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THESE IS MY WORDS” . . . OR ARE THEY? CONSTRUCTING WESTERN WOMEN’S LIVES IN TWO CONTEMPORARY NOVELS

JENNIFER DAWES ADKISON

Literary critics and historians have long attempted to define what is authentic in western literature, praising those works that come closest to presenting a true picture of western life. When read through this lens, Molly Gloss’s *The Jump Off Creek* and Nancy E. Turner’s *These Is My Words* could be considered praiseworthy. Both present fictional versions of western women’s experiences that have the trappings of true accounts, notably memoir. Contemporary western writers have refocused their presentation of the image of

women in western literature to one that is more “authentic” than the stereotypical view of the western woman as both a submissive helpmate and a civilizing force. Recently, however, new directions in western literary criticism have emerged that call into question the idea that western literature can or should be an authentic portrayal of real life. This second context reveals how Gloss’s and Turner’s novels point to the authentic as a something to be considered and questioned. Using these two novels as case studies, I explore how literary works both respond to and shape the conversation about women’s experiences in the West, how Great Plains literature—which has traditionally been viewed by scholars as depicting the authentic West—has influenced this conversation, and how recent criticism about authenticity and the West can be productively applied to western women’s writing.

In analyzing Gloss’s *The Jump-Off Creek* and Turner’s *These Is My Words: The Diary of Sarah Agnes Prine, 1881-1901, Arizona Territories*, I explore how questions of authenticity can help us to understand and situate these novels as well as how these texts playfully reinvent the “authentic” western.¹ In my discussion of the

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novels, I ask several questions that interrogate the way these texts respond to and situate themselves within a growing body of scholarship on western women's writing and how this then relates to concerns about authenticity. These questions include: (1) Given the growing interest in women's experiences in the West, how do these novels respond to a more woman-centered vision of the West? In this section, I will specifically address the ways these texts merge with recent scholarship in western women's history and literary criticism. (2) What contributions have these works and others like them made to the imagined West? In answering this question, I examine the ways that these texts broaden the horizon, so to speak, of the "mythical" West. This leads to my third question: (3) How, if at all, do these novels contribute to and/or alter our understanding of nonfiction narratives, letters, diaries, and other works from actual women who settled the Plains? From this vantage point, we can carve out a space for further discussion of the role of authenticity in shaping our understanding of the *western* in western women's writing.

Although these novels are situated in areas outside the Great Plains region—Oregon in *The Jump-Off Creek* and Arizona (primarily) in *These Is My Words*—the study of these works is useful to the larger conversation about Great Plains literature for two reasons. First, it allows us to consider the role of Great Plains literature in shaping this conversation about authenticity in the West. Great Plains writers such as Willa Cather, Elinore Pruitt Stewart, and Laura Ingalls Wilder (who I will discuss later) were largely responsible for constructing our cultural images of western women. Second, the discussion of authenticity in Gloss's and Turner's novels suggests a way of thinking about western women's writing that can be productively applied to Great Plains literature.

Gloss's and Turner's novels offer a productive entrée into this discussion because they explicitly entertain the notion of authenticity in both their form and content. On the surface, each novel is marketed to appear "realistic."

"As authentic as sand in one's shoes," reads the Edward Hoagland quote on the front of Gloss's *The Jump-Off Creek*. The cover photograph, as if to emphasize this statement, depicts a woman standing in the snow in front of a log cabin. From the context we understand her to be a homesteader, and attribution on the back of the book to the Oregon Historical Society reveals the presumed authenticity of the photograph itself. In contrast to these claims for the veracity of the text are the statements above the title that this is in fact a novel, that it has been both a finalist for the prestigious Pen/Faulkner award and a winner of the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association award. From the moment one picks up the book, the interplay between fiction and fact is apparent.

One sees the same kind of interchange on the cover of Turner's historical romance *These Is My Words: The Diary of Sarah Agnes Prine, 1881-1901, Arizona Territories*, which is designed to resemble the worn, well-used exterior of a hardbound diary. The fact that it is a paperback is itself an ironic comment on authenticity. As in Gloss's novel, the words "A Novel" appear on the cover, as does a quote, this time one that characterizes the novel as a romance. According to a cover blurb from *USA Today*, "Jack and Sarah are as delicious a couple as Rhett and Scarlett. The three-hankie ending to their long love affair will definitely make you give a damn." On the back cover, readers are alerted that the novel "includes reading group discussion questions." The discussion group questions and the quote from *USA Today* market this novel to perhaps a broader audience than Gloss's. However, both Gloss's and Turner's novels ask us to consider issues of authenticity, as even on their covers the fictional and the authentic compete for space. More than just a marketing ploy, the claim to truth in both novels functions as a framing device in the text that literally suggests how to read the novels. And these texts, as well as many others that deal with the western experience, provoke discussion about the construction of the western experience and our understanding of it.



FIG. 1. *Woman homesteader in front of log cabin.* Courtesy of Oregon Historical Society, #OrHi 8357.

TRUTH, WRITING, AND THE POSTWESTERN

In a growing critical stance that questions the utility of authenticity as a reference point for western literary criticism, scholars point out the irony in labeling competing visions of the West as being more "true." At the same time, contemporary western writers like Gloss and Turner attempt to portray a more historically accurate version of women's lives, and feminist critics interrogate a text based on the "truthfulness" of its depiction of women. These representations of western women's lives operate in opposition to the traditional associations of the West with male-oriented space. In *Landscapes of the New West*, Krista Comer discusses the masculinist orientation of western space:

[T]he most often celebrated feature of western space is its spatial *noncontainment*, its expansiveness, its vastness, its sheer, weighty limitlessness. And these kinds of characterizations—these broad, breathtaking, awesome, boundless, panoramic landscape perspectives—should register for us, loudly, the West's association with both public and male spatialities. The most "authentic" piece of the western epic, therefore, defines its authenticity through male-gendered spatial metaphors and logics, which means that in any beginning discussion of women in western space a multitude of exclusions work against locating female subjectivity at all.²

Comer suggests that women writers' engagement in this conversation is an attempt by them to "recast the spatial field in terms that do not render 'openness' synonymous with male-gendered spatialities or 'containment' necessarily synonymous with female-gendered ones."³ Works like the novels of Gloss and Turner offer a female-oriented space that contrasts with and contradicts the interpretation of the masculine as the authentic western experience. Just as women writers and feminist critics are beginning to paint a more clearly articulated picture of the lives of these

women, the very concept of authenticity, and along with it the possibility of a true portrayal of western women, are called into question. Although these two groups appear to possess conflicting perspectives and intentions, in this essay I hope to establish a common ground for productive conversation.

In order to understand the current critical conversation about authenticity and how it relates to western women's writing, it is particularly useful to consider the effect of Great Plains writers such as Willa Cather, Elinore Pruitt Stewart, and even Laura Ingalls Wilder and related scholarship on these authors in shaping our vision of the authentic western woman. All three writers depict early examples of women who go against the grain, defying conventional stereotypes of western women, while criticism of their texts has concurrently focused upon the veracity of their portrayals. Truth is never so apparent in western women's writing as it is in the context of *My Ántonia*. Based on real people of Cather's acquaintance, the characters in her novel seem to overshadow their human counterparts. "We're Ántonia's grandchildren," Ann Ronald writes of the greeting she received from Anna Pavelka's descendants in the Nebraska countryside.⁴ Ronald concludes that "So pervasive is Cather's creative presence in Webster County, Nebraska, that even the real-life offspring of her fictional prototypes blur the boundaries between Cather's imagination and their own family histories."⁵ Indeed, as William R. Handley notes, much of Cather scholarship has focused on the "unearthing of the real people and places that by proxy fill her fictional worlds."⁶ And at least one school of Cather criticism, according to Handley, "seeks to authenticate historically what feels authentic artistically."⁷ The real woman gets mixed up with the fictional one, creating a blurring effect that allows the fictional to govern interpretations of the real.

Similarly, much scholarship on Laura Ingalls Wilder has focused on the historical accuracy of her text. Kathryn Adam calls her settings "vividly realized frontier landscapes" and claims that Wilder "thoroughly re-created" the world of

the "western pioneer farm wom[a]n."⁸ Although Adam does not primarily seek to verify historical fact, she contends that "The 'truth' achieved by such [literary] means is not the truth of verifiable historical fact, but the 'truth' of fiction."⁹ Contradictorily, Frances W. Kaye claims that criticism of the Little House books "refuses to be jarred" as she defamiliarizes Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* by presenting the events of the story from the perspective of the dispossessed Osage and "read[ing] the book against that Osage norm."¹⁰ Kaye writes, "In general, writers have praised all of the Little House books as texts that not only give both young and older readers a taste for and an understanding of the past of the United States but also present feminist alternatives to the usual male-oriented myths of the frontier."¹¹ In their strong female protagonist, the Little House books could be seen to be a precursor to the kinds of new western women Gloss and Turner depict.

Elinore Pruitt Stewart is another unconventional woman whose letters cause us to think more closely about issues of authenticity. In their firsthand depiction of the life of an unusual and extraordinary woman, Stewart's letters, collected in *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* and later in *Letters on an Elk Hunt*, might seem to be perfect texts for the realistic approach to western women's experiences and literature that seems to permeate such criticism.¹² However, Stewart scholar and editor Susanne K. George avoids reading them as strictly historically accurate accounts in favor of considering their literary appeal: "Although Elinore did base her letters on her own experiences, I believe that she deliberately wrote for publication, embroidering her facts with fiction, and that she firmly and self-consciously relied on literary tradition when composing her works, publishing under the guise of 'found literature.'"¹³ George discusses how the epistolary form of Stewart's work suggests authenticity and speculates on the motives of Stewart's contemporary publisher in emphasizing the truthfulness of her work: "Perhaps because Stewart wrote so vividly about situations many readers would have trouble believing, they considered it important to underline

the veracity of the narratives. Or possibly they added the characteristic claim to comply with the conventions of epistolary fiction."¹⁴ Perhaps they simply want these experiences (and Stewart herself) to be the authentic product of the West. Stewart's account, like the novels of Ingalls or Cather's *My Ántonia*, presents options—and sometimes appealing ones—for women steeped in the stereotypes of woman as conservator of eastern values. They portray active women who are not only shaped by their environment, but in their own lives are shaping it.

The women in Gloss's and Turner's novels are direct descendants of these Great Plains "foremothers." However, as "authentic" women are being mined from western literary history as models for more current fiction, western critics have begun to question the very premise of authenticity. This discussion was recently brought to the forefront of western studies in a collection of essays entitled *True West: Authenticity and the American West* in the University of Nebraska Press's Postwestern Horizons series. Editors William R. Handley and Nathaniel Lewis write in the introduction that

Examining the conceit of western authenticity . . . challenges many assumptions we make about western writing and opens the door to an important new chapter in western literary history and cultural criticism—while returning us to some old, recalcitrant problems in the history and culture of the American West.¹⁵

Handley and Lewis describe the essays in *True West* as examining "how the concept of authenticity is used to invent, test, advertise, and read the West."¹⁶ Given the affinity for authenticity in western writing, as evidenced in *True West*, it is not surprising that both Gloss's and Turner's novels play with this idea. As Lewis states in the introduction to his *Unsettling the Literary West: Authenticity and Authorship* (another installment in the Postwestern Horizons series), "The pursuit, production, and marketing of the 'real West' all but define the history of western literature

and criticism."¹⁷ In *Making It Home*, Deborah Keahey identifies a similar strand of thought in Canadian literary criticism: "A 'realist' and deterministic approach to land and language has tended to permeate the major studies of Prairie literature to date . . . and to influence the evaluation of individual texts."¹⁸ At the same time, consideration of the ways that western writing invents and uses authenticity is a relatively new—or "postwestern"—idea.

Several factors have influenced the conflation of the West with an authentic place and/or experience. In his study of realism in western literature, Nicolas S. Witschi writes about the common connection of the West to nature: "[T]his association of the American West with the great outdoors maintains that life in the West affords an unambiguous relationship with an unalloyed, nonhuman, real nature."¹⁹ Lewis points to another important factor in the creation of the "realistic" West of early western writing as a historical basis for western representation: the spatial distance from East to West and the implied isolation of the West as an imagined place.

At first the West was remote to the dominant white culture, a distant place of savagery and wildness, sometimes exotic, often unattractive. Explorers, travelers, and tourists visited the far-off region and brought their impressions back to an armchair audience, reading mostly in the East and in Europe. Yet, oddly, this sense of remoteness lingered in the cultural imagination well past the age of exploration and then past the age of immigration.²⁰

This idea echoes Umberto Eco's discussion of spatial distance in "Travels in Hyperreality." Eco claims that the distance between places such as Los Angeles and New Orleans "drives this country to construct not only imitations of the past and of exotic lands but also imitations of itself."²¹ I would posit that the distance between our own time and experiences and those of nineteenth-century western women leads us to construct imitations of our forebears,

in the case of Gloss's and Turner's western women, and that these reproductions mediate the distance for us, particularly in the case of such an iconic representation as the western woman. For example, both Gloss's Lydia and Turner's Sarah offer someone with whom we as readers can identify in environments that seem typically (and familiarly) western.

It is important to consider, however, that any discussion of authenticity is problematized by its own rhetorical framework. For instance, if I am to point out the constructedness of the central characters Sarah and Lydia in these two novels, I do so by comparing them to the "real" women who populated the American West. I might explore how Lydia's experience mirrors that of Alice Day Pratt—one of Gloss's historical sources for her text.²² Or I might consider Sarah's experiences as a "westerling" girl/woman on the trail against the diaries of other western women depicted in Lillian Schlissel's work.²³ This comparison seems unavoidable while at the same time problematic. Hsuan L. Hsu writes in "Authentic Re-creations: Ideology, Practice, and Regional History along Buena Park's Entertainment Corridor" that California entertainment complexes sanitize the "American frontier," which was in actuality "characterized by crime, corruption, and often racially motivated violence."²⁴ The problems inherent in such interpretive strategies (Are we simply replacing one claim about accuracy with another?) are obvious but not easy to rectify. Hsu attempts to address this problem by considering the variety of "individual types" that populated the West and the ways that these "types" have either been reduced to sanitized stereotypes or ignored altogether. Hsu argues that a theme park such as Knott's Berry Farm "asserts its authenticity by collapsing distinctions between fact and fiction."²⁵ The park reinterprets and "repackages" the West for mass consumption. In Gloss's and Turner's novels, the readers, like the visitors to Knott's Berry Farm, are asked to at least consider the authenticity of what is presented to them, by reconciling the fictional with the actual historical accounts.

THE "NEW WESTERN" WOMAN

Both Gloss and Turner seem to be moving in the opposite direction from the sanitized version of the West portrayed at Knott's Berry Farm, bringing us back to a grittier "reality." Examining the constructedness of the characters of Lydia and Sarah allows us to consider the model of the western woman to which Gloss's and Turner's characters respond and correspond. This leads us to my earlier question: How do these novels respond to a more woman-centered vision of the West? Current scholarship on western women's writing is characterized first by the perceived need for texts that adequately represent the writer's actual voice. These critics see the writer's voice and what it portrays as central to our understanding of her experiences. Historians and critics have pointed out that editorial mediation of the women writers' narratives have resulted in texts that do not adequately reflect the writers' voice and even edge the writer herself off the page, replacing her voice with a scholarly "narrator." Numerous examples of this exist. In *Twenty Thousand Roads: Women, Movement, and the West*, historian Virginia Scharff discusses how the editor of the Susan Shelby Magoffin's *Down the Santa Fe Trail* "directs the reader's attention away from the diarist, nearly pushes the diary itself off the page, and all but renders the author invisible, swamped by the rising tide of editorial commentary," as she makes a case for the necessity of a new edition of Magoffin's text.²⁶ Scharff writes:

To Magoffin's original text, some 237 lined pages of writing in a book eight and a half inches long, Drumm added an avalanche of annotation amounting to a text nearly as long as the diary itself. . . . The doggedly researched footnotes to *Down the Santa Fe Trail* do indeed deal with names and places, in stunning detail. The footnotes seem to creep from the bottom nearer and nearer to the top of page after page. Drumm's annotations tell stories about any number of people. Curiously, they do not tell us a thing

about Susan Shelby Magoffin, who appears in the notes only twice in passing.²⁷

Drumm recasts Magoffin's story for her own purpose, namely, according to Scharff, to promote her own vision of manifest destiny. But in forcing her narrative to serve this purpose, Drumm mischaracterizes Magoffin and her narrative as she pushes the writer herself off the page.

There are a number of other similar examples of this reshaping of western women's experiences. In my own work, I argue that editorial intrusion and deletions in Sarah Royce's *A Frontier Lady* (the published version of Royce's manuscript "Across the Plains") inadequately represents Royce and her experiences, and I am currently working on a new edition of Royce's narrative that emphasizes Royce's own voice and narrative structure.²⁸ Ann Raney Coleman's *Victorian Lady on the Texas Frontier* offers another example of this phenomenon. Coleman's editor, C. Richard King, describes his editorial practices in the introduction:

Additional paragraphs have also been marked, and the chapters, 'books,' as Ann Raney Coleman termed them, have been redivided. Mrs. Coleman divided her story into seven notebooks, paying no attention to the change in subject matter. The entire Book I, Ann's early life in England, has been dropped from this volume, and severe editing has been applied to other divisions.²⁹

King also corrected Coleman's spelling but condescendingly left her "charming spelling of proper names" intact.³⁰ Current scholarship indicts the attitudes that guide such seemingly arbitrary editorial practices and questions the utility of documents that mediate not only the women's stories but also how they told these stories.

In a second and related concern, scholars are beginning to view the personal writings of western women with a kind of gravity not previously common to scholarship in this area. They are, in essence, taking these women and

their work seriously. Perhaps one of the best examples of this new scholarship is Jennifer Sinor's *The Extraordinary Work of Ordinary Writing: Annie Ray's Diary*. In her study, Sinor discusses writing typically labeled "discardable"³¹ and argues for the importance of such private writing:

This project is a defense of ordinary writing and takes as its center the ordinary diary kept by an ordinary woman, Annie Ray, who lived on the Dakota plains in the late nineteenth century. A text that is typically tossed because it lacks matter, her diary is one example of ordinary writing. By finding the tools necessary to value and, more importantly, evaluate her diary, we can learn to read and value other examples of ordinary writing as well as other examples of ordinary texts (and here I am including nonwritten texts like landscapes and bodies).³²

Sinor understands the significance of what she calls the "dailiness" or the simple daily life of a common woman that is recorded in the diary and reveals how this perspective suggests new questions and ways of looking at a text.³³ For example, Sinor concerns herself not only with the storied portions of Annie Ray's journal but also with what the "white spaces"—the places that the narrative does not reach—reveal. In doing so, she underscores the need for western scholars to consider not only what is being written but what is left unsaid.

Like the white spaces to which Sinor refers, the sections of Gloss's novel that depict the journal of central character Lydia Bennett Sanderson reveal as much in the unstated as they do in the actual narrative Lydia recounts. The structure of the novel alternates sparse diary entries with much longer narrative sections told from the perspective of an omniscient narrator. The story recounts Lydia's first nine months as a homesteader in 1890s Oregon. These nine months are, in effect, a rebirth for Lydia, who has previously gone from unappreciated wife to "homeless" widow. Over the course of the novel, Lydia develops

the skills needed for survival on her own. The novel opens with Lydia's economic accounting of her situation: "Bought the black hinny Mule today, \$18, also the spavint gray as my money is so short and I have hope he will put on wt, his eyes are clear w a smart look in them and his feet not tender" (1). Much like the experience of reading an actual journal, Lydia's own words offer sparse introduction to her or her circumstances. Instead, the reader is forced to make meaning by weaving together the story that is told in both the journal entries and the narrative that separates them. In the opening chapters of the novel, the reader is given little information about Lydia's background; it is not until chapter 16 that we learn that an unhappy marriage, widowhood, and the death of a child are motivating factors in her homesteading. She tells her new (and only) female friend, Evelyn Walker: "I'd rather have my own house sorry as it is, than the wedding ring of a dead man who couldn't be roused from sleeping when his own child was slipping out of me unborn" (81). Characteristic of the dialogue of the novel is Gloss's ability to convey in few words central truths about the characters.

Turner's novel, however, is not characterized so much by sparseness of narrative—at nearly 400 pages, Sarah's diary reveals a young woman who has much to say about her life—as it is by the attempt at verisimilitude of voice. The novel tells the story of Sarah Prince from age seventeen to thirty-seven, as she passes from teenage girl to the unappreciated wife of a childhood friend to untimely widow to wife again. Over the course of the years, she travels with her parents from New Mexico to Arizona, engages in a flirtation with Captain Jack Elliot (the love of her life who will become her second husband), and bears five children, two of whom do not survive. The first of Sarah's diary entries, dated July 22, 1881, depicts a naïve and untutored young girl whose desire for education leads her to lament: "I hope there is schools in San Angelo that will take a girl as big as me cause I want to learn to write better! Probably there ain't" (3). Over the course of the novel, Turner shows Sarah's writing improving

and her subject matter evolving as she matures. In her entry for April 8, 1893, Sarah writes, "My life feels like a book left out on the porch, and the wind blows the pages faster and faster, turning always toward a new chapter faster than I can stop and read it. We lost the baby I was carrying at Christmas, in February" (356). In penning her journal, Sarah has become a writer, and Turner captures this transformation in her novel.

It is in her depictions of grief that Turner most aptly portrays both the maturing of Sarah's character and the authenticity of her voice. Early in the novel, as she describes her parents' grief at the death of their child, and later her mother's mourning for her father, Sarah seems unaware of the depth of their grief, which is characterized in the text by Sarah's attempts to move beyond each situation: "Two days after burying Clover [Sarah's brother] we is still at the spot cause Mama and Papa just walks around lost like and saying they can't leave him. It is a hard time but I am making myself useful" (10). "Mama is just a hollow ghost of a person now and don't eat unless you make her, nor comb her hair. She just sits and holds her pilgrims progress quilt and rocks back and forth. The sound of the squeaking rocker is reminding me she is still with us and I think she will get better in time" (20). In Sarah's attempts to make herself "useful" in the face of her parents' grief and reassurances that her mother will get better after her father's death, Turner underscore the naïveté of the character early in the novel. In contrast, the intensity of her profound anguish to her own loss of her daughter and then her beloved second husband much later in the novel reveals Sarah's development as a character: "No wonder Mama went away in her head when Clover passed on. And then Papa . . . If I knew how to make myself go away in my head, I declare I would" (363) and "I laid his head on the pillow gently, and then buried my own face on it, and I shed tears the like of which I didn't know I owned" (379). The words she uses to describe her grief emphasize her emotional understanding of the depth of grief she can feel as an adult, and the change

she has undergone seems, again, to realistically portray maturity and growth.

The attempts at verisimilitude in both novels correspond to the foregrounding of the texts and voices of western women by historians and literary critics and the perceived need to bring the lives of these women into sharper focus. Both Gloss's and Turner's novels respond to concerns for a more woman-centered vision of the West by placing their female protagonists at the center of the texts, doing so in ways that aim for realism, and creating characters that challenge the stereotypical image of the sun-bonneted pioneer woman, the "gentle tamer," or the "madonna of the prairies." Instead, Lydia and Sarah both embody what I will call a "new western stereotype" of the feminist frontierswoman, which is rooted in the earlier depictions of women in Great Plains literature. They stand apart from the civilized and civilizing as they offer a counter-myth equal to the rugged individualism of the western male.

For Lydia, this counter-myth is an isolated individualism that contradicts more typical perceptions of women's connection to community. In a bold move, the widowed Lydia leaves behind her life in the East to homestead a plot of land in the Blue Mountain region of eastern Oregon. Lydia's sometimes sparsely written diary entries interweave with third-person narrative that describes her neighbors—Tim Whiteaker, Blue Odell, Evelyn Walker—and Lydia's interactions with them. In her first diary entry, Lydia reveals the purpose behind her scheme. She realizes that her community will see her as a "Mad Woman" for living and homesteading by herself, but she is prepared for this ostracizing. She writes, "But I am used to being Alone, in spirit if not in body, and shall not be Lonely, as I never have been inclined that way. I believe what I feel is just a keenness to get to that place and stand under my own roof at last" (1). Lydia's desire for a place of her own, separate from the rest of the world, counters the stereotype of the frontierswoman's longing for community. Gregory Morris points out that the interactions between Lydia and her community, particularly those with Tim

Whiteaker, are strained and characterized as much by silence as by speech. Morris writes,

Communication throughout the novel is marked by disjuncture and severance; speech is broken, incomplete—gesture is repeatedly ambiguous and unclear. The emphasis is upon *misdirection* and *miscommunication* and *misunderstanding*. Words like “confusion” and “embarrassment” and “pointless” describe, over and over again, characters caught in the unease of social commerce.³⁴

In a scene characteristic of the text for its sparse dialogue, Lydia, Tim, and Blue brand and castrate Lydia's cattle. The men and Lydia are uncomfortable and formal in their interactions:

Blue had never got to feel comfortable with cutting the sex out of a calf while a woman watched. He turned and came at it a little backward so the woman might not see around him to what he was doing. From there, with his hindside to Mrs. Sanderson, he gave Tim a look. Tim kept his head down.

“It works easier, sometime, if you take hold of the ears with one hand and the behind leg with the other,” Blue said gently, without looking at the woman. “They don't fall quite so hard.”

She nodded her head without speaking. Her face was set and pink, holding the calf flat. (59-60)

As Lydia learns the process, she tries to hide the “little flash of satisfaction” from her coworkers. Gloss creates a world in which conventional forms of social interactions are no longer sufficient to address the lived experiences of her characters. It is difficult to be genteel when one is castrating cattle. If conventional social interaction no longer seems appropriate, what *does* work for Lydia is a reliance upon her own internal resources and ultimately the ability to develop a new kind of community in the

West that is not based upon the imbalanced and gender-coded interactions of her life in the East. The community she creates, while offering a shared experience of work and support, also hinges upon her own ability to work and support herself.

Like Gloss's novel, Nancy Turner offers a woman-centered vision of western experience. On the surface, Turner's Sarah Agnes Prine follows a more predictable path than Lydia. The novel starts with Sarah as a young girl and chronicles her life and loves in the best tradition of the romance novel. Like the stereotypical romantic young girl, she is concerned with friends and fashion and with boys and her conduct toward them. However, Sarah cannot embrace the role of the conventional sentimental heroine that is presented to her as the female ideal. Her life in the West forces her to act in ways counter to these genteel depictions of womanhood. For example, early in the novel, young Sarah is forced to kill two men who rape and brutalize her friend Ulyssa. A watching Indian scalps the men and offers Sarah the “trophies” in deference to her “kill,” thus underscoring the “wildness” of her behavior (19).

Later, Sarah finds a conduct book called *The Happy Bride*, which instructs her that a girl must be “a righteous example of piety and purity, virtuous to a fault, kind and sharing” in order to be happily married (87). Reading this book causes Sarah to reflect back upon the events of several months earlier when she spent a fearful night in a violent rainstorm clinging to and being comforted by army captain Jack Elliot, while wearing nothing but her camisole and a pair of long underwear. After discovering *The Happy Bride*, Sarah realizes that the very books meant to guide her conduct as a young woman do not necessarily address the kinds of experiences she will face in her life in the West. Like the social codes and conformities of Lydia's life in the East, Sarah's book of etiquette is insufficient. Sarah writes, “The book doesn't say what to do if you have slept in your underwear on top of a soldier in a wagon during a rainstorm” (87). Both Sarah and Lydia find that what is

considered appropriate social interaction in an eastern sense fails as a guideline for behavior in the West. This realization becomes a juncture at which the eastern cultural stereotypes break down and are replaced by what becomes a new western vision of womanhood.

THE WEST AS IMAGINED SPACE

This leads to my second question: How do these novels contribute to the "imagined West"? It can best be addressed by examining their rhetorical context. In preparing to write *The Jump-Off Creek*, Molly Gloss extensively researched the lives of female homesteaders. In her dedication she writes, "I am greatly indebted to many published and unpublished diaries, letters and journals of women who settled the West. I hope their strong, honest voices can be heard in this book." Gloss is explicitly positioning her work within a kind of academic context: she has researched her subject and she writes her story using an understated "literary/artistic" style for a more sophisticated reading audience. She makes "high art" of the common experience in much the same way Jennifer Sinor's graceful prose elevates Annie Ray's daily record of everyday life.

In contrast, Turner classifies her book as a work of historical fiction, and it reads like a western romance. According to Julie Failla Earhart's review of the book, "*These is my words*' is an unforgettable novel of life on the frontier. In the manner of *Lonesome Dove*, it sweeps across the American West with a passion as enduring and powerful as those who try to tame it."³⁵ This review, as well as the press's marketing descriptions of the book both inside and on the cover, positions it as a sweeping work of fiction that interprets the western experience in a myth-making way. The inside jacket description of the book claims that Turner was inspired to write by "original family memoirs"; however, with the exception of five historical figures who play minor roles in the story, Turner also attests in the disclaimer that every other character is fictitious. Turner positions her work for a popular audience.

But unlike Gloss, Turner makes no reference to historical research (though she must have conducted some), possibly because her audience would not perceive it as essential to the enjoyment of her text.

Perhaps the most significant contribution that each text makes to our literary imagination of the West is in making the lives of western women accessible to a variety of audiences, and in so doing, creating a counter-myth to the traditional depictions of the masculinized West. Considering some of the risks inherent to such an enterprise, however, leads to my third question: How do these novels contribute to and/or alter our understanding of nonfiction narratives, letters, diaries, and other works from actual women? In order to answer this question, we must return to our discussion of authenticity. Consideration of the ways Gloss and Turner play with authenticity leads us to contemplate the constructedness of the "real" western narrative. For example, we see both Turner and the fictional Sarah responding to conditions and conversations outside the novel itself: Sarah is explicitly concerned with the version of reality presented in *The Happy Bride*, and her behavior in the text responds to this book and to the culture that created it. Turner, for her part, positions Sarah's story as a western romance.

The journal entries in Gloss's novel function in a similar way in that their "accuracy" shows awareness of the genre of western women's diaries and journals. An awareness of this urge for authenticity in fictional writing, which, as I mentioned before, is specifically characteristic of the western genre, can lead us to fruitfully question issues of authenticity and constructedness in the actual writing of nineteenth-century western women. We can look at the real-life models for Sarah and Lydia and consider how their writing was also a response to conditions outside their actual narratives—the social and literary conventions that guided their own, sometimes very private, writing. Such novels remind us how these real women were similarly constructing their own realities.

On the other hand, the risk of such popularizing of the western women's experience is that

we will begin to mischaracterize the actual narratives, reading what is not there, embellishing the details, shaping the real women to fit into the shoes of Lydia or Sarah or other heroines of western fiction—no matter that these fictional women are somehow more *real* for their strength than the stereotypical female role. I have assigned both novels in my Western Women's Narrative class, and even though we explicitly discuss the ways that these texts play with and respond to issues of authenticity, I fear that students will read the fictional as the actual, losing the real women's lives in the fictional version. The expectations these texts set up include the ideas that the "real" stories will read like stories—with plots and characterization and helpful description; that the feminist voices of these western heroines will be inherent in the diaries and letters and memoirs of the actual female settlers we read; and that the actual women will rise in triumph to defeat death and despair as do their fictional counterparts. Anything else becomes a disappointment. Even the process of *contrasting* the fictional and the real is an exercise in defining both.

In contrast to this concern, however, the novels can serve a purpose for the study of western narratives. The very claim to authenticity and the almost ironic competition between the fictional and the real that I explored at the beginning of this essay offer western critics, historians, and writers a fertile ground for discussion. Study of novels like *The Jump-Off Creek* and *These Is My Words* and their constructions of the "authentic" western experience reveals that ideas about the West and specifically western women are rooted in other literary depictions of the West and are informed by thinking that values the iconoclastic—and therefore more "authentic"—female voice. These writers and these texts speak to each other in a conversation that, over time, has shaped our own understanding of western women's lives.

NOTES

1. Molly Gloss, *The Jump-Off Creek* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989); Nancy E. Turner, *These Is*

My Words: The Diary of Sarah Agnes Prine, 1881-1901, Arizona Territories (New York: HarperCollins, 1998). Further citations to *The Jump-Off Creek* and *These Is My Words* are given in parentheses in the text.

2. Krista Comer, *Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women's Writing* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 28.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Ann Ronald, *GhostWest: Reflections Past and Present* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), 136.

5. *Ibid.*, 137.

6. William R. Handley, "Willa Cather: 'The West Authentic,' the West Divided," in *True West: Authenticity and the American West*, ed. William R. Handley and Nathaniel Lewis, 72-94 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 74.

7. *Ibid.*, 75.

8. Kathryn Adam, "Laura, Ma, Mary, Carrie, and Grace: Western Women as Portrayed by Laura Ingalls Wilder," in *The Women's West*, ed. Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, 95-110 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 97.

9. *Ibid.*, 98.

10. Frances W. Kaye, "Little Squatter on the Osage Diminished Reserve: Reading Laura Ingalls Wilder's Kansas Indians," *Great Plains Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 123-140, 124.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Elinore Pruitt Stewart, *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), and *Letters on an Elk Hunt by a Woman Homesteader* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979).

13. Susanne K. George, *The Adventures of The Woman Homesteader: The Life and Letters of Elinore Pruitt Stewart* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 199.

14. *Ibid.*, 201.

15. Handley and Lewis, "Introduction," in *True West*, 1.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Nathaniel Lewis, *Unsettling the Literary West: Authenticity and Authorship* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 1.

18. Deborah Keahey, *Making It Home: Place in Canadian Prairie Literature* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1998), 5.

19. Nicolas S. Witschi, *Traces of Gold: California's Natural Resources and the Claim to Realism in Western American Literature* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 4.

20. Lewis, *Unsettling the Literary West*, 8.

21. Umberto Eco, "Travels in Hyperreality," in *Travels in Hyperreality* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 53.

22. Alice Day Pratt, *A Homesteader's Portfolio* (New York: Macmillan, 1922).

23. Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982).

24. Hsuan L. Hsu, "Authentic Re-Creations: Ideology, Practice, and Regional History along Buena Park's Entertainment Corridor," in *True West*, 306.

25. *Ibid.*, 309.

26. Virginia Scharff, *Twenty Thousand Roads: Women, Movement, and the West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 38.

27. *Ibid.*, 38-39.

28. Jennifer Dawes Adkison, "Textual Editing and Western Women's Narratives: Sarah Royce's 'Across the Plains'" (paper presented at the Western Literature Association Conference, Big Sky, MT, September 2004).

29. C. Richard King, "Introduction," in *Victorian Lady on the Texas Frontier: The Journal of Ann Raney*

Coleman (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), xx.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Jennifer Sinor, *The Extraordinary Work of Ordinary Writing: Annie Ray's Diary* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002), 5.

32. *Ibid.*, 7.

33. Sinor borrows the term from Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, who uses it to describe Martha Ballard's diary in *The Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Vintage, 1991).

34. Gregory Morris, "The Jump-Off Creek: Molly Gloss's Novel of Frontier Manners," *South Dakota Review* 30, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 130.

35. Julie Failla Earhart, review of *These Is My Words: The Diary of Sarah Agnes Prine, 1881-1901, Arizona Territories*, by Nancy E. Turner, *The Charlotte Austin Review Ltd.* <http://collection.nlcnc.ca/100/202/300/charlotte/2000/1217/pages/reviews/generalfiction/theseismywords.htm> (accessed February 24, 2005).