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Review of *Writing in Dust: Reading the Prairie Environmentally* by Jenny Kerber

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Writing in Dust: Reading the Prairie Environmentally. By Jenny Kerber. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010. xi + 258 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. C\$85.00 cloth, C\$38.95 paper.

When do the prairies begin in history? And are they now in danger of ending? Jenny Kerber notes that settler cultures have relied upon two narratives to understand the Great Plains of

North America. The first is about how history begins on the prairie when it is recultivated as an Edenic garden; the second is about how that garden falls from grace into a barren wasteland.

Kerber opens up these Western, Christian traditions for interdisciplinary critique. By considering ecological, feminist, Indigenous, and other marginalized perspectives, she explores “how different stories might contribute to a vision of sustainable dwelling on the prairies in the twenty-first century.” *Writing in Dust* should be read by anyone interested in the past and future of the prairies.

Kerber connects local places to a globalizing economy, reexamining early twentieth-century Canadian prairie novels in the context of agricultural and military history. She argues that these texts can help us reckon with how technology shaped prairies in the past (transforming the land from a garden to a “battlefield,” and casting some humans and nonhumans as “alien invaders”). This will help us inhabit a region that “fits into larger political, economic, religious, and environmental patterns.”

Kerber’s analysis of what she calls “nature memoirs” and their “discourses of nativity” is especially relevant for Great Plains readers. She shows how the question of which animals, plants, and humans are “native” to a place—and how others might become “native”—is a question of politics, ethics, and aesthetics as well as ecology. Calls to reindigenize or hybridize the prairies must be considered within contexts of power and history.

To survive on the prairies, we need more stories, not fewer. Kerber describes three diverse poets—Tim Lilburn, Louise Halfe, and Madeline Coopsammy—who complicate stories about what it means to be at home on the prairie and propose multilayered understandings of identity. Finally, she demonstrates how Thomas King, Rudy Wiebe, and Margaret Laurence rewrite narratives of prairie endings and beginnings. There is hope because “the text of the prairie is not already scripted.”

The stories humans tell about the prairies do matter, imaginatively and materially, and they

matter for more than humans. As Kerber writes, “being truly at home demands the decolonization of relationships with nature as well as among people.” Justice is social and ecological; a just future requires stories as well as action.

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