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Book Review: True West: Authenticity and the American West

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True West: Authenticity and the American West. Edited by William R. Handley and Nathaniel Lewis. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. xi + 370 pp. Illustrations, map, notes, bibliography, index. \$49.95.

In the culture of the American West, the term “authenticity” comes close to “frontier” in its ubiquity, resonance, and elusiveness. The fifteen essays in this outstanding collection clarify how authenticity has functioned in cultural and literary settings. Instead of simply distinguishing the “fake” from the “authentic,” they explore the nature and consequences of quests for and claims to authenticity. Readers interested in the Great Plains will find rewarding essays on literature, environment, and the uses of American Indian history.

The book is organized into four thematic parts. The first section, “Rhetorics of Authenticity,” focuses on representation, authorship, and authority in literature. Alison Calder argues that Canadian critics have measured Canadian prairie fiction against a standard of authenticity resting on environmental determinism, result-

ing in an artificial tradition. William Handley shows how Willa Cather shouldered aside the “nationalizing distortions of prevailing retrospective narratives” of the West, yet also relied on the West “as literary setting . . . to authenticate and legitimate her own authorship.”

The second section, “Authenticity and Native American Cultures,” considers narrative representation and the phenomenon of “playing Indian.” In a subtle and compelling analysis, Christine Edwards Allred explores the paradoxes of Indian literacy, authorship, authenticity, and anthropological theory in the works of Charles Eastman, a Santee Sioux. Nancy Cook takes a fresh look at the fictive autobiography of Sylvester Long, a North Carolinian of European, Indian, and African descent, who fashioned himself into a Blackfoot chief. The autobiography allowed Long “to critique racial relations, establish a personal mythos, and connect with an empowering and distinctly *western* history” that relied on stereotypes of Plains Indians. In Cook’s view, the meaning and consequences of playing Indian are different for people “outside traditional access to power.”

“Picturing Histories” analyzes visual sources as passages into cultural history, while the final section, “Reimagining Place,” seeks to understand the meaning of place in western culture. None of these essays is situated in the Plains, but many raise compelling questions or offer models of cultural analysis that could be brought to bear on Plains studies. Bonney MacDonald, for example, connects “environmental stewardship” to the ethical and ontological implications of naming and telling stories about a place. Stephen Tatum’s complex and beautifully written meditation on Frederic Remington’s *Coming to the Call* serves as a model for interpreting visual art.

As a whole, this collection is thematically tight and imaginatively broad, a testament to the skill and vision of its editors. An extensive bibliography enhances its usefulness for scholars.

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