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Prairie Surreal--A Digital-Poetic Road Trip

Mari-Lou Rowley
University of Saskatchewan

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<https://vimeo.com/173414750>

Note on the Text

Two notions have compelled me since moving back to Saskatchewan ten years ago—poetic ferality and prairie surrealism. As a writer and poet who has lived most of my adult life in large urban centres, I found moving back to the prairies an unexpectedly alien experience. I felt like an outsider in my own hometown. And as a writer who has been influenced by urban avant-garde literature, visual art, performance, and dance, as well as my work as a science writer, I found my poetry regarded with suspicion in a community that fosters and champions “prairie realism.” A genre I found more surreal than Dali’s house on the Costa Brava.

Yet I love the prairies, the landscape, the people, the wildlife, and the wildness of a place and climate that can kill you at any time of the year if you are not prepared, as my first poetry mentor, Anne Szumigalski, used to say. A place and environment where, as Pamela Banting stated in her plenary talk, “Making Scents: Signature, Text, Habitat,” at the Poetics Ecologies Conference in Brussels (2008), you need the ability to “read for your life.” Indeed, since moving back to Saskatchewan I have come between a black bear and her cub, encountered a timber wolf, and learned how to catch and filet fish, recognize cougar tracks and bear scat, and shoot a rifle. These experiences have made their way into my poetry as well, partly as content, but more importantly as a theory of poetic emergence. Poetry as organic emergent system. Ferality as poetic enactivism, where poet and poem co-emerge with inner and outer environments. I have become more wedded to the landscape, and this land, than I had ever imagined, yet I am aware that my lived experience, my “intentionality” in the phenomenological sense, is shaped by my urban self as well. So, in order to fully experience this place, to try to understand the essence of prairie realism, I bought a little car and took a road trip to parts of the province I had never encountered before—grasslands, open range, parkland lakes, Carolinian forests missed by ice-age glaciers, dinosaur country.

Prairie Surreal is a poetic bricolage of video, photos, text, and voice that explores these experiences. The voice-over poems are from “Feral Verses” in *Unus Mundus* (Anvil 2013). The photos and video were shot primarily in southwestern Saskatchewan, between Eastend and Cypress Hills, during a month-long residency at the Wallace Stegner House.

This video was produced as part of a ten-day intensive Digital Storytelling and Poetics course jointly offered by the University of Saskatchewan and the Sage Hill Writing Experience. My thanks to instructors Ellen Moffat and Allison Muri, and my other (much younger and tech-savvy) classmates for their insights and assistance.

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MARI-LOU ROWLEY has published nine collections of poetry and has performed and lectured nationally and internationally. Her most recent book, *Unus Mundus* (Anvil Press 2013), was nominated for three Saskatchewan Book Awards and was second-place winner of the John V. Hicks Long Manuscript Award. Rowley is currently completing an interdisciplinary PhD in new media, neurophenomenology, and empathy at the University of Saskatchewan.

<https://usask.academia.edu/MariLouRowley> | <https://marilourowley.com>