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Review of Goodlands: A Meditation and History on the Great Plains by Frances W. Kaye

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Frances Kaye examines the different ways that Natives and Europeans perceived and interacted with the Great Plains during the age of nineteenth- and twentieth-century North American settlement. Commendably, she conceptualizes the Great Plains as a unity rather than two distinct regions bisected by the 49th parallel. Kaye uses the history of the region to “articulate a Great Plains consciousness” rooted in “Indigenous ideologies” to establish “what it means to make good use of the land.”
Deploying the concept of “sufficiency-deficiency” to frame her inquiry, Kaye argues that Natives viewed the Great Plains as “sufficient,” which is to say the region provided them with what they needed to survive. Natives, she writes, “understood the land as part of a sacred tradition of earth and sky” and thus “fit themselves into the cycles of the grasslands.” On the other side of her highly binary framework is the European settler. After obliquely suggesting that early settlers were “an army of occupation” (she goes the full Monty when she calls twentieth-century settlement a “European invasion”), she describes settlers as “prophets of deficiency.” Kaye argues that Europeans had long viewed the Great Plains as deficient: “deficient in gold . . . deficient in fine furs . . . support[ing] a deficient people.” And this perception persisted; settlers alternately “imaged” the Plains as a desert or a garden, but persistently refused to accept the region for what it actually was. Kaye’s view of the Great Plains is structured around the fervent belief that “no ecosystem is ever deficient.” It is “impossible,” she argues, for a region to be “incomplete.”

Kaye is a professor of English. Her family “has no farming traditions,” although she offers the reassurance that she has “lived within sight and smell . . . of farms” for much of her life. Thus the reader is treated to a celebration of not only the region’s landscape but also invasive weeds and gophers. Kaye takes self-flagellating walks through city parks with her dogs (“the dogs and I are as much invasive exotics as the . . . dandelions”), during which she asks “by what right [do] I uproot my fellow invasive?” Likewise the gopher is not a pest to be eradicated but is instead a “messenger of Gaia” that she credits with “invent[ing] summer fallow.” Kaye doggedly celebrates the ecosystem of the Great Plains and in doing so provides a history of the region that is badly oversimplified.

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