

University of Nebraska - Lincoln  
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---


Winter 2011

Review of *Bleeding Borders: Race, Gender, and Violence in Pre-Civil War Kansas* by Kristen Tegtmeier Oertel

Michael D. Pierson

*University of Massachusetts Lowell*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

---

Pierson, Michael D., "Review of *Bleeding Borders: Race, Gender, and Violence in Pre-Civil War Kansas* by Kristen Tegtmeier Oertel" (2011). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2645.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2645>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

*Bleeding Borders: Race, Gender, and Violence in Pre-Civil War Kansas.* By Kristen Tegtmeier Oertel. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009. xi + 198 pp. Map, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$32.50.

Bleeding Kansas has long been an important topic for political historians exploring how it influenced Congress, presidential campaigns, and the coming of the Civil War. Kristen Tegtmeier Oertel's book uses the insights of recent social historians to add depth to this political narrative, thereby strengthening our understanding of how antebellum Kansas changed America.

*Bleeding Borders* begins with a chapter that positions Kansas as a frontier territory. Oertel's antebellum Kansans are divided by race, but not just between white and black. Starting her history in the 1820s, Oertel finds that "white settlers' perceptions of and interactions with Kansas Indians played a crucial role in

developing white racial identity." Drawing on studies of "whiteness," she finds that almost all white settlers compared themselves favorably to both the area's older and more recent Indian nations, setting the stage for her conclusion that white supremacy would be a common belief among whites on both sides of the slavery question. The only exceptions to that rule, she notes, were a handful of white abolitionists who worked with African Americans to stop attempts to bring slavery (and slaves) into the Territory. Oertel's section on the pervasiveness of slave resistance is particularly strong, and the African American efforts against enslavement that she chronicles help to explain both the desperation of the proslavery settlers and their ultimate failure.

In addition to bringing Native Americans and African Americans into her history, Oertel also includes antislavery women who acted in the public sphere. They wrote fiction, poetry, songs, and prose that spoke for freedom in Kansas. They spoke on the campaign trail. They manufactured and transported ammunition, relayed military intelligence, harbored white and black fugitives, trained themselves in self-defense, and educated themselves on the struggle going on around them. Perhaps because the women's actions were so useful, antislavery men usually welcomed their efforts, despite the fact that they moved women closer to what had been thought of as male roles.

Oertel also convincingly argues that the expansion of women's sphere in Kansas, together with violence in the Territory, created a new antislavery masculinity. While other scholars of masculinity have emphasized self-restraint as the essential characteristic of antislavery men, Oertel finds a distinct subset of antislavery men in Kansas who endorsed violence in place of restraint. Pressed by violence in the Territory, these antislavery men made "a willingness to resort to violence in self-defense or in pursuit of justice . . . a central component of proper northern manhood."

By drawing on social history fields such as whiteness studies, women's history, and masculinity studies, Kristen Tegtmeier Oertel adds

valuable new insights to the study of Bleeding Kansas. *Bleeding Borders* is proof that familiar political events can be productively analyzed anew by scholars familiar with the findings of recent social history.

MICHAEL D. PIERSON  
Department of History  
University of Massachusetts, Lowell