, allows one an aesthetic experience that draws on a broader range of senses.

My attachment to the prairie comes, then, from both a visual appreciation of the minimal scenic viewpoint and a 40-year personal engagement with the landscape.

Near St. Denis, Sask.



Long Beach, B.C.



Rural Municipality of Vanscoy, Sask.



Northern New Mexico, U.S.

Psychological Attachment to the Prairie Landscape

Though not born or raised in Saskatchewan, it is my home, as I have lived there for over 40 years. Environmental psychologists (see Scannell & Gifford) understand my attachment to the place as a result of the many significant memories I carry with me, my emotional investments in my home place, my social ties there, and the sense of community I feel being there. Saskatchewan was a good fit for me as many of the traditional values there (such as community and social justice) matched my own values.

My psychological attachment to the prairie is also associated with emotional experiences. Being out on the prairie brings feelings of solitude and calm, and also a certain contemplative, self-reflective melancholy. My

photographs of the prairie today are more melancholy than before. After photographing only in colour, I prefer a black-and-white aesthetic today.

A few of my friends have told me that they sense a feeling of longing or yearning in many of my prairie photographs, even in my older, colour work. While this was a surprise to me at first, I now recognize what I understand as melancholy in my pictures.

I think that the longing or melancholy I experience while photographing the prairie, connoted in my pictures, has as much to do with me as it does with qualities inherent in the prairie landscape.

The prairie landscape itself does evoke negative emotions in some, including isolation, loneliness, vulnerability, fear.

For me, being out on the prairie has often brought some melancholy. I think this is simply because melancholy is a part of my inner life that is stirred while alone on the empty prairie. Today, returning to Saskatchewan after leaving brings back many memories of my life there, along with nostalgia and some regret.

My melancholy is not usually enjoyable or otherwise a positive feeling. Yet melancholy is a very familiar emotional experience of mine. It is a familiar habit of mind. Melancholy is a part of me. In a sense, I am “attached” to my melancholic nature.

At the same time, I am aesthetically engaged and psychologically attached to the prairie landscape in the positive ways I’ve described.

Old Man on His Back Ranch, Sask.

Near Wounded Knee, South Dakota

Rural Municipality of Perdue, Sask.

Southern New Mexico, U.S.



**Attachment to the Prairie
as an Influence on One's Art Work**

Visual art in the tradition of abstract expressionism and minimalism can reflect the minimal and abstract landscapes of the prairie. Artists who grow up on the prairie often feel that the landscape leaves an indelible print on their imagination.

Jackson Pollock, who grew up in Wyoming, never got over what he called the West's expansiveness and "vast horizontality," qualities that influenced his abstract paintings. The lines that he put into his paintings express an expansiveness that has been associated with the Western landscape. Because the landscape is relatively empty and uncluttered, it lends itself both to abstraction and to the filling of the open spaces. In Pollock the two approaches come together. (Milton 61)

Georgia O'Keeffe, who grew up on the Midwest plains and lived most of her later years on the high plateaus of New Mexico, thought that where a painter grew up and lived was reflected in their art. Her own paintings reflect the "barren beauty" of the plains (Milton 61).

Wright Morris, the novelist and photographer who spent his adolescent years in Nebraska, said that the prairie "conditioned what I see, what I look for, and what I find in the world to write about. The plain is a metaphysical landscape...Where there is almost nothing to see, there man sees the most" (qtd. in Marty).

Robert Adams, who for years photographed the plains in Eastern Colorado in black and white, was greatly influenced by his deep attachment to his home land. He described his engagement with the plains:

Were you and I to drive the plains together, and the day turned out to be a good one, we might not say much. We might get out of the truck at a crossroads, stretch, walk a little ways, and then walk back. Maybe the lark would sing. Maybe we would stand for a while, all views to the horizon, all roads interesting. We might find there a balance of form and openness, even of community and freedom. It would be the world as we had hoped, and we would recognize it together (Adams 182).

left: Rural Municipality of Arlington, Sask.
right: Yucatan, Mexico

left: Near Kyle, Sask.
right: Vancouver Island, B.C.



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Notes

¹ The Canadian government greatly exaggerated the promise of farming on the prairie, especially the Palliser triangle in Sask., to entice European settlers. In the first decade of the 20th Century most who had settled left due to severe drought. And then, during the depression, many more left after years of drought and no crops.

