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Review of *Birthing a Nation: Gender, Creativity, and the West in American Literature* By Susan J. Rosowski

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Birthing a Nation: Gender, Creativity, and the West in American Literature. By Susan J. Rosowski. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999. Notes, works cited, index. xiii + 242 pp. \$50.00.

Susan Rosowski, best known for her authoritative work on Willa Cather, establishes in *Birthing a Nation* her status as an authorita-

tive scholar of American literature and cultural history more broadly. In a series of concise chapters on Margaret Fuller, Cather, Jean Stafford, the Classic (masculine) Western, and Marilynne Robinson, Rosowski identifies the centrality of the West to American conceptions of national identity. Borrowing an evocative phrase from Jane Tompkins's *West of Everything*, she proposes what is "surely a better way" of thinking of its meaning than the terms made familiar by popular Westerns—violence, aloofness, masculine exclusivity.

The controlling metaphor for that "better way" turns out to be not so much the one suggested by the title as a metaphor of conversation. The Western "is about language far more than it is about land." In the standard popular forms in which it has served as a source of "pervasive cultural arrogance," the Western has claimed for its heroes the right to define the terms of a one-way, but markedly laconic, discourse in which others are to remain silent. That silencing of others, and in particular the female other, has been reflected in the silencing of women writers such as Stafford and even Cather, canonical though she has now become. Although Stafford's literary milieu was the Rockies and Cather's (in part) the Great Plains, they are still not readily thought of in connection with "the Western." Stafford is indeed, as Rosowski tellingly points out, simply unmentioned in standard histories of the literature of the West.

The reason is that they are outsiders to the formula. Refusing to genuflect toward the controlling and inevitably violent hero, they propose instead that a whole range of experiences of the West are all equally valid, that sharing is more satisfactory than excluding, that conversation is more productive than domination. If this vision occasionally seems idealized, it is after all an inspiring vision and one that Rosowski firmly grounds in a series of knowledgeable and persuasive readings. It would be hard to argue that the vision she proposes is not, or would not have been, a

better way than the exploitation and despoliation that have characterized much of American history.

One misses Mary Austin in this book. With her "Walking Woman," Seyavi the Basket Maker, and other free-moving, gravid figures, Austin might have been truly pivotal in the argument here. It may be that by "refiguring" myths of creativity into the figures of "the Muse, the midwife, and the Earth Mother" Cather "creates a new myth for America," but Austin created it before her—not to mention Native myths such as *Thinking Woman*.

Such objections, however, are really "yes, but also" responses illustrating how genuinely (but gently) provocative Rosowski's pondering of the West truly is. She leads us into the kind of creative conversation she suggests as the "better way." Through such original departures as a chapter on the Cather family letters, demonstrating "the importance of the extended family on the frontier," and a thoughtful linkage of Robinson's nonfiction *Mother Country* to the celebrated *Housekeeping*, Rosowski shows us how to gestate new meanings of West.

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