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Oxbows and Artists

A Conversation with Margaret Sweatman

PETER J. MILLER

In the field
my grandfather
thought
was his

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—FROM “STONE HAMMER POEM” BY ROBERT KROETSCH, *COMPLETED FIELD NOTES:
THE LONG POEMS OF ROBERT KROETSCH*

When I met with Canadian novelist, poet, and playwright Margaret Sweatman in Winnipeg on May 14, 2018, she ended our discussion by referring to Robert Kroetsch’s “Stone Hammer Poem.” “In three pages,” Sweatman said, “[the poem] says everything that we’ve been talking about . . . the madness of the tools of writing over land.”¹ Sweatman and I had been speaking about the phenomenon of “section lines,” the surveyor’s marks that delineated large swaths of land and continue to shape land—sometimes without regard for geography—across North America but especially in the Prairies. Louis Riel, Métis leader during the Red River Resistance of 1869–1870, in Sweatman’s *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, observes the impracticality of surveyor’s marks and their incompatibility with the experience of people: “These Canadians, they do not follow the contour of the land with their bizarre maps. It is a madness to place their lines so.”²

Geography and history shape much of Sweatman's writing. The Red River, a 550-mile-long waterway snaking its way from Minnesota, through Manitoba, to Lake Winnipeg, and thence to the Nelson River and Hudson's Bay, looms large. The Forks of the Red and the Assiniboine, the site of present-day Winnipeg and a traditional First Nations meeting-place, is at the center of a diverse geological and ecological region, encompassing the Canadian Shield and the Prairies, the leftover remnants of great glacial movements. The low-lying Red River defies the boundary between land and water since the river's meandering pushes land and water together. More deadly, the river's shallow depth—it is too young to have carved a substantial valley—produces great floods, some of which, such as in 1950 (described in Sweatman's *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*), create temporary lakes 550 square miles in size.

In this liminal space of watery land and oxbow islands, the home since time immemorial of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dené peoples, important parts of Canadian history have played out. For Sweatman, a writer inspired by particular spaces and time, this local history structures much of her writing. Rebellion and resistance have shaped Manitoba's history, even before the European settlement of Canada. In *The Players*, Sweatman found herself driven by the "malarkey of the purity of our origins." Indeed, the Canadian narrative of noble French fur traders and passive Indigenous assimilation has been challenged in recent years as treaty rights are recognized anew and reaffirmed. Sweatman's fiction thus exists in the past of settlement and the present of resistance and reconciliation. The Métis Resistance resulted in Manitoba's entry into Canada and its uneasy—and oft-violated—guarantees of land and language rights and religious freedoms. *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* demonstrates the contest over Riel's legacy; the title characters are enthralled by "this great man . . . looking directly into their souls."³ Alice, enraged by English Protestant encroachment on the traditional lands of the Métis, participates in the execution of Orangeman Thomas Scott, the act for which Riel would hang in 1885. For Alice and her descendants, Scott became one of several ghosts that haunted their "property."

The oxbow, a sinuous near-island, a transitory space between water and land, with the ever-present threat of flood and the complete meta-

morphosis that comes with a deluge, stands as a potent metaphor for understanding Sweatman's fiction. Rather than absolute delineations and identities based on ownership (mine/yours) or reification (settler/indigenous)—the surveyor's map of straightedge and compass—the appreciation and acceptance of eternal contradiction and contingency generates a kind of individual essence and the possibility of actual interaction. In these truly human interactions, which are played out across land and over boundaries, creativity and art emerge.

* * *

Sweatman is deeply connected to land. Or, as she might put it, in love with it: "Even though we don't own the land, we can still love [it] . . . love entails commitment." Born in 1953 in Winnipeg, Sweatman was educated at the University of Winnipeg, Concordia University (Montréal), and Simon Fraser University (Burnaby, BC). Her first novel, *Fox*, was published by Turnstone Press in 1991 and has been followed by two other novels firmly connected to the Canadian—indeed Manitoban—landscape: *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* (Knopf, 2001) and *The Players* (Goose Lane Editions, 2009).⁴ In addition to two other novels (*Sam and Angie* [Turnstone, 1996] and *Mr. Jones* [Goose Lane Editions, 2014]), Sweatman has published three chapbooks of poetry, and written or co-written five plays and a number of libretti; she wrote lyrics for the song "When Wintertime," featured in the film *Seven Times Lucky*, which won a Genie Award for Best Song in Canadian Film in 2006.

Across three of her novels in particular, land and identity play major roles: *Fox* (set during the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919, the only mass workers' revolt in North American history), *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* (an intergenerational story, narrated by "Blondie," of her parents' arrival in the Red River Settlement in the 1860s up to the anti-imperialist protests of the 1960s), and *The Players* (a semi-historical tale of the founding of the Hudson's Bay Company and the 1670–1671 voyage of Pierre-Esprit Radisson and Médard des Groseilliers). Sweatman observes that land and history are integral to these stories, which come out of particular times and places—as well as her own biography:

They're very located here . . . Let's say with *Fox*: growing up in Winnipeg . . . that sense that the city I grew up in was marked by

the Strike. So even though I'm not that old, even in the '60s and '70s the city . . . was split by the Strike. And so you either had a grandfather, as I did, who was prosecuting the strikers or you were on the other side.

Situated at the Forks of the Red River and Assiniboine River, Winnipeg has been marked by a class division overlaid onto geography, in addition to Hugh MacLennan's "two solitudes" (French/Catholic, English/Protestant). Moreover, Winnipeg's Indigenous inhabitants, both First Nations and Métis (the latter descendants of early French Catholic settlers and First Nations) have been dispossessed and marginalized throughout its history.

For Sweatman, however, these divisions are creative forces, so long as they are violated. Movement across boundaries within her own city, especially the racial, economic, and political boundaries represented by urban/suburban and North/South ends, were aesthetically productive:

I was a kind of rock-and-roll kid and a theater kid, and so the city was marked between the South End and North End. And the North End was the artists. I would go to the North End to be with my rock-and-roll friends or my theater friends. So there was a sense that the future was in the movement that was personified in the strikers and . . . the courage to think in terms of revolutionary movement of real radical change—and idealism.

The North End on which Sweatman remarks is the area of the city north of the Canadian Pacific mainline, traditionally a working-class and immigrant neighborhood (it remains poor in wealth: in 2016, by some measures, 46.2 percent of the population were classed as "low-income").⁵

In *Fox*, the connection between literal and metaphoric movement and revolution comes to the fore. Two main characters, Eleanor and Mary, both from the wealthy enclave of Crescentwood (south of the Assiniboine River), traverse the physical and social boundaries that river and railway represent. Eleanor transforms her politics as she rides in the carriage of used-bookstore owner and Strike supporter MacDougal. While Eleanor may partially reimagine herself when she moves into a new apartment on Assiniboine Avenue—across a "new bridge" that

connects the old wealth of the south of the city to the new monument to landed wealth, Manitoba's provincial legislature building —it is not until she joins striking workers in a soup kitchen that she truly changes. While she initially works “all but ignored by the others,” the time spent cutting carrots buys Eleanor some credibility.⁶ In contrast, her cousin Mary, inebriated with the wealth of Crescentwood, sees the Strike as an inconvenience. When even the chauffeur has left her, Mary has to drive herself to find her family's cook, a journey into what she regards as depravity: “Mary gags, gets dry heaves, driving in her open car, dodging great heaps of stinking garbage.”⁷ By the time she arrives at the half-remembered home of Mrs. Sokolov, she is in foreign territory. She meekly offers work and babbles apologies, but Mrs. Sokolov's daughter “Lydia, graceful as a pendulum . . . takes Mary through the door and deposits her outside. Mary is standing on the porch alone, and within, the house seems so private.”⁸ In response, the bewildered Mary retreats into her social class and wealth: “When I get home, I'm going to drink Pinkham's in the bath. And eat chocolate. Then I'm going to wear something nice.”⁹

While “fictional characters are composites,” Sweatman remarked to me that when she re-read *Fox* for its re-issue, she had a sense of her affinity with Eleanor. The novel was written when Sweatman was both a new mother and close to leaving a relationship that was dominated by “money and conservatism,” which made the “situation too static.” Stagnation, Sweatman points out, begets obstruction:

There was no movement. [. . .] If you do ascribe yourself; if you reify your environment, you become your environment, then you're almost an obstruction to change; you don't let time pass through you. I remember feeling . . . like there were two different types of people: transitive and intransitive people. And I would see people for a while—I remember when I was writing *Fox*—seeing them and seeing that light does not pass through you and light does pass through you.

The interior boundaries in Winnipeg are still in effect, and the “conservative impulse” of the city means that staticity is a strong force: “I think we're still in various demarcations of class and race, and immigration patterns are still very defined. And I still see baby-boom generation

people like me thinking that they know what's going on now because they knew somebody's grandfather or father." Sweatman herself, however, is a product of a breach of these conservative impulses and the boundaries designed—implicitly or explicitly—to replicate them:

Theater school. As a kid. It was down at Portage and Main, and that actually saved my life . . . taking the bus down to Portage and Main and encountering young Communists and Ukrainians and Russian immigrant kids . . . So I was very lucky that I fell in love with theater, [which] also gave me this interaction. Because kids I grew up with didn't [have it].

Movement, therefore, is paradoxically both coagulation and dispersal. For Eleanor, as for Sweatman, the movement across boundaries can change identities. The future is in movement, but change and movement are not inevitable bedfellows; their connection is generated by active interactions among different people.¹⁰ In a city like Winnipeg, where social difference maps onto geography, the possibilities of positive change are inextricably tied to actual, physical movement.

If movement generates identity, this identity, nonetheless, remains tightly tied to land and the rights we presume to have over land. Sweatman is attuned to the possibility of identification with places and the assumption that identity is a kind of deed: "When you look at a landscape over and over again, you become it. You just can't mistake that for ownership." The question—indeed the possibility—of ownership is central to Sweatman's Manitoba epic *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*. Throughout the novel, the title characters, Alice and Peter McCormack, and their descendants refer to their farmstead as "our property"—always in scare quotes in the novel. The McCormacks "know darn well" that they do not own the land on which they sojourn, and their complex relationship with land foregrounds a set of issues surrounding land and identity.

When Alice Lay Down with Peter and *The Players* challenge European claims to ownership, or at least contrast the tenuous claims of Europeans with the significant Indigenous relationship to the land. In *The Players*, during the long voyage to Hudson's Bay, the leader of the Company of Adventurers of England trading into Hudson's Bay, Magnus Brown, recalls a conversation about the logbook of the voyage that he had with

the company's governor, Prince Rupert, while in England: "Well, said Prince Rupert, 'I look forward to reading this when it is full of Rupert's Land.'"¹¹ This fantasy of absolute possession, however, is destabilized by the novel's emphasis on the flimsy and illegitimate European claim. When Radisson and his trading party return to the camp at Fort Charles, Magnus Brown worries over the rights of the Company. But, Radisson reassures him, "The Captain nailed a piece of brass to a small tree at the river's mouth. It did bear the English King's arms. He took possession of all that land for King Charles."¹² "All that land" refers to the huge territory called "Rupert's Land," "1.5 million square miles" of the inchoate country of Canada.

In Winnipeg, as in Canada, the colonial narrative of land possession has become disturbed, especially following the court decisions in the 1970s that reasserted Indigenous title to land and the Constitution Act, 1982, which reaffirmed "the existing aboriginal and treaty rights."¹³ Sweatman sees discordance in the metaphorical use of settlement and settler:

Like this word "settler" which I use a lot in *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*. The way I'm seeing it now in our environment or conversations in the English department now. [. . .] I don't think anyone is settled. And we have no chance . . . So that's not necessarily a good thing that no one owns the land because we don't have any sense of responsibility and stewardship and ownership of any kind; we're all mortgaged. And we're mortgaged to huge corporations that are inflicting corporate values on all of us and it's destroying us.

The notion of the financial value of land and its effects on biography and history are appreciated by Sweatman, who talks of "history as real estate," a sense that history can be best understood by connecting events to the land and recognizing an attachment to land at the same time as "always knowing that [the land] was not mine."

Land ownership and improvement go hand-in-hand with capitalism, and Sweatman's *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* charts the development of capitalism in the Red River Valley. Even those characters who long for the days of the nomadic buffalo hunt, such as Peter, who learned of

“a land without landlords just across the sea, a green and verdant place where a man could be free from tyranny, free from history itself,” nonetheless become land owners and entrepreneurial farmers.¹⁴ Peter initially abhors the growing encroachment of modernity on the open Prairie, and an encounter with a surveyor early in the novel shocks him: “the grid that lay upon the topography like a net, like a snare . . . the surveyor’s scribbles as scars on his weary freedom.”¹⁵ Still, with the Métis resistance at an end and Riel facing the gallows, anxiety over ownership recurs, and “Peter thought fences made the land his. A brand on it, his signature.”¹⁶ When the McCormacks bought “their” property, the deed was “a charcoal drawing of a buffalo,” and the resulting anxiety traverses generations.¹⁷ By the novel’s end, however, absolute ownership and capitalist control and delineation have been revealed as fraud: the floodwaters rise and a fire burns through the McCormack land. When the family members return, “there’s not much left of our houses at all. The land has changed shape.”¹⁸

The changing shape of land was foremost in Sweatman’s mind in her conceiving of this story. When she wrote this novel, she lived in its landscape, in St. Norbert; she resided on Marchand Road, in an oxbow of the Red River. Her neighbor’s name evoked the land and inspired the name of the narrator of *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, Blondie: “Vicki Marchand, and her husband was Eli, a Métis man . . . She was Blondie—they called her Blondie.” Sweatman’s house was on Marchand’s strawberry patch, but the “parceling and turning [of her land] into real estate . . . turned into disaster ‘cause we all fell into the river.”

The long history—and changing face—of the land challenges storytelling and the crafting of a narrative. As Sweatman told me, she “tried to draw like a plumb line”:

And I even started in my early drafts with Lake Agassiz . . . and I looked at the geological and the glacial movements and seeing that Saskatchewan is higher in elevation, there’s a steppe and then down into the valley . . . all of that sense of where it was carved and just to see if you drop a plumb line. And I had other drafts that went past Blondie’s death and into [a] character I left out, an

ecologist, and she was an ecological artist. So I had to curtail it, stop. But this feeling [remains] that it's on a continuum.

I suggested that it is almost as if the land is the main character in this and other stories, to which Sweatman replied: "Yes, exactly. Very much."

Sweatman's work, despite being rooted in real places and being connected to specific lands, does not represent a realist historical fiction. Her novels are inspired in content and form by modernity's "abbreviation of time and space." In taking shape, therefore, from the subjective (and thus constantly changing) perspective of movement and travel, Sweatman's fiction subverts the capitalist ontology of realism:

As opposed to . . . what we are using a lot of time in a novel, that bourgeois naming of the dining room table and the chairs and the table cloth and the cutlery, and they came in from the kitchen . . . and all of the details that make us think that a world is being created in a novel; and then that sort of inexorable movement of narrative. Instead of that, maybe you have flight, and you take off and you land and you take off and you land.

She explicitly links this to pre-capitalist, indeed Classical, notions of narrative, such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. For her, the "narrative trick" of "anyway . . ." is best expressed through the metaphor of flight, where you "take off and you land and you take off and you land," and the coherence of the novel is actualized through repeated motifs.

Motifs play a central role in *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, wherein the "flight" mode of narrative is constant: the novel touches on aspects of the lives of its title characters and their families, but shies away from compendious realism. Instead, "time is moving through—like the River." It sometimes moves quickly across wide swaths of country, but it also meanders, slows, coagulates, and nearly stops. Ghosts—in the form the Métis woman Marie and the murdered Orangeman Thomas Scott—slow the inexorable movement of the river of time. These "motific" elements, as Sweatman names them, connect the narrative and give it structure.

Whereas *Where Alice Lay Down with Peter* was inspired by Sweatman's home and its loss in the Red River Flood of 1997, travel to new places is also important to her creative process and her characters' identities:

Go and take pictures, and you don't know what you're seeing . . . Like when I wrote *Mr. Jones*, which is partly set in Japan, so I went to Japan, and when you're there it's kind of terrifying because your book isn't there yet, and you don't know taking a photograph of that table and you don't know what that means but you find out later. . . . To just go listen, and you take photographs of stuff you don't understand, and [when] you look at them sometimes three years later the meaning is still emerging for you.

Travel transforms characters as much as it inspires their creator. Helen, the daughter of Blondie, the narrator of *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, is the “most beautiful woman the world had ever known.”¹⁹ Still, her beauty gets caught up in what Sweatman regards as the sensuality of fascism, and she is married to a moneyed man who sees her half as prize and half as museum piece. While Sweatman apologized for using the word “fascist” in our discussion, she is adamant that it describes perfectly the sensual, masculine politics of a certain type of conservatism: “It exists in cufflinks and socks and the way you bring a fork to your mouth and the way you touch a woman.”

Travel to Europe with her fiancée's family initially changes Helen into a moneyed woman, though the transformation is partially forestalled by her return trip on the ill-fated voyage of the *Titanic*. When Helen travels back to Blondie and her family—who are intimately connected to, though not dominant, over the land—travel again plays its part. In a tradition of her family, Helen cross-dresses to enter a male space—“riding the rails” during the Depression—and the back-and-forth across the country alters not only her body through starvation, but also her mind and soul through politics. She becomes an anarchist and volunteers—again, disguised as a man—to join the MacKenzie-Papineau Battalion (part of the XV International Brigade) in the Spanish Civil War. For years Helen's fate is unknown, until a mysterious man named Jack literally falls out of the sky into the McCormack homestead. Challenged by Blondie to say what he knows, Jack gives her—and the reader—a vision of Helen's fate: “‘She was taken prisoner,’ he said. ‘She was at the end of the line.’ Again, Jack raised his fist. ‘That's how she faced the firing squad.’”²⁰ Helen's transformations through travel, however, do not cease

at her disappearance, and she joins, through metamorphosis, the other ghosts that stall the passage of time at the McCormack homestead: “Helen became a black moth.”²¹

While Helen, Alice, and Blondie—and Eleanor in *Fox*—are changed by travel, at least one character maintains her identity, or perhaps reiterates and reinforces her identity, through travel. As Sweatman told me of Lilly Cole in *The Players*, correcting my misapprehension that Cole abandons her actor’s trade on arrival in the New World, “She survives as an actress. It’s her only skill. She still has no skills.” Her talent is all that saves her in the face of starvation in the frozen north. Indeed, Sweatman remarked to me that Lilly, in a sense, bridges the Old and New Worlds through her ability as a mimic and her connection to the Cree Chief named Weaabinakaabo. On arrival at the Cree camp, the Moose Cree women are confused by Lilly’s inability to work and contribute. Weaabinakaabo, however, recognizes something in Lilly, her essential trait: “Could she not be a fool? Fools are brave; must they also be useful?”²² As Sweatman put it, “the only thing that saves her life is that Weaabinakaabo is an artist too.” The connection that links the New and Old Worlds here—troubled and challenged in Sweatman’s view—is the possibility of art.

* * *

Near the end of our conversation, Margaret Sweatman, thinking about Lilly Cole and Weaabinakaabo, wondered about the place of art in North America: “Can there be art in a New World? [. . .] Do we have art here? We certainly don’t have as much, and we don’t take it as seriously.” But, in Sweatman’s novels, especially *Fox*, *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, and *The Players*—all so rooted in the land of Manitoba—we see the potential for art in a “new world” through the potential of listening—being “receptive” as Sweatman puts it.

Receptivity recurs in Sweatman’s novels: When Alice learns the local—and immigrant—names for everything or when Lilly Cole opines of the New World, “It is not new.” In *The Players*, when Radisson tells his incredible tale of capture by the “Indians,” who “cut pieces of flesh from all parts of my body and broiled them,” only Lilly—receptive and open to persistent contradiction—can detect his story as lies.²³ In *When Alice Lay Down with Peter*, Marie subtly changes the language of Alice and Peter

from “your” to “our” property and settles down in a grotto-like homestead from beyond time (“who knows how old it was”).²⁴ The charcoal drawing of the buffalo—a stand-in for a deed that never was—is attached to the wall of the McCormack house; the house itself is a contradiction in a land that pushes against any absolutist resolution of contradiction, “new” and “old,” “dry” and “wet”: “The McCormack Land is surrounded by the Red, on an oxbow. The lowest part, at the end of the oxbow, like the bottom of a cup, flooded too often and we left it wooded, oak and aspen mostly, dogwood, wild rose and the like.”²⁵ In accepting and living in the irreconcilable contradiction of the very idea of a “new” world, art emerges.²⁶

Lilly Cole, in particular, is apposite: as an actress, she defies the reified identity (based on land and ownership) that Sweatman equates with capitalism. Instead of finding identity in land or ownership, Lilly’s personhood is based on change and travel. She is “a dyed-in-the-wool actor and so is a little always by proxy, a split self.” The recognition of internal contradiction and the role of movement in this process is part of reconciling “settler” claims to land and “identity.” I return, therefore, to Sweatman’s “madness of the tools of writing over land.” The madness of the surveyor is the attempt to reconcile the persistent and inherent contradictions at work in Sweatman’s fiction and emblemized by Lilly Cole. When we stare at land for long enough, we think we become it. Instead, however, it is change and our openness to others that makes us individuals, that creates the movement that challenges coagulation and staticity—and therefore makes art possible.

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NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations by Margaret Sweatman are taken from an interview conducted in person by Peter J. Miller on May 14, 2018, at the University of Winnipeg.

2. *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 27.

3. *Alice Lay Down*, 25.

4. *When Alice Lay Down with Peter* won the 2002 Sunburst Award for Canadian

Literature of the Fantastic and the 2001 Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize. For the latter, it beat out, among others, future Nobel laureate Alice Munro. For a complete list of Sweatman's work, see the 2017 edition of *Fox* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 231–234).

5. See "Point Douglas South Neighbourhood Cluster," <https://winnipeg.ca/census/2016/Clusters/default.asp>. Since the North End is not a federal or provincial riding or a census division, its present poverty rate ("low income cutoff") is hard to measure. However, Point Douglas South, a modern census division, represents a sizable portion of the old "North End."

6. *Fox*, 177.

7. *Fox*, 138.

8. *Fox*, 141.

9. *Fox*, 142.

10. The University of Winnipeg Department of Urban and Inner-City Studies has opened a new campus in the North End with the express intent of breaching these same boundaries: not only to give "inner-city" students a chance to leave the North End, but to bring suburban students to the same area to challenge preconceptions.

11. *The Players* (Fredericton: Goose Lane Editions, 2009), 205.

12. *Players*, 253.

13. Constitution Act, 1982, 35.1.

14. *Alice Lay Down*, 8.

15. *Alice Lay Down*, 18.

16. *Alice Lay Down*, 79.

17. *Alice Lay Down*, 49.

18. *Alice Lay Down*, 454.

19. *Alice Lay Down*, 168.

20. *Alice Lay Down*, 402.

21. *Alice Lay Down*, 389.

22. *Players*, 291.

23. *Players*, 22.

24. *Players*, 35–37.

25. *Alice Lay Down*, 409.

26. *Alice Lay Down*, 380.