

THE RANGEROADS

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By

COURTNEY LEIGH LOBERG

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Coordinator, MFA in Writing
University of Saskatchewan
Interdisciplinary Centre for Culture and Creativity
Division of Humanities and Fine Arts
Room 509
9 Campus Drive
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
S7N 5A5

ABSTRACT

The Rangeroads is a graphic novel employing regionalism and Gothic elements to investigate how individual identities and landscape engage with the cultural-colonial and industrial-environmental history of the Peace Region. The narrative follows Cai Monkman, a Cree-Métis teenager who becomes lost in the network of rangeroads surrounding the rural Albertan town of Beaverlodge. The roads morph into a place both familiar and strange as Cai travels, encountering spirits, albino moose, and haunted pioneer shacks. At the same time, two lab assistants from the Beaverlodge Research Station investigate the sudden levitations of barley crops and a prophetic voice that phases in and out on a Grande Cache Radio station. The phenomena encountered by Cai and the researchers emanates from the rangeroads realm: a place-doppelgänger of the Peace Region where history manifests in the form of supernatural beings and occurrences. *The Rangeroads* is a Gothic portrait of place, zooming in on an obscure corner of Western Canada and the individuals who live there. Using tools of Gothic literature and a visual narrative, my thesis excavates the histories and current realities of a mostly-unknown regional community to offer a complex, metaphysical exploration of its identity.

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ARTIST STATEMENT

On a September afternoon, Cai Monkman drives away from high school and becomes lost in the network of range roads that surround the rural Albertan town of Beaverlodge. Cai is seventeen, a First Nations girl of Métis and Plains Cree heritage. The roads morph into a place both familiar and strange as Cai travels, encountering spirits, albino moose, and haunted pioneer shacks. At the same time, two lab assistants from the Beaverlodge Research Station investigate the sudden levitations of barley crops and a prophetic voice that phases in and out on a Grande Cache Radio station. So begins *The Rangeroads*, a graphic novel employing regionalism and Gothic elements to investigate how individual identities and landscape engage with the cultural-colonial and industrial-environmental history of the Peace Region.

The Peace Region always felt haunted to me. Its architectural patchwork of industrialism, historical buildings and abandoned dwellings combined with a vast, rolling landscape exude a sense of deep history (both cultural and environmental) and concealed realities. As Susan Lord explains, there is a sense that “land has history (which is often a mysterious or frightening invisible presence)” (405). In *The Rangeroads*, the “invisible presence” is articulated through supernatural Gothic elements that evoke the Peace Region’s history of colonization and environmental destruction. For example, the haunted pioneer shacks encountered by Cai allude to land-theft, while the albino moose is a ghost of a pre-settlement environment. Teresa Goddu states “the Gothic disrupts the dream world of national myth with the nightmare of history” (Goddu 10). The rangeroads themselves represent a national myth: the colonizer’s rational, efficient division of land. In my thesis, the rangeroads’ empirical function is subverted by supernatural Gothic elements, transforming the roads into a shifting, alternate realm marked with a history of colonialism and industrialization.

Another trope of Gothic literature employed in my thesis is the doppelgänger, rendered in the form of the rangeroads realm. This realm is a warped double of the Peace Country, governed by dream-logic. The supernatural laws of the rangeroads realm animate the landscape with elements like the giant spider, the haunted pioneer shacks and the demon becoming dynamic extensions of the Peace Country. In this way, place is elevated from the function of a passive setting. Instead, it directly interacts with and influences characters, becoming an active character in the narrative itself.

The character of Nimue is a critical example of place’s agency and influence in *The Rangeroads*. Nimue, so named by Cai, is a former human who entered the rangeroads realm and has been living there for years. The power dynamic between Nimue and place is a reversal of Western society’s economic relationship with place, in which people alter and impose their needs on the land. In Nimue’s case, her personality, psyche, and physical appearance have been altered by the landscape. Her arms and legs have developed scales, her eyes have become wide and reptilian and snakes have grown into her hair. She has forgotten her name along with many of her human memories and gained intuitive understanding of the land’s natural cycles. Her transformation is not squarely represented as positive or negative. While she has lost some of her humanity, she has also gained knowledge and power.

Cai undergoes a similar yet subtler transformation on her journey. She enters the rangeroads realm lonely and self-conscious, dependent upon one friend who seems to be losing interest in her. As she navigates the strange realm, Cai gains independence, a new friendship and magical abilities based in the landscape. Her story is, at its core, a coming-of-age narrative. In constructing Cai’s character and narrative, I drew influence from the intimate narration and expressive drawings in the graphic novel *Skim*, by Jillian and Mariko Tamaki. The focus on a

sensitive, social outsider (a Japanese-Canadian teenager who practices Wicca) and the diary-like narration in *Skim* were both elements I wanted to incorporate into my thesis. Another influence I encountered was *Big Kids*, a comic by Michael Deforge about a teenager who transforms into a tree after being dumped by his boyfriend. This work inspired my decision to create a link between coming-of-age themes and nature imagery like the twigs, leaves and grass Cai manipulates when she learns magic. Her character development is strongly influenced by place, from the independence she gains surviving alone in a desolate environment, to the land-based magic she learns from Nimue.

The characterization I implement in *The Rangeroads* is reflective, in part, of the Peace Region's demographics. The Cree, Métis and Dane-zaa nations have cultivated and lived in what is now referred to as the Peace Region for thousands of years—long before the settler-population arrived there. To illustrate the historical and contemporary cultural identity of that area, it's imperative to foreground indigenous characters. Like in most other forms of media, whiteness is still often the default for character representation in graphic novels. Though I describe the necessity of including indigenous characters in a Western-Canadian regionalist narrative, the perceived need to rationalize the inclusion of any characters of colour in a work is indicative of the aforementioned default to whiteness. While it's true that Cai Monkman's Cree-Métis background speaks to the setting and narrative she appears in, I hope that by having more characters of colour appear as protagonists in graphic novels, there will eventually be no justification expected for their inclusion.

In many ways, *The Rangeroads* is an attempt to distill a place to its metaphysical heart. The construction of Beaverlodge and the surrounding Peace River Region in my thesis combines my experiences growing up there with the area's history, pre-settlement existence, settlement and industrialization. Though the setting is detailed and regional, it was not my goal to create an empirical documentation of place. The fusion of the personal, the surreal and the authentic in *My Winnipeg*, Guy Maddin's "docu-fantasia" of his hometown, inspired me to create a version of the Peace Region synthesized through a Gothic lens (Gillmore). This version became the rangeroads realm: a site that emulates a more personal sense of place. In constructing the rangeroads realm, I incorporate supernatural elements to illustrate the sense of mystery, limitlessness and obscurity I experienced living in the Peace Country. This technique is situated in the tradition of the Gothic sublime, described by Vijay Mishra as an attempt to represent an unrepresentable experience through the supernatural (Mishra 1).

The combination of visual art and narrative make the graphic novel an especially immersive medium to convey supernatural elements. Drawings allow me to create a "second, metaphorical layer on physical surroundings," as seen in the work of French graphic novelist, David B. (Wolk). Long, horizontal panels simulate the prairies and situate the reader in landscape with immediacy that language alone can't achieve. A visual medium also creates space to represent the researchers' documentation of the rangeroads realm through data, and field illustrations.

For the process and aesthetic of my graphic novel I took inspiration from the world of underground comics: a scene built on experimentation, the fine arts and punk culture. In underground comics, form is not bound by genre conventions or industrial production standards. Content can range from intimate personal narratives to surrealism and psychedelia. Earlier in this statement I described the influence of Michael Deforge and Jillian and Mariko Tamaki on the coming-of-age narrative in my thesis. Deforge, the Tamakis, and other underground artists inspired other elements of my process as well, such as the decision to use the traditional medium of a brush and India ink and to incorporate poetry and diagrams into my graphic novel.

Through the interdisciplinary form of a graphic novel I have attempted to interweave past, present, exterior and interior experience. By blending lyrical language, drawings and research data my graphic novel may deepen understanding of the Peace Region's cultural and environmental history by presenting it in an immersive, new way. *The Rangeroads* is a Gothic portrait of place, zooming in on an obscure corner of Western Canada and the individuals who live there. Using tools of Gothic literature, my thesis excavates the histories and current realities of a mostly-unknown regional community to offer a complex, metaphysical exploration of its identity.

Courtney Leigh Loberg
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
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