

Eighty Degrees of Separation: Languages of Landscape

STEPHANIE ROLLEY*

*Stephanie A Rolley, ASLA, AICP,
Professor, Kansas State University,
College of Architecture, Planning +
Design, Department of Landscape
Architecture/Regional and
Community Planning, Manhattan,
Kansas 66506-2909,
United States of America.
Email: srolley@ksu.edu*

We sat looking off across the country, watching the sun go down. The curly grass about us was on fire now. The bark of the oaks turned red as copper. There was a shimmer of gold on the brown river. Out in the stream the sandbars glittered like glass, and the light trembled in the willow thickets as if little flames were leaping among them.

Willa Cather, *My Ántonia*

Above the carpet bedding, on one hand, there is a green hedge, and above the hedge a long row of cabbage trees. I stare up at them, and suddenly the green hedge is a stave, and the cabbage trees, now high, now low, have become an arrangement of notes—a curious, pattering, native melody.

Katherine Mansfield, *In the Botanical Gardens*

Two writers in the early 1900s, Katherine Mansfield in New Zealand and Willa Cather in the United States tallgrass prairie, chronicled both the cultural and physical nuances of their respective frontiers. Their stories are set in rich textural backdrops, made vivid with their descriptions of natural environments. These descriptions provide the text for this exploration. Their dense and evocative imagery provide a point of departure for a comparison of the two landscapes understood not as 'scenery' but as lived places.

MY FIRST GLIMPSE OF NEW ZEALAND came from the air. Arriving in Christchurch on a grey misty morning, the rows of hedges revealed patterns of agriculture and land division that spurred my curiosity. Why did it seem so familiar, yet so different from home? Investigations on the ground gave way to surprise, as I found that the agricultural settlement patterns and natural systems of the New Zealand bush and farmland and those of the United States tallgrass prairie, invite comparison. Mansfield's and Cather's narratives provide the guide for this study, capturing the subtle differences and underlying similarities of the textures and patterns of these two landscapes while emphasising the differences in colour and scale. The degrees of separation are not as distinct as the eighty degrees of latitude that lie between them. Instead, there is a myriad of subtle rather than singular differentiations.

This visual analysis is not intended to address the significant cultural differences of these two places. Rather, it is a study of visual distinctions and similarities guided by the environmental qualities identified by Mansfield and Cather. Narrated with their words, it is interwoven with my graphic text of watercolour and collage explorations. My own investigation of place comes through a graphic

exploration of the physical environment: the line, form, pattern, texture, colour, light and spatial qualities of each. These places are deciphered with drawings and visual thinking; my vocabulary inspired by the measurements of James Corner's map-notation drawings, the blurring of visual and experiential memory of Richard Hanson's drawings and the layered meanings of Edward Tufte's drawings and diagrams. The aerial photography interpretations of Alex MacLean and Yann Arthus-Bertrand provide additional stimulus.

REFERENCES

- Cather, Willa (1988) *My Ántonia with a forward by Doris Grumbach*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, p 13.
- Mansfield, Katherine (1997) *New Zealand Stories Selected by Vincent O'Sullivan*, Auckland: Oxford University Press, p 18.