

In 1936, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration embarked on an ambitious aerial survey of farmland in the United States. New production controls and soil conservation measures demanded accurate measurements of individual farm fields, and aerial photography would allow the agency to collect these measurements on a scale that made ground-based surveying impractical. Agency representatives spread the photographs out on their desks to interpret them, but they also carried the images out on farm visits and pored over them alongside farmers planning the next year’s crops. Public responses to this technique for visualizing the countryside were varied: critics grumbled about government “sky snoops,” even as the agency was beset by requests for additional copies of the photographs. Beyond their usefulness as technical artifacts, these aerial views became charged with sentiment as landowners proudly framed and displayed them as keepsakes.

In *Barnstorming the Prairies*, Jason Weems highlights the ways in which the view from above enables and yet exceeds panoptic fantasies of control. He’s read the strand of scholarship that emphasizes “the authoritarian aspects of aerial imagery, and specifically, its role in fueling modernist aspirations to synoptic vision, rational planning, and spatial order” (xi). But it’s his attunement to homespun details like the black-and-white photograph hung in the sitting room that allows him to tell a more nuanced story. This story, for Weems, is a distinctively midwestern one: he argues that elevated views, real and imagined, helped the region’s inhabitants to make
sense of an open and seemingly featureless landscape. Learning to live on this land meant learning to see anew, as a nineteenth-century English traveler quoted by Weems poetically observed: “There are no organs of perception, no faculties as yet prepared in this country” (6).

Of course, such faculties had been cultivated by Native peoples living in what we today call the American Midwest before settlers started arriving en masse in the early nineteenth century. Barnstorming the Prairies has little to say about this history of encounter; while Weems offers a detailed discussion of the Land Ordinance survey that carved the region into a grid and gave rise to early overhead views like plat maps, it is as though he takes the project of westward expansion and the settler colonial society that grew out of it for granted. The Jeffersonian yeoman farmer, who appears throughout the book as a foil to the modernizing farmer of the 1920s and 30s, is never [End Page 108] placed in dialogue with the hunters and horticulturalists whose displacement made his presence on the land possible. This prevents Weems from seeing, in the framed aerial photograph, a naturalized history of dispossession. Yet it opens the visual archive that Weems has gathered to a rereading that would effect, in the words of literary scholar Mark Rifkin, “a sensuous realignment of perception in which settler personhood and placemaking might come into critical focus.”

As an art historian, Weems is at his best when interpreting particular images: the chapter he devotes to the Iowa-born painter Grant Wood is a tour de force. Weems persuasively shows how Wood’s early paintings pay homage to nineteenth-century genres of elevated looking like the atlas and the bird’s-eye view. With the help of the full-color plates at the book’s center, Weems offers strikingly original readings of works like Death on Ridge Road (1935), in which an aerial view of an impending collision dramatizes anxieties about changing rural lifeways. Even familiar images like The Birthplace of Herbert Hoover, West Branch, Iowa (1931) take on
new meaning, as an oblique perspective on the future president’s boyhood home comes to evoke the airplane that might have afforded it. This eminently teachable chapter models an approach to visual culture that takes the social significance of technology seriously, and it traces a hitherto unacknowledged throughline in the work of an important midwestern artist.

Other chapters feel more diffuse: one on what Weems calls “Jeffersonian urbanism” gets off to a promising start, as an illustration appearing in Daniel Burnham’s Plan of Chicago reveals the difficulty of representing both a city and its hinterlands from a single vantage point. Weems discusses a series of efforts to accomplish this integration at the level of urban design, including the architect Frank Lloyd Wright’s dispersed, horizontal vision of Broadacre City. Weems makes much of the aerial photographs that Wright uses to critique the overbuilt, alienating metropolis. Yet visual materials produced by Wright’s rivals, like planners in the Resettlement Administration’s Greenbelt Towns program, represented the industrial city in similar terms: congested, disordered, divorced from nature. Where the reformers differed was on the question of renouncing centralization altogether or reining in its excesses, and the different uses to which they put aerial vision would appear to be effects, rather than causes of that disagreement.

Despite its unevenness, Barnstorming the Prairies is a welcome addition to the resurgent field of midwestern history. It zooms in on a period in the early twentieth century when the region’s landscape “came into sight as a [End Page 109] locus for the construction of new cultural outlooks that were intricately tied to emergent practices of aerial looking and thinking” (ix). Although Weems sets 1940 as the endpoint of his study, the book’s conclusion gestures toward subsequent reconfigurations of the aerial view. Here, Weems waxes a bit romantic about farmers “no longer privileging their own local knowledge and experience” (263) as they place their faith in GIS data. My own research on the use of unmanned aircraft for crop imaging in the
Upper Midwest suggests the opposite; imagery analysts emphasize the importance of “ground truthing” to verify that their sensors are properly calibrated and to offset the impact of variations in incident light. Practices like this only serve to reinforce the central argument of *Barnstorming the Prairies*: that midwestern modernity was enacted in ongoing negotiations between the patterns of the past and the promise of the future.

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