
Kathleen A. Boardman and Gioia Woods, eds. *Western Subjects: Autobiographical Writing in the North American West*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2004. 442p.

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When, in a panel discussion recorded at the 36th Annual Western Literature Association Conference in Omaha in October 2001, memoirist John Price considers the sense of truth that underlies historical fact, he concludes—much to his own surprise—that subjectivity plays an enormously influential role in anyone’s notion of history: “When I started my memoir, I thought that I was going to write about historical fact, the *what* of history,” Price says. “But I was surprised to find that it was really about the *why* of memory and that oftentimes memory diverged from history” (42). Price found himself most amazed by his own literary acceptance of the potentially dangerous humanness of individual memory: “I used to be a purist about these things, but I’m now a waffler,” Price concludes (42).

For many of the essayists whose works are compiled in *Western Subjects: Autobiographical Writing in the North American West*, the American West is not a story of truisms, factual accuracy, or archetypal ideals. For them, the West is simply life at its most human level: personal, individual, and layered—for good or for ill—with memories. An effective means of stepping past erroneous western myths or the assumption that an accurately all-encompassing story of western history is even attainable lies, therefore, in the vulnerability and human honesty of autobiography, according to the essayists in *Western Subjects*. And editors Kathleen A. Boardman and Gioia Woods succeed nicely in gathering the variety of autobiographical approaches necessary to begin to frustrate the historical and literary assumptions embedded in our understanding of both the American West and the genre of autobiography.

Two places where contemporary western memoirists have begun to dismantle existing archetypal assumptions about the American West are in our understanding of the importance of place and in the role self-representation plays in autobiography, Boardman and Woods argue in their introduction. With regard to a westerner’s sense of place, for example, the editors suggest that narrow definitions can be breeding grounds for problematic myths: “If we can cast a critical eye on the way places continually shape identity, we may be able to free places from rigid understandings (i.e., a desert is a wasteland) and rid people of unfortunate stereotypes. The construction of places and subjects, discussed together, can yield a rich understanding of the various ways each constitutes the other,” they write (19).

As memoirist Julene Bair suggests in the volume’s opening panel discussion, place does indeed play an essential role in the literature of the American West: “A

lot of people say setting takes the place of character in rural or western prose, but it's more than that. Setting supersedes character in a lot of our prose, and it's like the creator of our very being. We are who we are because of where we live" (49). Yet the essayists of *Western Subjects* are not content to let the debate rest on that comfortable note. As Julia Watson describes in her essay "Bringing Mary MacLane Back Home: Western Autobiographical Writing and the Anxiety of Place," Mary MacLane, an early 20th-century writer who repeatedly migrated between Butte, Montana, and the urban East, harbored a decidedly complex relationship with her Montana hometown. Watson, who defines MacLane's love-hate attachment to Butte as an "anxiety of place," acknowledges that although MacLane left Butte on numerous occasions, she continually battled with personal emotions regarding the town's formative role in her life (224). MacLane in no way glorifies an idealized American West; instead she wrestles internally with an unbidden sense of the importance of place and a desire to flee from all it represents to her as an individual.

Another literary device the autobiographers in *Western Subjects* employ to toy with extant western myths is the literary tool of self-representation. As memoirist Patricia Hampl discusses, she herself was surprised that the role of "I" in a memoir does not necessarily limit a writer to a book solely about herself or himself; instead the "I" becomes "a light- and heat-seeking instrument," allowing a writer to discuss the wider world through the lens of a ready-made personal protagonist (44). In the 1883 publication *Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims*, for example, autobiographer Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins "constructs herself as a spokesperson," essayist Daniel Tisinger writes (98). Winnemucca, who also performed frequently onstage to draw attention to the plight of the Paiute Indians, consciously creates a self-inspired protagonist who ultimately seeks to manipulate public policy regarding the treatment of Native Americans.

Cowboy Edward Abbott may not have been as astutely aware as Winnemucca of his own use of himself as a literary tool in his 1939 autobiography titled *We Pointed Them North: Recollections of a Cowpuncher*, argues essayist Richard Hutson, but his use of autobiographical self-representation is noteworthy nonetheless: "Abbott's stories of his life on the trail are an intricate weaving of his own memories, his self citations, and the stories and memories and writings of untold numbers of other men," Hutson writes. Abbott "presents himself as the conduit for the transmission of oral stories about various characters and their activities, and, from his point of view, there is no reason to be skeptical about such stories, unless he himself voices some skepticism about his memory" (132-133).

In contrast, Woody Guthrie quite consciously invents a namesake hero who is "at once a singular western tough, a Christ-like figure of great humility, a ring-tailed

roarer prone to braggadocio, a socialist ashamed of his financial accomplishments, and a dyed-in-the-wool American success story eager to boast about his singing career,” essayist Edward A. Shannon writes in his essay “Vulgar Words of Language: The Sacred and Profane Hero of Woody Guthrie’s *Bound for Glory*” (188). As Guthrie downplays his own successes in *Bound for Glory*, instead creating a protagonist unfettered by the binding ties of capitalism, he dismantles both the mythological American success story and the time-worn European tradition of viewing autobiography as “establishing exactly the kind of legitimacy Guthrie rejects,” Shannon continues (195).

Other unconventional approaches to autobiography and the unpacking of the American West include the use of sentimentality in Terry Tempest Williams’ memoir *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* and William Kittredge’s *Hole in the Sky: A Memoir*. Although the rhetorical strategies in the two texts differ, Tara Penry writes in her essay “Sentimental Eco-Memoir: *Refuge*, *Hole in the Sky*, and the Necessary Reader,” both memoirs employ sentimentality in an attempt to solidify a relationship with the reader that ultimately will inspire him or her to social and environmental activism (341). In the essay “Prepositional Spaces: Family Photographs, History, and Storytelling in Memoirs by Contemporary Western Writers,” essayist Melody Graulich similarly toys with the established literary conventions of autobiography by exploring memory through the personal photographs of several western memoirists. “Memory is as much about what we have forgotten as it is about what we remember,” Graulich writes, and, in such writers as Yoshiko Uchida, a Japanese American who was imprisoned during World War II, for example, photographs become a means of smoothing over or suppressing a “historical reality” (388, 398). Much as Price allowed himself to diverge from the conventional in his realization that memoir often privileges memory over historical fact, so, too, do many of the essayists in *Western Subjects* allow themselves to step afield of the norm in an effort to further frustrate the troublesome western archetypes that only manage to aid in the furthering of erroneous stereotypes and even bias. ✱