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

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Western Subjects: Autobiographical Writing in the North American West. Edited by Kathleen A. Boardman and Gioia Woods. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2004. vi + 447 pp. Photographs , notes, bibliography. \$24.95 paper.

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 auto-ethnography, 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 identities 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 representation of self in the autobiographical literature 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 autobiography as a genre of western American literature, finally addressing the question, "What is western about western American autobiographical writing?"

In part 1, a panel of five western autobiographers 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 western 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-representation 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 autobiography 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 intricacy 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.

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