

Overlooking Saskatchewan: Minding the Gap* edited by Randal Rogers and Christine Ramsay (University of Regina Press, 2014)

The editors of *Overlooking Saskatchewan* take on the task of reclaiming ‘the impossible project of community’ (xi), made doubly impossible because this Canadian prairie province is often dismissed by metropolitan Canada as flat, monochromatic and uninteresting.

Who from here does not recognize the familiar look of the outsider who wonders as we speak why we would want to live in this void between other ‘real’ and ‘true’ places – in the gap, as the joke goes, between Calgary and Winnipeg, to be looked down on, literally, as one flies over. (xii)

Think the famous *New Yorker* magazine cover, in which flat, brown nothing begins three feet into New Jersey. But an accurate portrayal of the province’s racial, class and gender diversity, many contributors note, is also thwarted by Saskatchewan’s very boosters, who champion a ‘Saskaboom’ centred in the energy, real-estate and other overwhelmingly white-dominated businesses of the large cities, while ignoring the enduring poverty and exploitation visited on Aboriginal Canadians as well as the Métis (people of mixed French and Aboriginal ancestry who were literally shunted into the ditch, as contributor David Garneau documents). Such narratives are rarely likely to warm the hearts of the Chamber of Commerce.

Overlooking Saskatchewan, then, brings together writers from history, literary studies and arts practitioners who seek to reclaim the province as a place that matters and in which community, ironically, arrives out of a recognition of ‘the impossibility of adding up, of ever finally reaching a state of comfortable identity and total belonging’, (xiv) especially when racial rivalries and enmities between Anglo-Canadians and pretty much everyone else are added into the narratives. In this the contributors largely succeed. Central to the contributors’ project is the inclusion of the previously ignored/marginalised Aboriginal presence, as well as reflections on the once shunned Ukrainian, Chinese and other non-British settlers who staked out a place in the province. What *Overlooking Saskatchewan* presents is a messy, complex and confounding narrative – but out of multi-vocality the gaps in the Saskatchewan story are mended.

As in any edited volume, some chapters are stronger, or perhaps will appeal to various readers based on their own disciplines and interests. Nicole Côté movingly analyses Joey Tremblay’s play, *Elephant Wake*, in which the mentally challenged protagonist JC stubbornly hangs onto his near-ghost town Francophone home town as well as his misguided belief in his cultural and ethnic purity, when all evidence points to his blended English, French and Native heritage. The artist David Garneau looks at the marginalisation of Métis who were cast aside to live on marginal unclaimed lands – far away from ‘modern’ (white) Saskatchewan, but near enough to become a ready source of low-wage labour. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia or ‘undocumented’ Latinos in the U.S. would understand this exploitative nearness-farness paradigm. The francophone, and especially the ‘vanishing’ (but not quite) Indian presence in the province presents a story of ‘hybridity that challenges conventional ideas of identity and place, especially those directed toward purity’ (xxviii).

Perhaps the grimmest reminder of this enforced racial purification of the ‘Saskaboom’ saga comes from Brenda Beckman-Long, who examines narratives of Natives who have survived ‘starlight tours’ in which police officers in Saskatoon and Regina snatch Native men from city

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streets and drive them far into the bush to make it back (or not) to safety as best they are able. This forcible erasure, what scholar Patrick Brantlinger (2003) elsewhere refers to as ‘Dark Vanishings’,¹ is still occurring in the twenty-first century and not some uncomfortable remnant of a dimly distant colonial past. It is in Beckman-Long’s chapter that the reader encounters the violent implications of a racially exclusionary, selective narrative of a place’s history. This is the grim side of community – similar to the sunset towns in the U.S. where blacks were warned to leave before dark. By effacing the African American, the Native, the Chinese and Mexican, from the dominant national narrative, non-white denizens enduringly remain in a gap. They are Nobody, and it Never Happened.

Of course, from the beginning white Saskatchewan settlers have been ploughing under the Native presence. Christine Ramsay notes that the city of Regina was built atop a landmark known as Pile O’Bones, a huge mound of bison bones that the Cree natives had been building for years in the belief that living bison would return to the site of their ancestors’ graves. The Pile O’Bones had grown to 2 metres high and 12 metres wide by the time white Canadian settlers demolished it. Anthropologists several decades later announced that much of the Pile O’Bones had actually been Aboriginal remains, the burial mounds of Natives decimated as early as 1857 by European-imported smallpox – again, there are obvious resonances here with other settler contexts. Thus the desecration was compounded. This semi-awareness of Native violation didn’t stop a new, whiter place for profit from being created by the entrepreneurs and boosters of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Pile O’Bones’ transformation into Regina, named in honour of Victoria Regina, was mocked by more easterly Canadians, such as a Winnipeg newspaper cartoonist who portrayed the governor general’s distaste at the bone pile’s stench. But Ramsay notes that out of adversity came progress (at least for white denizens), for Saskatchewan was the birthplace of Canada’s cooperative movement, universal healthcare, and home to Canada’s first arts board and constitutional bill of rights.

Still, as various contributors remind readers, Regina, ‘my wonderful town’, (6) more graphically perhaps than other cities in white settler colonies, was built on the ashes of exterminated, forgotten others.

Sometimes even whiteness is a many-shaded colour. James M. Pitsula’s examination of the popularity of the Ku Klux Klan in 1920s Saskatchewan – a part of the province’s history ‘relegated to a past best forgotten’ – looks at the endeavours by nativists to keep the province pure for old-stock, British-descent Canadians. Pitsula’s chapter, ‘Keeping Canada British’, notes that not even all whites were welcome, as the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s became a powerful political force in Saskatchewan with their cries that ‘immigrants ... speaking a babel of tongues and laying siege to British hegemony’ had to be thwarted (153). Pitsula gives the lie to the dismissal of KKK members as ‘marginal men’, noting that it was the cream of respectable middle-class Anglo-Canada that rallied to the cause of keeping their country ‘purely’ British (154). As in the U.S., the group’s leaders thundered that ‘the Klan refuses to be the grandfather of a mongrel race in Canada’ (161). The Klan got in many digs, too, at the suspected dual loyalty of Catholics (165), calls which likewise resonated in the States when the Catholic (gasp!) governor of New York ran for president in 1928.

The Klan’s hegemony in Saskatchewan was brief, but not because tolerance made an unlikely appearance. As in 1920s Indiana, Klan leaders were caught embezzling the

¹ See Patrick Brantlinger, *Dark Vanishings: Discourse on the Extinction of Primitive Races, 1800-1930* (Cornell University Press, 2003).

organisation's funds, and Saskatchewan leaders fled, never to be heard from again, 'though it was rumored that they ended up in Australia' (160).

Recollections of such sordid pasts confound not just the comforting story of progress, but call into question the purity of place that today, many Canadians with vowel-laden surnames and Ukrainian Easter eggs in the cupboard take for granted. One's ancestors were often unwelcome, and gave the jitters to an earlier era's worriers over too much 'difference'.

Natives, too, had to be 'pure' to appeal to white Saskatchewanians, even if the purity was fabricated. Carmen Robertson analyses Saskatchewan's most celebrated 'Native' resident, Grey Owl, who was lionised in the 1930s as the epitome of indigenous respect for the environment and the land. When it was revealed shortly after his death in 1938 that Grey Owl was in reality Archie Belaney of England, some cognitive gymnastics were required to continue claiming Grey Owl as the province's favourite 'noble savage'. Still, to this day Parks Canada promotes tourism to Grey Owl's cabin in Prince Albert National Park, and he remains the province's most famous Aboriginal son. Robertson argues that Grey Owl's popularity in life and the enduring belief many have in Grey Owl/Belaney's indigenous identity was because he 'told non-Natives what they wanted to hear, that "Native people did not actually concern themselves with politics and indeed were quite content with the colonial status quo".' He fulfilled the white ideological imperative: A stoic 'savage' living in harmony with nature (167-70). Grey Owl lived up to the white cultural ideal of a stereotypical Indian frozen in time, and thus relieved whites from worrying about the status of real Natives, in the 1930s or 2010s. We see what our ideology requires us to see. When the evidence proved too overwhelming, white Canadians reversed course and argued that Grey Owl's authenticity didn't matter after all, for he had emblematised conservationist principles of value to all Canadians. The noble savage was reclaimed for the country, no matter his real ancestry.

Some contributors are at times a bit too enamoured of academic jargon, with very real struggles over political atrocities verging on reduction to cultural analysis of texts. As in many edited collections, *Overlooking Saskatchewan* draws in contributors from a variety of disciplines, an overall strength to the volume, but some chapters are less appealing to an historian.

This caveat aside, *Overlooking Saskatchewan* is an important reminder that, in settler societies, the best way to present a fuller, more accurate community study is to 'unsettle' the dominant narrative. The contributors to this volume do an able job in bringing Aboriginal, Métis, and other non-Nordic voices into the Saskatchewan community.

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