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Sustaining the West: Cultural Responses to Canadian Environments edited by Liza Piper & Lisa Szabo-Jones

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Voices Harmonized

Sustaining the West: Cultural Responses to Canadian Environments edited by **LIZA PIPER and LISA SZABO-JONES**

Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2015 \$42.99

Reviewed by **SHELLEY MCEUEN**

"If the world really works in a way so as to encourage the consilience of knowledge, I believe the enterprises of culture will eventually fall out into science, by which I mean the natural sciences, and the humanities, particularly the creative arts."

—E.O. Wilson, *Consilience*

"Our hope, ambitious though it may be, is that this volume will continue to work in the world by engaging new audiences and demonstrating how we can, as artists and scholars in the arts and humanities, work together more effectively to push for change in dealing with pressing and ubiquitous environmental concerns."

—Liza Piper, Introduction

This collection from Wilfrid Laurier University Press' Environmental Humanities Series is the culmination of the workshop "Cross-Pollination: Seeding New Ground for Environmental Thought and Activism across the Arts and Humanities" held in Edmonton, Alberta, in March 2011. This visionary, original event, organized and facilitated by Liza Piper and Lisa Szabo-Jones, was predicated on the belief that environmental issues facing the West can and should be approached through interdisciplinary perspectives. With a

particular focus on the disciplines of art and humanities and the "common ground" both share, Piper and Szabo-Jones envisioned and created an inspired workshop for the exploration of environmental crises. Missing from the workshop were the sciences, but not for exclusionary purposes. Understanding that many opportunities already exist for interdisciplinary exploration between science and humanities, Piper and Szabo-Jones chose to move the interdisciplinary discussion into a new, unflinching realm for exploring "the role of imagination and sentiment in knowing nature" (3).

In their introduction, the editors speak of their intention to create a workshop with a climate ripe for exchange. Session commentators were specifically chosen from different disciplines than those presenting, forcing both to engage broadly across disciplines, creating a fertile atmosphere for responses from workshop attendees. Public plenary sessions were also part of the original workshop, encouraging a variety of disciplinary representation while highlighting the "overlaps" evident in a shared concern for the environment. In all, the workshop attracted artists, poets, historians, and ecocritics, among others.

This diverse, rich collection is a direct result of the workshop. Both the workshop and this text share a grounding in the West for its "physical and biological diversity" and because it is home for the editors. The volume extends the workshop by offering "an expansive interpretation of the west," while working to connect and clarify our understanding of the broad

geographical term (3). The collection seeks to answer a crucial question: What does it mean to live in the West during a time fraught with environmental challenges?

Notable entries are the interludes serving to link the three sections in the volume. Interlude one, "Creating Metaphors for Change" by Lyndal Osbourne, connects "Part 1: Acting on Behalf Of" and "Part 2: Constructing Knowledge." Interlude two, "Symphony for a Head of Wheat Burning in the Dark" by Harold Rhenisch, links Part 2 with "Part 3: Constructing Knowledge." These interludes serve as thoughtful bridges between sections, but they also provide abundant, stand-alone material for further exploration.

In "Part 1: Acting on Behalf Of," Beth Carruthers' "A Subtle Activism of the Heart" moves art and aesthetic engagement into activism as a means of altering personal perspective for larger, more foundational change. Carruthers' ecophilosophical approach considers the current state of separateness between humans and their natural environment—an emergence, Carruthers contends, of the settler culture. Through an interwoven tableau of literature, art, and philosophy, Carruthers manages to forge a new ontological vision, pushing against an established way of being human in the natural world. In an essay both passionate and precise, Carruthers provides inspiring examples, embedded in art and aesthetics, of connection and profound belonging to place that will resonate deeply and persuasively with readers. The implication of Carruthers' vision is a radical notion of what it

means to create a new "self-world" relationship grounded in love.

In "Part 2: Constructing Knowledge," Angela Waldie looks at the grasslands of Trevor Herriot's *Grass, Sky, Song* and the wetlands of Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge* for a deeper understanding of the connection between "human health and the health of our natural surroundings" (194). In her chapter, "Endangered Species, Endangered Spaces," Waldie consciously links both of the naturalists-turned-authors' attention to birds, beloved space, and belonging. Williams' *Refuge* explores the metaphorical interconnectedness of losing her beloved wetlands surrounding the Great Salt Lake in Utah and her mother's death from cancer. The title of each chapter in *Refuge* is named for a bird, corresponding to themes connecting plot to that particular bird's behaviors and traits. Williams also subtitles each chapter with the water level of the lake, which, in its continual rise, is a constant reminder of habitat loss. Herriot's *Grass, Sky, Song* conveys an introspective exploration and deeply personal respect of grasslands and the avian life therein. Herriot, like Williams, seeks connection between these endangered grassland birds and human health. When his wife Karen is diagnosed with breast cancer, Herriot becomes engrossed in researching the indiscriminate use of agricultural pesticides, linking their use to the decline of human and avian health. Taken together, the authors represent differing nations, backgrounds, and landscapes that, when merged, forge a rich examination of what it means to inhabit a "threatened" landscape.

In “Part 3: Material Expressions,” Christine Stewart offers a tangible representation of a liminal landscape. In “Propositions from Under Mill Creek Bridge,” Stewart posits an eloquent perspective on place, represented by Edmonton’s Mill Creek Bridge. Serving as an intersection of bridge, creek, and ravine, the bridge offers the opportunity to discover an alternative “reading” of landscape. Mill Creek Bridge has a steady stream of traffic—cars and trucks pass through regularly. However, Stewart offers an alternative view of what lies underneath this bridge—the wildlife, “lush flora,” and homeless population living below. Stewart takes readers on a poetic imagining of alternative readings of this landscape we only think we know. In doing so, she uncovers a world of “unknowable alterities” which exist in an environment both mysterious and fascinating.

The fresh approach and perspective offered in *Sustaining the*

West: Cultural Responses to Canadian Environments is also its strength. The choice to consciously cull the disciplines of art and humanities for the shared purpose of addressing environmental issues in the West is innovative. This collection also represents consciousness of an ever-altering landscape, worthy of new scholarship and interrogation. In compiling this collection, “Different voices are harmonized by their shared concern for the environment” and interested readers will find inspiration for connection and activism (3). Readers are offered an invitation for personal discovery and the chance to probe the deeply personal ideologies represented in much of this stellar volume.

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