

World Making: Poetry and Landscape of the Prairies

Carl J. Tracie, *Shaping a World Already Made: Landscape and Poetry of the Canadian Prairies*. Regina: University of Regina Press, 2016. xvi + 230 pp.

In *Shaping a World Already Made: Landscape and Poetry of the Canadian Prairies*, geographer Carl J. Tracie aims to discern the influence of “the world of environment and culture” as a means to understand place. The place he seeks to gain further knowledge of is the Canadian prairies and the culture is the poetry produced in this geographical space, or created by writers who are identified closely with the space. Poet and critic Dennis Cooley is right to point out in the foreword that “No one has ever written a book on Canadian prairie poetry” of this scope, making its publication a “signal event” (xi). Tracie chooses as his primary focus nine poets who are associated in significant ways with the prairies: Di Brandt, John Newlove, Lorna Crozier, Patrick Friesen, Jan Zwicky, Tim Lilburn, Eli Mandel, Dennis Cooley, and Andrew Suknaski. Additionally, a range of other writers, such as Marilyn Dumont, Gregory Scofield, Louise Halfe, and Emma LaRoque, finds presence in the discussion, though they do not receive significant attention: the book is heavily skewed toward writers of European settler descent. Nevertheless, in the sense it emphasizes writers that have received scant attention, *Shaping a World Already Made* makes an important contribution to the scholarship of literary culture that is identified with the Canadian prairies.

Shaping a World Already Made proceeds less with a thesis than with a general interest to identify the notion of a Canadian prairie region as its primary organizing concept. This proves to be its key conceptual weakness. The notion of a Canadian prairies is defined as a function of a set of geographical features, and as a consequence Tracie also defines the poetry created in this space (or by poets who can be identified as stemming from it) as being determined by the geographical features he identifies as typical of a prairie landscape. The result is a challenging approach to the poetry he explores: the poetry is useful only insofar as it supports thematic understandings of the world it is deemed to arise out of.

Poetry's status as language and as emanating from a complex literary history is not theorized, nor is the notion that landscape exists in poetic expression only insofar as a construction of language. This is unfortunate for a number of reasons: the approach prioritizes thematic commentary that largely eludes close attention to the aesthetic qualities of the texts examined; many of the poets Tracie discusses are themselves well aware of the relationship of signification to the world they occupy. Mandel, for example, obsessively rehearses the problems of language as the matter of poetry (as opposed to the problems of landscape). Mandel's 1977 volume *Out of Place* well exemplifies the ever-shifting attention he pays to symbol, signification, articulation, and creativity: ostensibly a book-length poem about a return trip to the Southern Saskatchewan of Mandel's youth, *Out of Place* is ultimately primarily interested in the speaker-poet's immersion in language and exploration of signification systems as he traverses the prairie landscape. Similarly, Cooley's work turns to the possibilities and problems of language as the tool of human articulation—and poetry as a particular mode of that tool. Landscape features prominently in books like *Fielding* and *Irene*, for example, but the poetry's interest is not determined by that landscape but rather by the myriad cultural elements that Cooley seeks to work out. Likewise, for Lilburn the attention to the landscape is hallmarked not by a landscape as originator of word but rather of landscape as a place that demonstrates the threshold qualities of language.

The approach, then, is to rely on physical qualities of landscape as identifiers of a poem's qualification as stemming from a Canadian prairie poet, which is why a writer like Zwicky is featured as an important prairie poet, a position she is not typically seen to occupy. As Tracie remarks, "The most obvious criterion for the influence of prairie landscape on prairie poetry, and the one I employ here, is the use of landscape images and descriptions. Poets writing from and about the prairies would be expected to include references to, or imagery of, the physical elements of the landscape they observe" (21). The focus on thematic concerns misses a key quality of poets like Lilburn, Mandel and Cooley, which is that they are not mainly observers of the landscape but rather interested in the role of language as means to understand the place of the self in the world, and the specificities of the prairie landscape are not the originators of that interest. Robert Kroetsch, who receives little attention in Tracie's book, perhaps best articulates this concern in *Seed Catalogue*, which concludes that the self can only be situated in language or as a relationship to language. Birk Sproxtton, a surprising omission from Tracie's book,

indicates the very point I'm making in his poem "Heisler, the Hotel" from *Headframe: 2*, where the poet-speaker and the figure of Cooley explore Kroetsch's literal landscape and find no signs of the poet or his work. The figuration exists only in the construction of language that is Kroetsch's oeuvre and it is pointless to try to find it in place (to echo Mandel in *Out of Place*, to be in place is to be out of place).

The result is a focus on thematic elements as the primary organizing feature of *Shaping a World Already Made*, and while there is value in the identification of various themes in the poetry, the result is unsatisfying. For example, the second chapter, "Poets of the Prairie: Enduring Elements of Prairie Landscape in Prairie Poetry" proceeds by author: each poet receives 4-5 pages of attention organized around a biographical identification of the poet's relation to the prairies, and a listing of excerpts from poems that exemplify landscape-oriented themes such as air, sky, snow, space, darkness, light, etc. The number of examples is impressive in terms of volume, but there is little-to-no critical attention to any of the passages. Typically, 10-20 lines from a poem might be introduced by a single sentence. Critical consideration is absent making it impossible to find much value in the presentation of the poetry. Later chapters emphasize broad thematic explorations—race and gender, ambivalence and ambiguity, mystery and silence, literary and popular poetry—that lead to numerous generalizations rather than to closely argued, and theoretically supported, critical-interpretive conclusions. For example, the discussion of Indigenous and non-Indigenous understandings of landscape rests on a set of gross generalizations: "In general terms, there is a vast difference in the experience of home between settler society and Aboriginal society. Settler society had to make the prairie home, while to Aboriginal society the prairie *was* home, and had been for time out of mind" (91); "Societal perspectives on landscape are quite different for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. For Aboriginal cultures, landscape is a nurturing, mothering presence to be welcomed and respected. . . The Aboriginal relationship to the land is, in general, built on cooperation and adaptation, whereas for non-Aboriginal culture it is built on domination and control" (97). While there may be some truth to these statements—and others like them—Tracie offers no substantiation for his claims about the difference between the two perspectives he outlines. Surely, at the very least one should be writing specifically about Indigenous perspectives about the landscape and home, and one should acknowledge that differences exist across the expanse of the prairies. *Shaping a World Already Made* would have been well served by specific

discussions of poets like Randy Lundy (amongst many others), for example, who carefully addresses issues of place, space, and identity in his work.

The very guiding concept of the book—the notion of a prairie west—is complicated by lack of clarity. In the introductory chapter, Tracie does not make clear what his definition of prairie is as he only devotes a couple of paragraphs to the matter and those paragraphs provide little insight. Tracie rightly points out that the designator “prairie” refers “inappropriately” to three western provinces when the majority of the geography is not comprised of prairie lands. The grasslands, which are the proper prairie landscape, “from the core of short-grass prairie to the parkland and forest on its perimeter” (7), seem to be how he conceives the term “prairie”. While Tracie wants to prioritize the grasslands with emphasis on writers such as Crozier, Cooley, and Newlove, this categorization is troubled by inclusion of such writers as Friesen and Lilburn. The former is noted particularly for his urban poetry, set in Winnipeg, alongside his landscape-oriented writing, and the latter employs spaces such as the scrubland of the South Saskatchewan River which is not typically identified as grassland, and thus are not the kind of “prairie” that fit with Tracie’s emphasis. The point is not to quibble about what is and is not “prairie” but that Tracie does not adequately define the term, and at times the writers do not fit easily into his paradigm. The focus on grasslands might explain why writers such as Joan Crate, Shane Rhodes, Alison Calder, and Sproxton are excluded as none of them emphasizes the landscape of the grasslands, but it does not explain why others like Lilburn, Friesen, and Zwicky are heralded as examples of the kind of writing Tracie wants to identify as a tradition.

The focus on themes of landscape blurs the links that can be made among a host of poets writing in the prairie west over the last forty or fifty years—links that are rooted in considerations of language, literary tradition, genre, and poetics. Serving perhaps as a counter argument to *Shaping a World Already Made*, Douglas Barbour in “Story for a Saskatchewan Night”, set in the grasslands of the Qu’Appelle Valley, addresses the problem of what the landscape gives the poet: “there is/ no story that/ is what i have to tell you”. Poetry arises out of language and its engagement with other language, he notes, in a self-referentiality: “now that we know/ theres no story at all/ we can begin to tell it”. *Shaping a World Already Made* seems, then, to be a missed opportunity to examine the wealth of poetic production even when it draws the gaze to poets who are deserving of increased scholarly attention.

Works Cited

Barbour, Douglas. "Story for a Saskatchewan Night." *Story for a Saskatchewan Night*. Red Deer: Red Deer College Press, 1990. 9-17.

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