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Review of *Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women's Writing* By Krista Comer

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Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women's Writing. By Krista Comer. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999. Notes, bibliography, index. x + 302 pp. \$45.00 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

Claiming the New Western History as its most enabling context, Comer's study traces the genealogy of recent female regionalist writing, locating its roots in the civil rights movement, feminism, and postmodernism. This is an obvious challenge to those who claim Western regionalism as the very *antidote* to postmodernism. Moreover, by including writers of color in her discussion, Comer questions the idea that Western regionalism is only a "white thing."

Through issues of gender, landscape, and geography, Comer focuses in each of her chapters on a different kind of landscape—urban, wild, erotic, national. The Great Plains do not seem to fit any of these categories. She chooses California's urbanscapes as her first terrain, thus challenging the exclusion of the urban within Western studies. Discussing Didion, Coleman, and Kingston, Comer suggests that women writers' investment in the city is high, although motivated by heterogeneous desires of empowerment.

Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams* and Silko's *Ceremony* are discussed in terms of their problematic engagement with the "wilderness plot." Here Comer criticizes ecocritical, environmentalist, and writerly assumptions about the "naturalness" of Western spaces that mask "the gendered, classed, and imperial contexts out of which the wilderness ideal emerged." While Silko and Kingsolver serve as negative examples (Kingsolver's book is condemned as a version of Southwestern real estate developers' kitsch), Houston, Cisneros, and Erdrich are lauded as creators of alternative landscapes of female desire. Comer goes on to read autobiographical texts by Wakatsuki Houston, Anzaldua, and Clearman Blew as critical "postnationalist" engagements with "the West is America" conventions.

Comer provides an ambitious, often brilliantly perceptive, critical analysis of the premises underlying Western studies. She does this on a theoretical level, repeatedly mapping her ground in informative and provocative ways. Many of her highly selective readings, however, are unconvincing. In the end, they fail to provide any inclusive, extensive survey of the texts and the concerns of the new female regionalism. Rather, by isolating texts from writers' larger oeuvre and by focusing exclusively on gender and landscape, they risk ignoring larger contexts and critical considerations. The readings of Silko and Erdrich seem especially reductive, disregarding recent discussions within Native American studies.

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