2006

Book Review: Western Subjects: Autobiographical Writing in the North American West

Larry Ellis
Arizona State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly
Part of the Other International and Area Studies Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/94

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Prior to the middle of the twentieth century, North American autobiography was defined largely by chronological, full-life narratives written by and about “great men.” Since then, the canons of “self-lifewriting” have expanded to include not only memoir, diary, and correspondence, but also genres as far afield as autoethnography, oral tradition, and pictography. In Western Subjects: Autobiographical Writing in the North American West, editors Kathleen A. Boardman and Gioia Woods chart contemporary theoretical and critical approaches to North American autobiography in an anthology of intriguing, cogent essays that explore how autobiographers construct, communicate, and perform self in relation to its interaction with place. Here, place is the North American West—a region whose boundaries and defini-
tions are as shifting and conflicted as those of
the genre of autobiography.

According to Boardman and Woods, the
crucial role of place and location in the western
American experience provides fertile ground
for western autobiographers to negotiate identi-
ties through life narrative. Further, “[r]ecent
autobiographical criticism has begun to explore
the role of location in lifewriting,” and in doing
so “has pointed to the multivalent meanings of
place’ in the positioning of the autobiographical
subject.” A thorough introductory essay explores
these meanings within the context of the represen-
tation of self in the autobiographical litera-
ture of the American West, which Boardman
and Woods suggest we should view “through
a trio of locations: physical location, rhetorical
location, and political location.” The essays that
follow are divided into four sections, each of
which explores this complex division of the
concept of place in a manner that deconstructs
the canons of both autobiography and autobiog-
raphy as a genre of western American literature,
finally addressing the question, “What is west-
ern about western American autobiographical
writing?”

In part 1, a panel of five western autobiog-
raphers discuss memory, cultural hybridity, and
transformation of self as components of memoir
writing set in the West and Midwest. In part
2, essays by Eric Waggoner, Danielle Tisinger,
Richard Hutson, Dan Moos, and Edward
Shannon look at western autobiography as
performance of self on rhetorical and political
stages often tied to gender, ethnicity, and class.
Essays by Julia Watson, Cathryn Halverson, Bert
Almon, Wendy Hesford, and Theresa Kulbaga in
part 3 challenge conventional notions of west-
ern space as nostalgic, rooted, and redemptive.
Finally, Tara Penry, Susan Maher, and Melody
Graulich explore the complexity of memory, the
ambiguities that emerge when self-representa-
tion is tied to place, and the problems inherent
in relying on photography as an objective means
of constructing memory. The anthology ends
with Charlotte Hogg's study of community auto-
biography in western Nebraska that stresses the
role of travel and settlement in western concepts
of place. Its setting in western Nebraska will
interest readers looking for a Great Plains focus,
as will Hutson’s essay on cowboy E. C. “Teddy
Blue” Abbott along with Dan Moos’s study of
African American memoirs set in the western
Plains.

“[W]e are all writing about home,” observes
western memoirist Mary Clearman Blew, “and
that home is almost always a specific, carefully
evoked place that reflects, in our case, a western
landscape.” In a thought-provoking and very
readable anthology, the essayists, memoirists,
and editors of Western Subjects reveal the intric-
cacy of the bonds between the autobiographical
“I” and the American West: the place that is, or
is in the process of becoming, home in western
American self-lifewriting.

LARRY ELLIS
Department of English
Arizona State University