

Review of Swyripa, Frances. 2010. *Storied Landscapes: Ethno-Religious Identity and the Canadian Prairies*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press. Pp. 296. Maps and black-and-white photographs. Lists of illustrations, list of maps, list of image credits, acknowledgments, introduction, conclusion, endnotes, index. ISBN 978-0-88755-720-0 (paper) \$29.95; ISBN 978-0-88755-191-8 (cloth) \$55; ISBN 978-0-88755-3004 (e-book) \$29.95.

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Volume 80-81, 2014–2015

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/mcr80\\_81br02](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/mcr80_81br02)

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Cape Breton University Press

ISSN

1718-1259 (print)

0000-0000 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Holyck Hunchuck, S. (2014). Review of [Review of Swyripa, Frances. 2010. *Storied Landscapes: Ethno-Religious Identity and the Canadian Prairies*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press. Pp. 296. Maps and black-and-white photographs. Lists of illustrations, list of maps, list of image credits, acknowledgments, introduction, conclusion, endnotes, index. ISBN 978-0-88755-720-0 (paper) \$29.95; ISBN 978-0-88755-191-8 (cloth) \$55; ISBN 978-0-88755-3004 (e-book) \$29.95.] *Material Culture Review*, 80-81, 190–194.

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Review of

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Pp. 296. Maps and black-and-white photographs. Lists of illustrations, list of maps, list of image credits, acknowledgments, introduction, conclusion, endnotes, index. ISBN 978-0-88755-720-0 (paper) \$29.95; ISBN 978-0-88755-191-8 (cloth) \$55; ISBN 978-0-88755-3004 (e-book) \$29.95.

*Storied Landscapes: Ethno-Religious Identity and the Canadian Prairies* is an important book. With it, Frances Swyripa, a professor of History and Classics at the University of Alberta, has advanced international diaspora studies through a Canadian lens, and has done so in at least six distinct ways. First, she brings to light many places where we can read the stories of the multicultural history of this country, with specific reference to the landscapes and material cultures of the immigrant-pioneer bloc settlements of Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. Second, the scope of research behind it is noteworthy: This was a multi-decade effort, undertaken with many assistants and conducted in the archives, in the field, and (to judge from the author's endnotes), through what appears to be a lifetime's worth of critical readings from secondary sources. Third, the author's methodology—cross-cultural, cross-geographic, and cross-thematic—offers a new standard for comparing and contextualizing the overlapping, and sometimes conflicting, histories of immigrants wherever they have settled. Fourth, the links that Swyripa draws between the specific histories she describes and the broader meanings to be drawn between them and international diasporic theory are educational, even enlightening, without being pedantic. Fifth, in her sections on the current status of these peoples and places, she touches on some of the very real (but seldom raised) dilemmas that now face the practicing historian: how to frame a discussion about the production of contemporary ethnic kitsch inspired by historical handicraft, and how to examine the potential compromising of historical scholarship that ensues when non-scholarly endeavors seek to commercially exploit historic sites. Finally, her ability to organize what must be a vast private archive of research material and de-

velop from it a coherent, well-written manuscript, is an inspiration in its own right.

*Storied Landscapes* stems from a simple two-fold premise: first, that “for almost 150 years, the Prairie West has been a place of remarkable ethno-religious diversity” (6); and second, that the history of this diversity is to be found inscribed virtually everywhere in the landscape of the region—from buildings, graveyards, roadside memorials, and ethnic place names, through contemporary festivals, museums, parades, and pilgrimages, to mass-produced tourist memorabilia. Swyripa provides many facts and examples that underscore these positions. From the 1901 census, for example, she gleans a telling statistic: by that year alone, fully “one-third of the West's population was foreign-born as compared to three per cent in the rest of Canada.” (14) The book focuses on twelve groups of newcomers: all “non-Charter” peoples from Central, Eastern, and Northern Europe who created (or were assigned by federal agents to settle in) Prairie “blocs” (essentially, rural, monocultural, and often-isolated reserve-like tracts of land), dating from the mid-19th century into the early inter-War period. Icelanders, Mennonites (and other German-speakers), Russian-speaking Doukhobours, and Ukrainians dominate in this study of non-English and non-French pioneers, but the author also includes lengthy discussions of others who lived in similar circumstances, including American Mormons, Ashkenazi Jews, Danes, Finns, Norwegians, Poles, Romanians, and Swedes, and notes in passing the bloc-type pioneering communities of the English Barr Colonists in Saskatchewan, as well as the French in St-Pierre-Jolys, Manitoba, and Bonnyville and St. Paul, Alberta. The result was a broader regional society defined and made distinct from

the rest of Canada, in part by the physical challenges of a Prairie landscape, but settled in many places by these different, clearly defined, and largely self-reliant, ethno-religious settlements.

Swyripa spent twenty years researching this project. Aided by six archival assistants and twelve field workers, she consulted eleven Canadian collecting institutions; as well, she travelled through what must have been thousands of kilometres of back country Western Canada to visit hundreds of sites of historical interest, and while there, attend public events, conduct interviews, take photographs, and perform other field research. Yet the book is more than mere travelogue: it is social history about people, a material history about their built environment, and an often-enlightening philosophical discussion of the meaning of these historical peoples and places to Canada's multicultural present. In addition to many first-person recollections from descendants of the original pioneers, *Storied Landscapes* also contains a wide selection of visual materials that help round out the narrative, including four original maps and fifty photographs, some archival and some taken by the author. Additionally, the book is supported by extensive bibliographical references: the maps alone, for example, were collated from seventeen sources (xi), while a single footnote on Prairie toponymy—a topic that reveals itself to be a fascinating source of immigrant lore—cites fourteen titles (258 ff2).

“Apart from its findings about specific ethno-religious groups and the West,” Swyripa posits in the introduction, “this study addresses broader questions pertaining to Canadian identity and hinterland-metropolis relationships, past and present” (4). This proves to be no idle promise, and is fulfilled in part through the author's cross-cultural, compare-and-contrast approach. In this aspect alone, her book represents a significant advancement in Canadian historiography, for while many of these peoples share overlapping histories in Europe and faced similar challenges and difficulties in Canada, previous researchers (including Swyripa herself)<sup>1</sup> have tended to study them as immigrant communities in isolation from one another rather than as parts of the broader phenomenon of Prairie bloc settlement. In addition, she takes care to describe the peoples and objects of her study in an objective and balanced fashion: no one group is either heroized

or demonized at the expense of others, and the cultural artifacts they created are all treated in an objective manner informed by the facts, by the items themselves, and by the people who made them.

In its first chapter, “Ethno-Religious Settlement—the Canadian Prairies in Context,” Swyripa sets out the reasons for Prairie diversity by addressing the similar causes and far-from-ideal conditions that influenced these otherwise-disparate communities to leave 19th-century Europe and to settle where they did in Canada. The lives of countless Europeans were constrained by compulsory military service to despised imperial powers, rigid class barriers, land shortages in rural areas, and cities that were overcrowded, underserved, and prone to mass outbreaks of disease. Life in Europe at the time for ethno-religious minorities was further marked by, as Swyripa notes, “religious persecution, national oppression, grinding poverty, or, as immigration historians have increasingly argued, frustrated ambitions and expectations” (22). She shows that these are more than abstract generalizations about the effects of colonialization and imperialism on diasporic movements. The Doukhobours, to cite just one example, perceived Canada as a sort of Promised Land. As a Russian Protestant sect in Orthodox Tsarist Russia—one who practiced communal living, embraced pacifism, and rejected materialism, military service, and indeed, all forms of secular authority—they also had to develop what the author terms, “a defining martyrology, often welcoming suffering and martyrdom because that was what being a Doukhobor meant.” She adds, “Significantly, they brought their propensity for martyrdom to Canada—the men later beaten, imprisoned, and exiled for refusing to bear arms” (143).

At the same time, the Canadian federal government specifically sought out Europeans to settle and colonize its West—even though, until 1925, all potential newcomers were divided into one category of “preferred” immigrants (Britons, French, Germans, and Scandinavians), and one of the “non-preferred” (all peoples from elsewhere, including those who form the bulk of Swyripa's study.)

In chapter 2, (“Possessing the Land—The Secular, the Sacred, and the Dead”), and chapter 3 (“Founding Stories and Founding Fathers—

Beginnings, Place, and Belonging”), the author outlines the key experiences of the immigrants as they arrived in Canada and began to establish communities here. Swyripa identifies the main differences between the ethno-religious groups and their many sub-groups, but equally emphasizes their common points of reference in Canada. The first homesteads in this country, first community institutions, and, especially, the places and dates of “first arrival” and settlement have become central to each community’s sense of its place in Canadian history, and have today inspired new culture-specific but made-in-Canada commemorations, such as the building of shrines, cairns, and museums, the installation of ethnic-themed public art and historical plaques, and the creation of holidays, festivals, and mass pilgrimages that revolve around these sites and events.

The very meaning of diasporic society and spaces in general are explored through the example of the Canadian West in chapter 4, (“Region and Nation—Situating the Prairie Experience within National Narratives”), and chapter 5 (“Outside Connections, and Homelands, Diasporas, and the Forty-Ninth Parallel”). Here Swyripa surveys the interchanges between peoples in the Prairie blocs and their compatriots and co-religionists elsewhere in the world, and considers how these relationships in turn affected integration into, or marginalization from, Canadian society more generally. Group relationships could be fraught: all faced, to at least some degree, officially tolerated Canadian discrimination, particularly during times of war, economic distress, or other upheavals, whether in Canada or the immigrants’ homelands. In addition, Old World grudges and prejudices sometimes continued to sour the everyday social interactions between those who came from different and sometimes mutually-antagonistic backgrounds in Europe, but were now immediate neighbours to one another, living side-by-side in contiguous Prairie blocs.

Material historians in particular will find much of interest in chapter 6 (“Wheat, Dragon Ships, and Baba—Symbols of Prairie Ethnicity”). In it, the author explores a range of contemporary cultural activities and products that are derived from these ethno-religious histories. She cites both official, “high-culture,” activities, often funded by government (such as regional

museums) as well as populist, “low-culture” vernaculars (such as ethno-pop memorabilia), but the chapter centres around the ways by which certain culture-specific figures—such as the Icelandic Viking Dragon Ship or the Ukrainian Baba (all-wise peasant grandmother)—have been appropriated today by these ethnic groups to stand as symbols of their collective pasts. These hybrid objects—in which traditional forms are reinterpreted in modern media and often produced with a sense of in-group irony and/or whimsy—have tended to be either overlooked or dismissed with ridicule.<sup>2</sup> Swyripa, however, shows that to reduce this wealth of contemporary Canadian material culture to the status of a sort of bastardized cultural embarrassment is inadequate. The more broadminded analysis she provides reveals they can be more properly understood as populist, albeit sometimes naïve, statements of the multicultural presence that underwrites much of the Prairie’s social history.

In both chapter 7 (“Returning to the Land—Commemoration and Preservation of the Past”) and chapter 8 (“The Land as ‘Sacred Ground’ and Gathering Point”), Swyripa reflects on the use of such historical referents within a larger socioeconomic purpose: the creation of contemporary heritage tourism industries that both accommodate and commercially exploit the nostalgia felt by the more modernized, urbanized, and prosperous descendants of these pioneers. That nostalgia prompts a desire to re-experience the past of their forebears—and, in so doing, to bring economic activity into what have often become depopulated and economically depressed regions of the country.

In her conclusion, Swyripa briefly but unflinchingly raises an issue that could form the subject of her next book: the potential for historians and historical scholarship to become “co-opted” (252) by interests that go unnamed in this work, but could easily include political imperatives to define a national “heritage” that acknowledges one ethno-religious history while denying the existence of all others, or by economic imperatives that drive the commercial repackaging of public historic sites into places of profit-driven real-estate development tied to historically themed spectacles.

In addition to providing an analytical survey of the multicultures that formed Prairie bloc

settlements, Swyripa has also produced with this book a primer in immigration theory. In particular, she demonstrates how the idea of “imagined communities,” first described in 1983 by political scientist Benedict Anderson, can be applied to diasporic spaces and events in Canada.<sup>3</sup> She summarizes his theory with the simple insight that, “Occupation of the land transformed a space into places—and all immigrants recreate place to some extent” (249). Such imaginative transformations, which she describes as, “shifting combination[s] of shared language, borders, faith, religion/ethnicity, historical memory, current events, and symbols” (8) have come to define Prairie society. Even the toponymy of the region was permanently transformed by the community imaginings of newcomers, as reflected in hundreds of places names such as Alberta’s Myrnam and Vilna,<sup>4</sup> Manitoba’s Gimli,<sup>5</sup> or the Saskatchewan towns of Veregrin, Hirsch, and Esterhazy.<sup>6</sup> But Swyripa is neither an incurious cataloguer of ethno-religious data nor a glorifier of the diasporic peoples in Canada as if they arrived to find a tabula rasa. The geographic place-naming by immigrants occurred with both positive and negative effect on their relationships with others. On the one hand, the marking of territory by naming it manifested a significant form of identity assertion by immigrants; additionally, it was an “exercise that totally disregarded Anglo-Canadian ideas of cultural hegemony, assimilation, and supremacy of the English language” (48). On the other hand, it stood then and persists now as a form of denial towards the pre-existing cultures of the First Nations people: “Newcomers often failed to realize,” Swyripa explains, “that Western landforms already had aboriginal names that told stories, explained the universe, and oriented natives as they moved about their vast territory” (45).

## Conclusion

Clearly, the project that led to *Storied Landscapes* was ambitious, multivalent, and vast. Nonetheless, Swyripa and her editors at the University of Manitoba Press have managed to condense her findings into just 300 pages of a highly-informative and well-organized text. The themes of each chapter unfold in a consistent format based on logic, fact, and chronology; no bit of information is tangential (or irrelevant); every piece of supporting documentation, such as maps and photographs, adds to the point being made; and all sources are properly accredited. The parallel structure with which the author lays out her arguments, in which theoretical abstractions are followed by concrete examples, makes for persuasive discourse and Swyripa’s consistent use of it lends a coherent rhetorical flow to the book as the structure of one chapter leads organically into the next. Moreover, while the book is rich with pertinent information, from general ideas and theories through to particular places, objects, social activities, and individual personalities, Swyripa presents it all clearly and coherently, frequently elegantly, and occasionally, as in the section describing the plight of Doukhobors as martyrs to their faith, movingly. Her skill as a writer also comes through in the book’s endnotes, which make for informative and engaging reading in their own right. While some idiosyncrasies in her spellings of Icelandic and other proper names could be explained in future editions, and a number of small corrections made to a few inaccurate footnotes,<sup>7</sup> *Storied Landscapes* is a book that will be read and re-read by anyone who encounters it.

## Notes

1. Frances Swyripa, *Ukrainian Women in Ontario, Polyphony: The Journal of the Multicultural History Society of Ontario* 8, 1 and 2, 1986, 47-50; From Sheepskin Coats to Blue Jeans: A Brief History of Ukrainians in Canada. In *Art and Ethnicity: The Ukrainian Tradition in Canada*, ed. Robert Klymasz, 11-28. Hull, QC: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1991; *Wedded to the Cause; Ukrainian Canadian Women and*

*Ethnic Identity, 1891-1991*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993; Swyripa and John Herd Thompson, ed, *Loyalties in Conflict: Ukrainians in Canada During the Great War* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta, 1983), and Swyripa with Marlene Epp and Franca Iacovetta, eds, *Sisters or Strangers: Immigrant, Ethnic, and Racialized Women in Canadian History* (Toronto: University

- of Toronto Press, 2004).
2. See for example, Grekul, Lisa. 2005. *Leaving Shadows: Literature in English by Canada's Ukrainians*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press.
  3. Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).
  4. Ukrainian for "Peace be among Us" and "Freedom," respectively.
  5. Icelandic for "Hall of Heaven."
  6. Named after Doukhobor leader Peter Veregrin, Jewish philanthropist Baron de la Hirsch, and Hungarian immigration promoter, Paul Esterhazy, respectively.
  7. For example, Swyripa's reintroduces but does not explain her use of what appear to be Norse or archaic Anglo-Saxon letters in the spelling of Icelandic proper names, pp. 157, 167, 296, among others.

## JOHN MATHEWS

Review of

*Framing Fraktur – Pennsylvania German Material Culture and Contemporary Art*. 2015. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Pp. 112, full colour, hardcover, 26.2 x 21.1 x 1.3 cm. ISBN-10: 0812247450.

*Framing Fraktur* was published in conjunction with two exhibitions that were presented by the Free Library of Philadelphia in 2015. The premise of these exhibitions was to reinterpret and reframe the library's historic fraktur collection through the lens of contemporary art. Fraktur is a manuscript-based folk art that was created by German immigrants in Pennsylvania, beginning in the later part of the 17th century. The term is derived from the Latin *fractura* (breaking) and refers to the broken style of lettering. In Pennsylvania the most common form of fraktur were birth certificates and, less commonly, marriage and death memorials. Other non-religious types of fraktur included merit rewards, love letters, music manuscripts, greeting cards, and family records. As such, fraktur was a text-heavy art form that provided a unique record of everyday life. Fraktur fuses together the styles of early-European illuminated religious manuscripts with the colourful and idiosyncratic approach of North American folk art.

The book is divided into three sections, the first of which is devoted to the history and development of fraktur tradition. Lisa Minardi's

insightful and clearly written essay explores the individuals and communities behind fraktur. She draws our attention to the ways in which the social backgrounds of the artists affected the styles and outcome of fraktur artworks. For example, illustrations by artists from the Ephrata community had very sparse and minimal content, due in large part to their cloistered lifestyle and practise of abstinence.

The second section of the book looks at a variety of 20th- and 21st-century artworks that incorporate text. At first it might seem like a leap of faith to compare the centuries-old and formalized folk art genre of fraktur with experimental artworks from the Dada, cubist and pop genres. However the author of this chapter, Matthew F. Singer, attempts to draw parallels between these disparate groups by showing how they all blurred the lines between utilitarian, commemorative and artistic painting. Singer goes onto to explore works by artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, who used the interplay of words and graphics as a way to express historically rooted identities.