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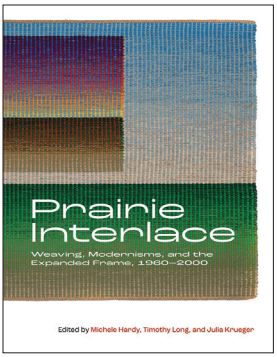


PRAIRIE INTERLACE: WEAVING, MODERNISMS, AND THE EXPANDED FRAME, 1960-2000

Edited by Michele Hardy, Timothy Long, and Julia Krueger

ISBN 978-1-77385-488-5

Jane Kidd, *Landslice* #3, 1989 (cat. 27)

10

Six Ways of Looking at *Prairie Interlace*

by Alison Calder

The View

> *Looking at wolf willow bloom,*
> *streaming through plushlands of scent towards the feeling of its yellow, self*
> *breaks up, flaring in stratosphere.*
> *Looking undermines us.*
> *The world and its shining can't hold our evaporating weight.*
>
> Tim Lilburn, 2007, "How To Be Here?"[1]

The Prairie landscape only looks like it would be easy to turn into art. Writers who first tried to use their imported English to describe the place ignored the Indigenous languages and knowledge that might have helped them to get their bearings. This alienation wove its way into the best-known Prairie realist novels, which were read, like the landscape itself, as being transparent or self-evident. Much writing from the Prairie provinces in the last fifty or so years has been engaged in the act of *un*writing. As Karina Vernon points out in *The Black Prairie Archives*, that Prairie literary history reflects a white settler/colonizer perspective is no accident.[2] I would add that it's also no accident that Prairie literary history largely reflects a view that the *raison d'être* of the Prairies is resource extraction, whether agricultural products, mining, oil, or even art. In this mindset, its value centres on its usefulness in the generation of wealth; land that cannot be exploited is a waste of space.

The works in *Prairie Interlace* interrupt this narrative of regional use-value, in terms of both place and art. As recent Prairie writing turns towards environmental awareness, deep history, and Indigenous knowledge, readers are invited to look again at a landscape taken

for granted. This looking, as Tim Lilburn writes, undermines us, unsettling ideas of ownership and mastery. So, too, viewers of *Prairie Interlace* are challenged by works like Pirkko Karvonen's *Rapeseed Fields* (cat. 25). Here the perspective is unexpectedly aerial: instead of seeing the usual horizon, we look down on a crop that spills out of its fields, swamping grid roads or tunneling beneath them. The piece's title invites speculation: in what ways is this a field? It has become a cliché to talk about a Prairie experience in terms of land and sky, but here the viewer may be actually *in* the sky, looking down on fields that can be experienced purely as shape and colour. The horizontal/vertical relation, emphasized in Henry Kreisel's oft-quoted vision of a "giant in the landscape" silhouetted against the sky,[3] is disrupted. Similar revisioning occurs in *Landslice #1* by Jane Kidd (cat. 26), which presents as a cross-section of soil, here constructed by pulling the warp threads after weaving to create a bunched fabric. If *Rapeseed Fields* takes the viewer above the earth, *Landslice #1* suggests a need to look below it. The colourful fabric, reading as scraps or discards even though it is one solid piece, serves an almost archaeological function, reminding viewers of the land's deep history as layers of human occupation are revealed. It also suggests a manufactured landscape, not only by showing a landslice that has been itself constructed, but also by presenting the spectacle of the artist's labour. While the labour that goes into farming, for example, is amply represented in canonical Prairie novels such as Martha Ostenso's 1925 *Wild Geese*,[4] the labour that goes into producing those novels is largely masked by the finished product. So, too, with domestic textile crafts, largely made by women, where the maker's time and skill are eclipsed by the use-value inherent in a product like a dish-towel or a pair of hand-knit socks. Through use, these products become ephemeral, and the labour held in rugs, clothing, blankets, towels, and even rags dissolves and disappears. In *Landslice #3* (cat. 27), the viewer is particularly confronted with "wasted" productivity, as Kidd's laborious action of pulling the warp threads transforms the flat woven textile into a sculptural art object. The *Landslice* pieces call into view multivalent questions about the relationship of settler/colonizer culture to the place, the cost to the earth of such settlement, the erasure of women's labour in home-making, and the need to engage in both literal and figurative excavations of buried history.

The Body

Let's stand up for breasts
any size, any colour,
breasts shaped like kiwi
fruit,
like mandolins, like pouter
pigeons,
breasts playful and shameless as
puppies.
Breasts that pop buttons,
breasts with rose tattoos.
Let's give them the vote.
Let's make them mayor for the
day.

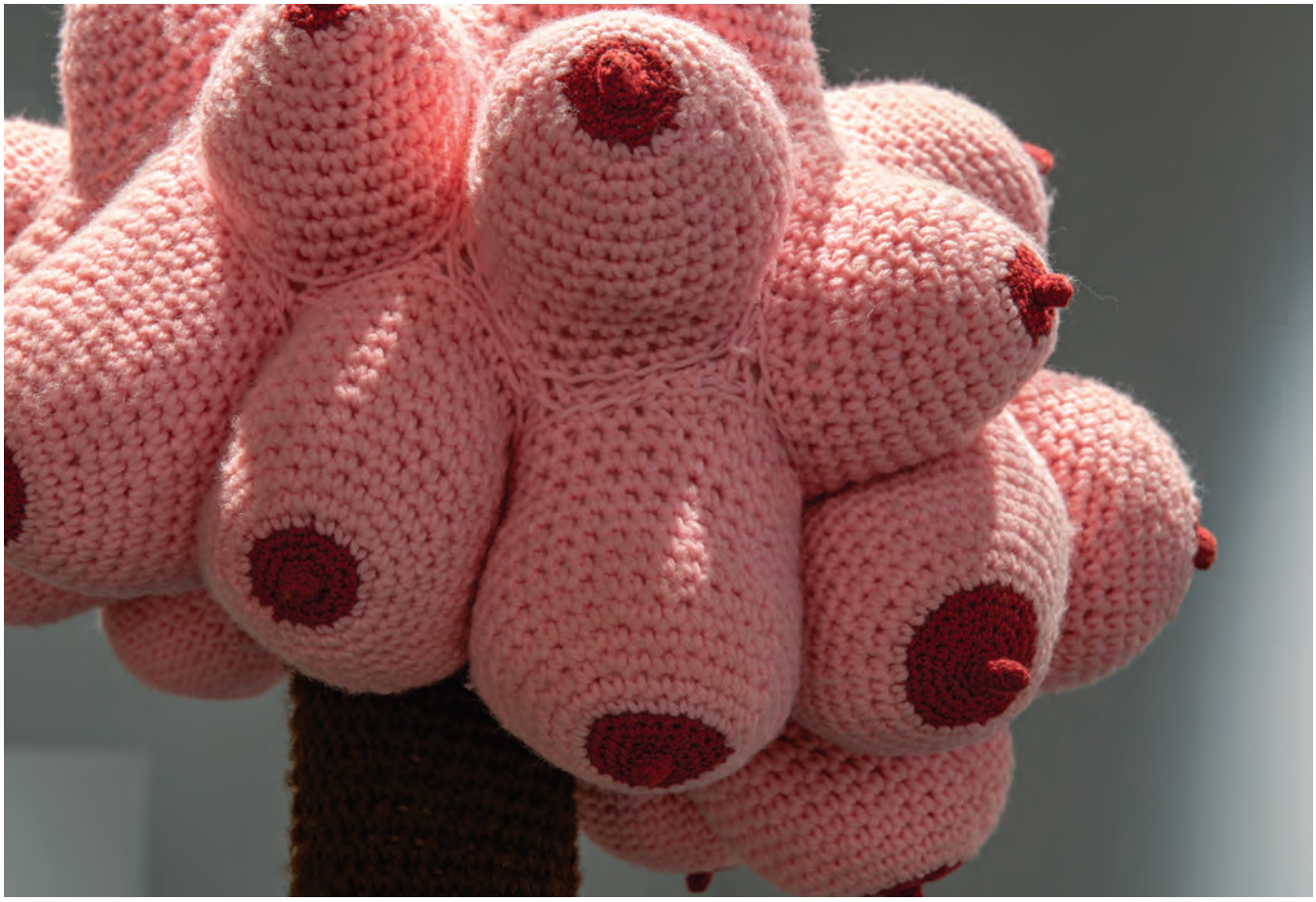
Lorna Crozier, 2009, "News Flash from the Fashion Magazines"[5]

Thus writes poet Lorna Crozier in an extract from "News Flash from the Fashion Magazines." Crozier's poem—playful, feminist, political, a little ridiculous—works with imagery and language to break the silence surrounding women's bodies and to highlight the ways in which the fashion industry, and capitalism in general, seeks to control them. Ostensibly a response to an article claiming that breasts are out of fashion, the poem has a sister expression in Phyllis Green's *Boob Tree* (cat. 18), where Crozier's description of breasts "shaped like kiwi fruit" are literalized in Green's sculpture. Like Crozier, Green makes breasts the centre of attention, turning them into fruit or leaves, both animating them and leaving them strangely unmoored. Disembodied, Green's crocheted breasts are shocking, but only because the cultural fixation on women's bodies is unmasked. Does Western culture treat women as boob trees? Where Crozier presents breasts as independent entities, giving them a parodic power—"Let's give them the vote"—Green's crochet treatment renders them curiously passive. At the same time, her use of crochet adds to potential scandal by linking a craft most commonly associated with grandmothers to an open sexuality. The cartoonish quality of Green's work, accentuated by her bright colours, suggests and comments on the juvenile nature of the male gaze—a gaze which, Crozier's poem points out, women also turn on themselves.

Concern with female identity links Green's fructified body to Aganetha Dyck's vertebral sculpture *Close Knit* (cat. 13). These felted sweaters are simultaneously different and the same, with their anthropomorphic attitudes suggesting that they're looking around curiously, perhaps crowded together for comfort—or because they're unable to leave. It's tempting to read into this piece the kind of exploration and exposé of Prairie Mennonite communities that poet di brandt undertook her 1987 *questions i asked my mother* or novelist Miriam Toews showed in her 2004, *A Complicated Kindness*.[6] Dyck's use of felted sweaters, with the pun on clothes/close, literally softens her critique as the medium allows ambiguous interpretation. What is the cost of the uniformity she depicts? Dyck's wordless art permits contradictory situations to be true simultaneously, managing to show complex social identities without assigning blame. The medium also presents Dyck with a kind of plausible deniability perhaps not available to Nancy Crites, whose use of condoms in the welcome mat in *Threshold—No Laughing Matter* (cat. 9) makes it impossible to consider the piece apolitically. Like Kidd's scrap-like aesthetic in her *Landslice* works, Dyck's use of felted sweaters in *Close Knit* also evokes questions about sustainability, waste, and labour. Are these garments spoiled in their transformation into art, or are these waste items usefully repurposed? What kind of costs are being examined here—and who is paying the bill?

The Depths

"On that monotonous surface with its occasional ship-like farm, its atolls of shelter-belt trees, its level ring of horizon, there is little to interrupt the eye. Roads run straight between parallel lines of fence until they intersect the circle of the horizon. It is a landscape of circles, radii, perspective



Phyllis Green, *Boob Tree* (detail), 1975 (cat. 18)

exercises—a country of geometry."[7] So writes Wallace Stegner in the 1962 *Wolf Willow*, his iconic memoir of growing up in southern Saskatchewan. Such geometry might seem to define people's relation to the place, as in the title of Laurence Ricou's 1973 study of Prairie literature, *Vertical Man/Horizontal World*.[8] But as the subtitle of Stegner's book suggests—"A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier"—the seemingly definite lines mask a complex intersection of time, place, and human response. The land's transparency is a disguise, hiding different realities that are perhaps best connected through metaphor or art.

An insistence that place is important is present even in the title *Prairie Interlace*, and many of the works included here engage directly with a geometric settler imagination. Amy Loewan's *A Mandala "The Circle and the Square"* (cat. 30) and *A Peace Project* (cat. 31) are obvious examples, as are Margaret Sutherland's *The Seed* (cat. 53) and Pirkko Karvonen's *Rapeseed Fields* (cat. 25). But, as with the Prairie itself, all is not as it seems. Pat Adams' *Prairie Sunset* (cat. 1), with its minimalist representation of horizon and light, looks like it fits into Stegner's model perfectly. But what then does one do with Adams' *Remember That Sunset We Saw From Here One Time?* (cat. 2) While on the one hand viewers now see two landscapes, through the postmodern duplication and layering of images they are also confronted with the fact that neither of these rectangles is actually a landscape at all. Stegner's natural geography is here refigured as a highly stylized representation that looks increasingly unnatural as Adams' work raises questions of colour and scale. And is the Prairie really this flat? That both layered images seem plausible suggests that neither might be, as Adams' work draws attention to the art rather than the subject. This insistent problematizing of representation, also epitomized in genre-blurring written texts such as Kristjana Gunnars' 1989 *The Prowler* or Aritha van Herk's 1990 *Places Far from Ellesmere*,[9] speaks again to a desire to unwrite Prairie clichés. In juxtaposing the landscape of Ellesmere Island with the setting of Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina*, van Herk produces a double vision that creates a space to consider the "rules" of representation of both environment and gender. Adams' piece functions similarly, as viewers are invited to carry questions about the construction of the tapestry into a consideration of the construction of the landscape itself.

Further complications of place are suggested in Brenda Campbell's *Woodlands Undercover* (cat. 8). Its topographical imagery, reminiscent of *Rapeseed Fields* (cat. 25), appears ripped out of a larger frame, the lighter border against the black evoking both a shredded map, and a lakeshore seen from above. Strands of field and furrow dangle and unravel into a texture that evokes the woodlands of the piece's title. To be undercover is to be subversive, hidden: what does it mean to unmake a landscape, particularly one that has been so consciously made? The piece's two straight edges accentuate the lack of framing elsewhere. Not only does the material seem to drip off the work's ripped edge, but in the use of spaces between the woven cords, the work also allows the viewer's gaze to go beyond the surface (undercover?) to the wall behind.

Striking here also is the use of colour. Where *Rapeseed Fields* (cat. 25) employs familiar green and gold to invoke its subject, Campbell's use of grey means that viewers need to find another way to understand how what they see represents a woodland. Meanwhile, in *Ten Shades of Sheep* (cat. 55), Annabel Taylor uses colour to promote a different kind of engagement. Paradoxically, by turning her work into a colour study, she draws a direct line to materials usually taken for granted.

Consumer culture suggests that textiles and clothing are endlessly available, appearing as the product of unseen hands and coming from invisible sources. *Ten Shades of Sheep* (cat. 55) literally makes these sources visible as the distinct shades of wool work together to create a cohesive texture. Both sampler and showcase, it links both to highly conceptual works and to the earthy beauty of Kate Waterhouse's dye archive (cat. 58). Showing local plants like fleabane and nettle in what is perhaps an unexpected light, Waterhouse's archive invites a redefinition of the surroundings, as plants that viewers thought they knew are revealed to have unexpected dimensions. In these ways, viewers are prompted to step outside of well-trodden paths as they consider the underpinnings of their surroundings.

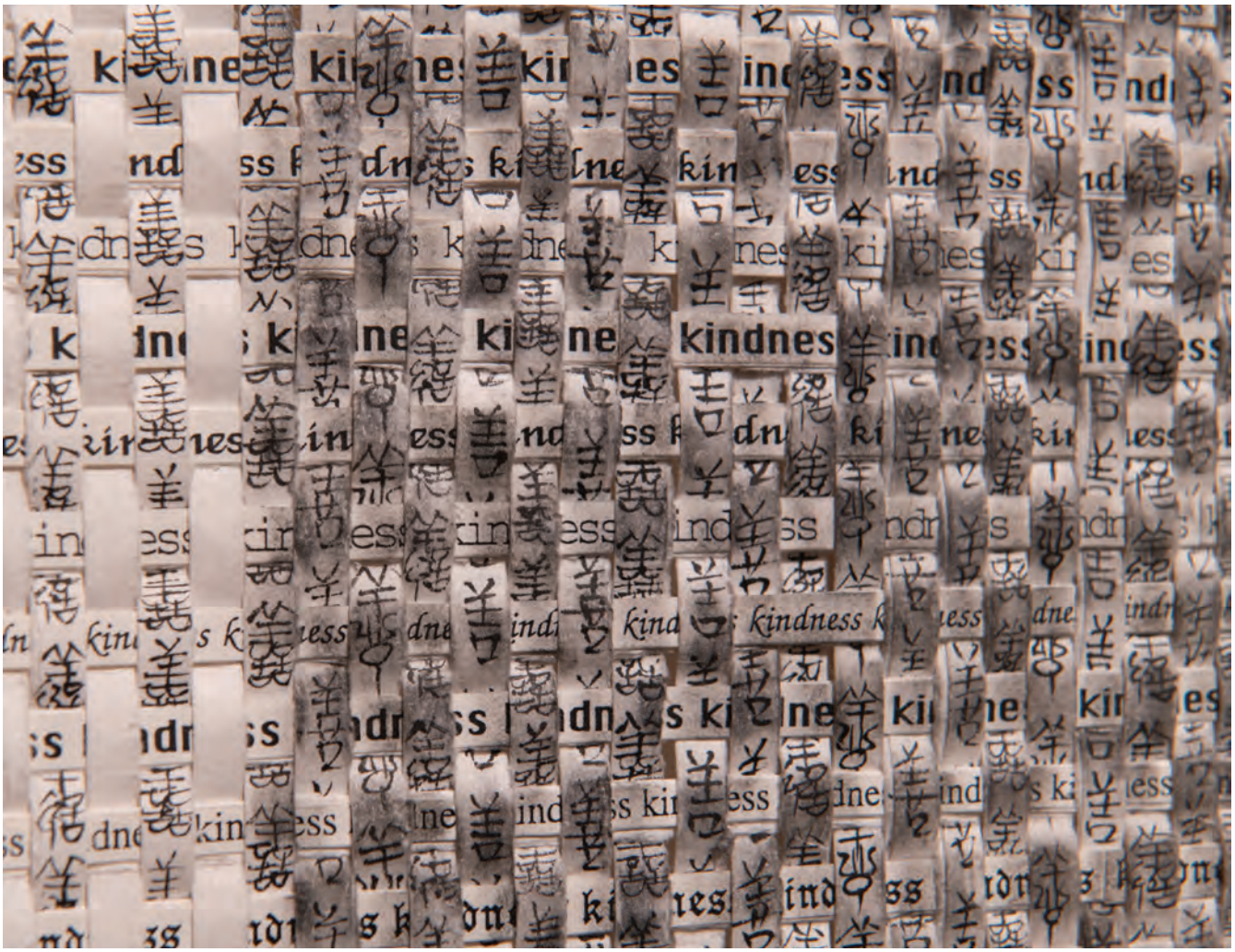
The Flat?

Everyone knows that the Prairie is made for farming. Or is it? One result of viewing the Prairie primarily in terms of resource extraction is that it is now one of the world's most altered landscapes. Following other imaginative roads requires a recentering, an ability to reframe and see a place without literal or symbolic horizons. This essay began with a consideration of the disorienting aerial view offered by Karvonen's *Rapeseed Fields*. (cat. 25) and Carol Little's *Furrow* (cat. 29) adds another dimension to that top-down perspective. *Furrow* turns the line upon its axis, simultaneously evoking a furrow seen lengthwise, as the long strip of fabric replicates the straight line of the plow, and crossways, as the zig-zagging of the fabric calls to mind a cross-section of a furrowed field. If we think about the Prairie having two dimensions—Stegner's landscape of circles, radii, perspective exercises—then *Furrow* bursts into 3D with the dynamism of a flying carpet. The vibrant colour further defamiliarizes the agricultural landscape, redefining a furrow in terms of aesthetic possibility rather than agricultural byproduct. What is the purpose of this airborne furrow, caught mid-launch? We might consider it beside Cathryn Miller's *Winter Sun* (cat. 35), whose sharp angles capture frozen light and ice crystals. *Winter Sun* is all about stillness, while *Furrow*, like Dyck's *Close Knit* (cat. 13), invites animation. While some pieces suggest thoughtful contemplation, *Furrow* looks like a viewer might have to chase it around the gallery. The Prairie is imagined by many to be unchanging, a timeless, motionless agricultural landscape, always in the past. Little uses this piece's title as a hinge to swing representation from one mode to another, raising questions about both the art and its putative subject, and giving settler geometry a reboot.

Margaret Sutherland, *The Seed*, c. 1984 (cat. 53)

Margaret Sutherland, *The Seed* (detail), c. 1984 (cat. 53)

Amy Loewan, *A Peace Project*, 2000 (cat. 31)



Amy Loewan, *A Peace Project* (detail), 2000 (cat. 31)

Cathryn Miller, *Winter Sun*, c. 1977 (cat. 35)

Kate Waterhouse, *Kate Waterhouse Archives—Dye Sample Chart*, 1977 (cat. 58)

Florence Ryder, *Untitled (lilac ground)*, no date (cat. 48)

The Voice

now
make room in the mouth
for grassesgrassesgrasses

Layli Long Soldier,
2017, *Whereas*[10]

In "38," her poem about the thirty-eight Dakota men hanged in 1862 for their resistance to starvation-induced genocide caused by the American government's failure to honour treaties made with the Dakota Nation, Oglala Lakota poet Layli Long Soldier brings together art, history, memory, aesthetics, resistance, and Indigenous resurgence. The annual memorial ride commemorating the thirty-eight men hanged for their part in the Sioux Uprising, she writes, "is not an object inscribed with words, but an *act*."[11] When I look at the works made by Florence Ryder (cat. 48 & 49) and by the artists in the Sioux Handcraft Co-operative (cat. 7, 15, 16, 17, 24, 33, 34, 54, 60, 61), I want to think about the making of art as an act of memorializing, an act which does not locate Indigenous culture in the past but insists on it as a continuing strength in the present. Making this art is an act of resistance that adapts colonial craft practices by incorporating traditional knowledge. In making the rug, the artist animates that knowledge, as a storyteller animates through speech. This is to say that these pieces are not artifacts. Describing the Sioux uprising, Long Soldier writes that "'*Real*' *poems do not 'really' require words*."[12] If I think of these rugs as acts rather than as objects, then I can understand them not only as records of Sioux decorative art and the traditional knowledge associated with it, but I can also understand the labour that went into them as an ongoing resurgent practice. In that the rug becomes the record of its own making, it becomes, as Long Soldier suggests, "an *act*." This is a different kind of geometry that speaks to plenitude, not emptiness, and whose lines are paths written by the land itself.

The Thread

Even a tightly woven fabric contains space. Conventional essay writing states that you need an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. But, like the interlacing suggested in this exhibition's title, the works in *Prairie Interlace* refuse a straight line, instead insisting on multiplicity, ambiguity, deferral, and mobility. If there is a commonality here, it may be the invitation to the viewer to reconsider not only the artwork and its parameters, but also the ways in which modes of representation work to create particular narratives of place and identity. These narratives include the designs that humans make on the Prairie landscape itself, as artists work against and through the colonial grid to suggest depth and dimension. A textile's materiality can motivate a recognition of the ways that bodies imprint themselves on place, and are themselves marked by social and historical forces. The refusal of these pieces to be easily corralled into one summary shows both complexity and strength.

NOTES

1 Tim Lilburn, "How to Be Here?," in *Desire Never Leaves*, ed. Alison Calder (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), 20.

2 Karina Vernon, ed., *The Black Prairie Archives* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2020).

3 Henry Kreisel, "The Prairie: A State of Mind," in *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, ed. Eli Mandel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 254–66.

4 Martha Ostenso, *Wild Geese* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2008). First published 1925.

5 Lorna Crozier, "News Flash From the Fashion Magazines," in *The Blue Hour of the Day: Selected Poems* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2009), 66.

6 di brandt, *questions i asked my mother* (Winnipeg: Turnstone, 2015); Miriam Toews, *A Complicated Kindness* (Toronto: Knopf, 2004).

7 Wallace Stegner, *Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Prairie Frontier* (Toronto: Penguin, 2000), 7. First published 1962.

8 Laurence Ricou, *Vertical Man/Horizontal World* (Vancouver: University British Columbia Press, 1973).

9 Kristjana Gunnars, *The Prowler* (Red Deer, AB: Red Deer Press, 1992); Aritha van Herk, *Places Far From Ellesmere* (Red Deer, AB: Red Deer Press, 2003).

10 Layli Long Soldier, *Whereas* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2017), 5.

11 Long Soldier, *Whereas*, 52 (italics in original).

12 Long Soldier, *Whereas*, 53 (italics in original).