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Review of *The Prairie in Nineteenth-Century American Poetry* By Steven Olson

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Kamrath, Mark, "Review of *The Prairie in Nineteenth-Century American Poetry* By Steven Olson" (1995).
Great Plains Quarterly. 1034.

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The Prairie in Nineteenth-Century American Poetry. By Steven Olson. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994. Map, preface, notes, works cited, index. xi + 211 pp. \$29.95.

The Prairie in Nineteenth-Century American Poetry is an important book about prairie and plains imagery in nineteenth-century American poetry. Situating his study among Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land*, Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*, and Annette Kolodny's *The Land Before Her*, Olson argues that nineteenth-century American poets created a "new American poetry" (171) in the ways they describe the prairies and "symbolically incorporate people, imagination, ideology, and place in the United States" (vii).

Olson begins by showing how the "openness" of the Plains, as recorded, for example, in Lewis's and Clark's journals, became a metaphor for the belief in American expansion and manifest destiny (15). He then explores Bryant's increasingly enthusiastic depiction of the prairies and how idyllic themes and images such as "freedom" and "the sea" were popularized and conventionalized (62-63). Conversely, Olson examines women's poetry—their record of hardships and isolation on the Plains—and poems like Whittier's "The Kansas Emigrants" (1854), which "politicized the prairie metaphor" by introducing the theme of freedom versus slavery (85-86). He also investigates Melville's and Dickinson's subversion of popular tropes of the prairie and how their respective emphasis on the imaginative and imperialistic implications of the prairie metaphor critiques the status quo. Finally, Olson suggests that Whitman reconciles public optimism and private pessimism insofar as he uses the prairie metaphor to symbolize "the centrality of America in a cosmic vision of spiritual unity for all individuals" (169).

Of course, not all readers will be satisfied with Olson's study. Some will wonder, for example, why he omits any reference to Robert Thacker's *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination* (1989) and his insights about the "collision" between established aesthetics and

the prairie landscape. Others, despite Olson's attempt to limit his thesis, will want a more rigorous investigation of the linguistic and textual "*la frontera*" Kolodny outlines, including a more inclusive account of the experiences and poetry of non-English speaking immigrants. Still other readers will challenge Olson's claim that the prairies are "[s]tructurally and thematically central" to *Leaves of Grass* (169), arguing instead that Whitman's effusive "Personality" unifies the poems.

Such criticisms aside, Olson provides a perceptive analysis of how the vast, open prairies appealed to the paradoxical ideologies and nature of an emerging democracy. As such, his study makes a significant contribution to Great Plains scholarship and to our understanding of nineteenth-century American poetry.

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