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# BABSON FACULTY RESEARCH FUND

## TALLGRASS PRAIRIE: A WORK IN PROCESS

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### **BFRF WORKING PAPER SERIES**

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## **Tallgrass Prairie: A Work in Process**

The sublime of this place that we call the prairie is one of patience and looking .... The coming to grips with the prairie, for the artist at least, has to do with a long and expansive relationship, one that seems, at first, without parameters.

--Keith Jacobshagen, painter

*And Water Meets Sky*

Title of miniature weaving (9.5"x4.5"): cotton, silk,  
reversible, all selvages finished, by  
Sheila Hicks, b. 1934, Hastings, Nebraska

Held in vertical filaments of celestial blue silk,  
Sheila Hicks' key thoughts extend the reversible  
subject of her weaving: a blurring convergence  
of sea, sky, her artist's eye. Drawn up and down,  
these warp threads suggest sky, land. Anyone can see  
she uses a small loom, miniature world view (no less

true) to move past, and in toward her mind. Beyond  
this, she takes up the horizon, a back and forth entanglement  
thickening space into pattern, or if she pleases, opening  
into slits, slots, the swervings of weft. Here again sea-  
sky blue, but now pearl gray, green cotton too, and what moves  
me is the pale yellow, almost hay ... hint of Hicks' Nebraska  
roots, those prairies: bluestem, blazing star, inland salt, cord grass  
oceans' wavering, and all captured in this small woven field.

Bluffline, Loess Hills, Iowa

By nature vulnerable, crooked, unstable. How would you like to be  
 a bluffline for flour-sift silt? And what would you be  
 trying to say, at once holding  
 but ever ephemeral over oxidized piles of it, hills of it, hundreds

of feet deep of it, this mostly rockless, seeming reckless loess: wind-placed quartzite  
 dust, so fine a yellow, or sometimes sable, the pulverized remains left by long, scouring  
 departures, returns, departures, re-turns, departuresreturnsdepartu re returns of ice

shelves, hurried hardly

by wind, which nonetheless eventually blew these fragile giants into place. Dry,  
 lonely, they can hold themselves  
 in near-vertical walls: looming cliffs, a blown buff  
 lining for river valleys, here at the Missouri, and not here  
 nearer the Snake, Rhine, Yellow—

but just as quickly they can crumple  
 in a heavy rain,

a slow rivuleting,  
 then rivering,

collapse,  
 a slumping  
 , runoff,

some reports say like dissolving

sugar.

Standing on a loess bluffline,  
 meandering

spine,

you can see miles of rumple and slide, and from maps know  
 this old geological narrative narrows and bulges erratically, from the eastern banks  
 of the Big Sioux River in southeastern South Dakota, to northwestern Missouri,  
 just south of Mound City.

Meaningless, these loess compass points, really,

for they are always in flux:

once of the inland sea, then under ages of ice,  
 then scoured and rescoured by it,  
 now gullied,  
 or tractored,

paved, plowed,

grazed to the

nub,

or grubbed,

dug. Still,

some line of drift-top till will always

be returning, rearranged: a barely held  
ridgecrest, skyline,

ever-shifting script.

## Bound less

... Came Suddenly into an open and bound less Prarie, I Say  
bound less because I could not See the extent of the plain in  
any Derection ...

From William Clark's Corps of Discovery Expedition journal,  
July 19, 1804, and one of the earliest writings about the  
tallgrass prairie near the Missouri River, somewhere south of  
Council Bluffs, Iowa, in what would come to be known as the  
Loess Hills.

I'd come there too, looking to find what's now  
left, over 200 years later, of that tallgrass prairie, past  
vast country of grass, millions of bound less acres,

generous lining of our continental interior, from  
Manitoba to Texas, Montana to Indiana, tough  
sod heart: rhythm-weave, soil-maze, fossil bed,

hub. And I'd read about how Iowa had it all  
once, a border-to-border weave, sedge-dense  
diversities: a balance of seed, stem, leaf, so

many flowers—aster, larkspur, gentian, wild  
bergamot, foxglove, ironweed, rush-pink, even  
Queen of the Prairie, whose scientific name, it must

be said, *Filipendula rubra*, is a song—alongside  
the newt, prairie racerunner, and earthworm;  
there were masked shrews, herds and herds

of bison; mink, regal fritillary butterflies, toads,  
the ornate box turtle, bat. I'd picked here to look for all  
that, but more for its loess, *l-o-e-s-s*, a name I found

while looking for rhyme, an end word to pair  
with *lessons*, last sound from a poem of mine's  
previous line, *les*: linked, slip-like, to that final

syllable, *sons*, slipping again, deep, a slip-  
stream of air lengthening over and past the tongue,  
throat, all the way to a deep hush, hum. How

to pronounce it though? A two-beat *low-us*?  
 Or a melding into one sound, with *o* and *e* as *œ*,  
 as in the French, **feu**? Or more like the long

*oh*, in bone, or know, or woe? In the original  
 German, it's *löss*, which looks a lot like loss  
 on the page, only with an umlaut, those tiny eyes

dotted, dotting over the *o*, don't they keep it from  
 sounding like emotion, surprise? Don't they instead  
 make it *uh-ss*, something it really isn't, a kind of enforce-

ment? How linguistics with its diacritics  
 insist on assimilation: the originally occurring  
 now usually lost. Here, in Iowa,

just south of Council Bluffs, not far from  
 the tamed Missouri River, its unruly sand bars  
 and wandering ways channelized, I

see in any direction all that's left now is  
 remnant—traces, a prairie ragwort here,  
 buffalo clover scattered near stands of Indian

grass there—how to the extent there is  
 anything, it's holding and held by the steepest  
 loess bluffs (where cows and plows and saws

haven't been able to reach)—and I  
 pronounce *loess*, emphasis on *us*, knowing  
 it carries in it loss, less.

## Close Reading: An Epigraphist's Apologia

afte[r] breakfast which was on a rosted Ribs of a Deer and a little Coffee I walked on Shore intending only to Keep up with the Boat, Soon after I got on Shore, Saw Some fresh elk Sign, which I was induced to prosue those animals by their track to the hills after assending and passing thro a narrow Strip of wood Land, Came Suddenly into an open and bound less Prarie, I Say bound less because I could not See the extent of the plain in any Derection, the timber appeared to be confined to the River Creeks & Small branches, this Prarie was Covered with grass about 18 Inches or 2 feat high and contained little of any thing else, except as before mentioned on the River Creeks &c, This prospect was So Sudden & entertaining that I forgot the object of my prosute and turned my attention to the Variety which presented themselves to my view ...

--From William Clark's Corps of Discovery Expedition journal, July 19, 1804

Epigraphication, I'll call it: that selective re-making  
of a point, a slice from somewhere else, a pointing  
to an image, or theme, that sounding of dialect,  
style, or pitch, that crafting of aura, or mood,  
a tonal casting of doubt in a reader's mind,  
or a not-so-subtle pitch for credibility,  
(who'd have guessed she'd read  
that?), a spilling of cadence,  
the ringing of memory's

bell, a message from a sage,  
the stillness of pith. I've always  
loved the epigraph, how powerful  
a carving of opinion made in the mirror  
image of an original, or finessed to matter  
otherwise—it's all in the hands of the cutter,  
chipper, chief ellipsist who plays ragtag with  
edges of meaning. William Clark's notes are for me

epigraphically seductive, so much from which to carve, from the sensuous math of his sightings, first accounts: 51 bird, 44 mammal, 15 reptile and amphibian and 12 fish species (not including the 178 previously unknown plants sketched by his pen) to his suggestive tables of data on 50 tribes, not to mention 14 vocabulary lists, blank sheets offered by President Jefferson, so eager was he to know new native words, he ordered them captured along the way. All

were filled, and all misplaced, or lost. Surely there's loss in making epigraphs ... whole texts are left behind to feature a cinched sentence, maybe just a clipped clause, and isn't it just like a writer to omit, abandon, especially if it's not her own work? Epigraphs, once born, lead double lives—

the jilted lover, cast aside, torn by past textual loyalties, yet so fickle, curious about the future, and the new love interest, bold overture set apart, quick study, island for metaphor. All deserving of close readings, for what's there, what's not. For this poem's epigraph, I here fess up to cutting Clark's entire journal

entry for July 19, 1804, and at its center the epigraph I lifted for an even earlier work, one about the explorer's awful sense of *the boundless Prairie* ... You see, dear reader, I needed it to support my own poem about boundlessness, so I trimmed what I didn't need then—Clark's context, frame: a breakfast of *roasted ribs of Deer and a little Coffee* ..., his walk alongside the keelboat's slow tack with the river, his seeing fresh elk sign, his following it, getting bit lost in

lowland woods but coming into what we now know is loess, then vast with prairie, the end of which he couldn't see, nor could he see, at least at first, anything they contained but grass *2 feet high* and being so suddenly entertained, taken in by its seeming endlessness, he forgot everything, turned his eye *to the Variety Which presented themselves to my view* ... I restore here then his full view, for all it extends from that July day, but more for what it doesn't take away.

*Dégringolade*

A raucous character—wiggling to an uncertain destiny—collapses in broad daylight, completely undone. I abandoned this small work only to retrieve it twenty years later with new interest.

--Sheila Hicks, notes on her 8.58 x 6.75" weaving, titled *Dégringolade*: woven, floating warp; cotton, silk.

Tumble collapse it's hard to read this weaving's  
gradual unravelment how the steady gold warp goes  
soon loses its grip the weft drifting loose left to bundle  
slip run colors askew a single-strand mauve silk giving  
way to slubby worsteds rust and navy green grey while  
a thin snarl of undone maroon threads tangle a patch  
remnant dangling ajar orphan does it still belong or want  
to drift the fraying river like tresses for mourning repair

Even the word tumbles *dégringolade* like a full shuttle  
traveling across over under almost all the vowel threads  
while bumping up back and forth against a couple of hard-  
knock consonants those d's, those g's just a nudge then  
a rest on the *n* of *in* the *l* of *la* like loess it's flux forever  
in a state of undone completely raucous uncertain destiny

Exotics: Found (even in) Poem

Today, between 30 and 60% of the plant species on the Great Plains are not native to the region .... The best known exotics are the cultivated crop plants on the High Plains, especially wheat and corn. Their cultivation of necessity destroys the prairie sod.

--Jane Bock and Carl Bock, biologists, from "The Challenges of Grassland Conservation"

A single mature purple loosestrife plant produces 2.5 million seeds annually. Japanese knotweed can spiral its roots sixty feet underneath a highway to send up shoots on the other side.

--Cornelia Mutel, historian, from "The Great Transformation," *The Emerald Horizon: The History of Nature in Iowa*

Teasel. Leafy spurge. Canada thistle, autumn olive. Common buckthorn, garlic mustard. Multiflora rose, spotted knapweed, Japanese knotweed. Assimilated,

appearing to blend, seeming natural, normal. Possessed of thorns, or spines, or toxins: pain-inflicting repellers. Chicory, dame's rocket,

Queen Anne's lace, daylilies, oxeye daisies, smooth brome, smooth sumac, reed canarygrass, wild parsnip, meadow fescue. Common roadside standards,

populators of small urban strips. Early maturers, profuse producers of seeds, survivors of everything harsh, resisters to local diseases. Be banished carp,

sweetclover, yellow and white. Dandelion, cattail, house mouse, night crawler, Norway rat, foxtail—can't you go back where you came from? Kazakhstan,

ancestral home of our sweet apples. *Bromus tectorum*, you cheatgrass. Crested wheatgrass, tall wheatgrass, quackgrass, orchard grass, Timothy, all are Eurasian

in origin. Oh South Africa, your monocultures  
of lovegrass are here too, and so like love in its irony—  
introduced as it was to restore overgrazed grassland, but

ending up flimsy forage for our grazers. Accidentally  
introduced Russian thistle (whose seeds were present  
in sacks of flax imported to be sown in South Dakota

in 1873) and other surreptitious castaways: hidden  
in live-stock feed, mud-oozed from boots, afloat in ship  
ballast. Nurseries cradle fungal parasites in their stock,

and all manner of invasive fugitives get rides  
in hinges of railroad cars, or lie in wait, pinched between  
their floorboards. Even verbs with some straggler

modifiers oblige these sly hitch-hikers: to establish,  
usurp, invade, play havoc, cost. They continue to threaten,  
often pose, easily out-do, start a chain of effects, smother,

flaunt, no problem driving out, will kill, are  
killing, patient killers, have killed, creep, impede. Are  
becoming. Loose. Strife.

## Sow, See

What is so compelling about this place, what is in part the visual seduction of the Plains, is the ability to see, without great interruption, how each element, silo, grain elevator, tree line, roadway, pond, farmhouse, railroad line sits and occupies its place in the scheme of things . . . . It is not the heroic space one finds at the rim of the Grand Canyon; it is instead a distance that is at once human in its visual and emotional scale—a scale in both the land and its relationship to sky that embraces, shelters, and signals the visual journey forward without intimidation. For me, it always has implicit in it the outer expression of an inward journey.

--Keith Jacobshagen, painter

Across the plain worn

face of an old pillow lined paper canvas for a new

seed single strand for bobbin-lace dab of paint word placed

a seeding first stroke crisscross then another another then

strandstrandstrand or strandstrand and stranded strand

line flax hemp gimp oil hair-thin cotton image

held tangle-free by grooved wood reel brush bone shuttle

sleek fitting the palm the seeing

heart hand land-sky silo river of silk uncertain turn

clasp a clasping pass doubt

with ease or snag rhythm wait

a weight dangling at on edge

until needed or not slip

woven stanza journey: no matter

what: something: lace-scape net

## Yield Prayer

Corn thus becomes incarnate; for what is a hog but fifteen or twenty bushels of corn on four legs?

--Writer from the 1860s commenting on the use of surplus corn to feed hogs, whose numbers were growing rapidly

... we North Americans look like corn chips with legs.

--Todd Dawson, biologist, in reference to isotope ratios in human tissue

You, commodity corn, trillion-rowed, your traces in our hair, beer, ketchup, dairy. We ingest you, now that you are everywhere—feedlot, fryer, toothpaste, relish, whitener, you even in the waxy sheen on our Safeway beans. Patron saint of surplus, Church of the Corn Palace, lockstep, you, your family of hybrid giants—once a grass, now a monoculture—stand domesticated. Oh, eternal high volumist, consumer of tallgrass prairies, secure our futures.