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Summer 1998

Review of *The Culture of Wilderness: Agriculture as Colonization in the American West* By Frieda Knobloch

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Greenwald, Emily, "Review of *The Culture of Wilderness: Agriculture as Colonization in the American West* By Frieda Knobloch" (1998). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2038.

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The Culture of Wilderness: Agriculture as Colonization in the American West. By Frieda Knobloch. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. Notes, bibliography, index. xi + 204 pp. \$39.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

In this intriguing synthesis, Frieda Knobloch brings a new set of ideas to existing scholarship on agriculture and the environmental history of the American West. She traces the process of "nature becoming culture," the ways in which naturally existing resources (land, animals, plants, and trees) were transformed into agriculturally-managed commodities, thereby serving the twin imperatives of colonization and agriculture. Knobloch argues that colonization and agriculture not only sprang from the same roots in the English language, but have also operated hand-in-hand to dispossess indigenous plants, animals, and peoples. In Knobloch's formulation, neither can exist apart from the other—essentially, agriculture is colonization, and vice versa.

Knobloch employs a "poetics" strategy—a search for commonalities in seemingly disparate processes. In chapters dealing with the histories of trees, plows, grass, and weeds in the American West, she reveals pervasive metaphors of colonization and agriculture. Government foresters, for example, developed methods for managing trees as a crop. "Trees had ceased to be merely material," she writes. "They had become agricultural objects, with biologies that could be fostered or interrupted to the advantage of the forester." Timber became "something to cultivate rather than something to mine." In the fourth chapter, Knobloch delves into the problem of how to define a weed, showing that its meaning is completely tied to agricultural thought rather

than any biological characteristics. She also finds colonial metaphors in ideas about weeds, such as Frederic Clements's description of weeds as pioneers in plant succession processes.

Although her ideas are powerful, Knobloch carries some of her assertions too far. Throughout the book, for instance, she argues that "Colonization is an agricultural act. It is also an agricultural idea." While she does bring to light crucial interrelationships between colonization and agriculture, colonization in the American West did take other forms—mining, military occupation, and missionary activity among them. She also asserts that modern agriculture required a shift from women's tools to men's, causing a decline in women's status, but presents no hard evidence to support this claim.

In terms of sources, Knobloch relies too heavily on existing scholarship for her examples and anecdotes, drawing from works by Carolyn Merchant, Donald Worster, Alfred Crosby, R. Douglas Hurt and others. While these provide a stable base on which to build her own theories about agriculture in the West, most academic readers would expect more original research. In contrast, Knobloch makes good, creative use of prescriptive literature on farming, ranching, and weed control, as well as textbooks and government publications on those topics. From these sources she teases out the metaphors of colonization and agriculture that lend weight to her "poetics" approach.

Ultimately, Knobloch's fundamental claim that the history of the American West is about colonization, with the US government playing the role of imperial entity, is not new. But she does make innovative and often persuasive arguments about the role of agriculture—the metaphors derived from agriculture as much as the act of growing crops—in the larger process of resettlement and environmental transformation in the West.

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