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**Western fathers/writing daughters: The place of gender in the autobiographical nonfiction of Mari Sandoz, Mary Clearman Blew, Linda Hasselstrom, and Julene Bair.**

Nicole Zickefoose

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**WESTERN FATHERS/WRITING DAUGHTERS: THE PLACE OF GENDER IN  
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NONFICTION OF MARI SANDOZ, MARY  
CLEARMAN BLEW, LINDA HASSELSTROM, AND JULENE BAIR**

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of English

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

University of Nebraska at Omaha

By

Nicole Zickefoose

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THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NONFICTION OF MARI SANDOZ, MARY  
CLEARMAN BLEW, LINDA HASSELSTROM, AND JULENE BAIR**

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College, University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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**WESTERN FATHERS/WRITING DAUGHTERS: THE PLACE OF GENDER IN  
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NONFICTION OF MARI SANDOZ, MARY  
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Nicole Zickefoose, MA

University of Nebraska at Omaha, 2004

Advisor: Dr. John Price

In the lives of Western rural women, fathers—as well as the regional myths and values they represent—often play a pre-eminent role in defining the scope and value of women’s work. Though women perform work important to the personal and economic success of the family and business, they are frequently limited to the confines of the domestic arena and denied a sense of their own value as well as a platform in which to voice their concerns. The authors included in this thesis challenge, both through their lives and in their autobiographical writing, the traditional, gendered boundaries established by the rural Western cultures in which they were raised. Though each author writes about the relationship to her father, I argue that their fathers collectively represent larger, patriarchal tendencies embedded within the region’s rural, social architecture. The authors openly question or seek to revise many of these patriarchal trends, including contradictory gendered expectations, the exclusion of women from the physical and economic management of the family business, attitudes toward environmental

stewardship that differ from previous generations, and a rural ethos of privacy that silences expressions of dissenting emotions and ideas. One trend in particular, the ethos of privacy, is problematical for several of these writers, making the publication of their autobiographical nonfiction an act of rebellion that has consequences, both personal and professional. In revealing some of the psychological, social, and environmental challenges facing those living in the rural West, these writers step into the role of protector and defender of their respective rural places. As well, the environmental emphasis found in the work of these women strengthens a bioregional, non-gender specific definition of community.

I also include some of my own experiences from rural Iowa in the introduction and conclusion and weave portions of my story into some of the chapters. For me, and other regional women artists, the authors discussed here model ways to articulate and transcend the gender limitations still faced by many women in the rural West today.

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## One Western Woman's Experience: A Personal Introduction

It was a hot and humid late-summer day, typical during baling season in Iowa. I waited with my sister Summer in the kitchen; we were supposed to take sandwiches and drinks over to the barn for the baling crew at noon. We had both offered to drive the tractor or help load hay onto the rack and then the haymow, but had been turned down by my father. Instead, he had wanted the names of any high school boys we knew who could help out for the afternoon. When questioned about these old-line notions by my fairly opinionated and liberal mother, he replied, "I don't think the girls are strong enough yet." Soon exasperated with our questions and complaints, he quietly called the pastor in town and asked his two boys to come out and help for the afternoon. My sister and I fed the crew lunch and then retreated to the house to keep our brothers from fighting and to finish any household chores left on a list by my mother, who had left earlier in the day for her college classes.

The phone rang mid-afternoon; my father was calling from the barn. "Get over here. You and your sister need to finish out the afternoon." We dressed appropriately for baling by throwing on jeans, work boots, and long-sleeved shirts, and grabbed some leather gloves to protect us from the scrapes and scratches that baling causes. We arrived at the edge of the field just in time to see the two boys my father had hired crawling on their hands and knees to the pump house for water. They were clearly fatigued from the heat and the physical exertion necessary to bale during a humid late-August day in Iowa. Summer and I did finish the afternoon alongside my father and the neighbor men who

had agreed to swap labor for some of our hay from the year's harvest. My father didn't pay much attention to this incident, nor did he thank us for stepping in to relieve his hired crew. Rather than acknowledge the fact that my sister and I had finished a job that two older boys could not, he chalked up their inadequacies to their urban upbringing. The "city boys" that my father had hired were clearly not used to the rigors of daily farm work. While we struggled to understand the reasoning behind these contradictions, we couldn't help but foster some resentment. We wanted to help castrate pigs, muck out the horse stalls, and drive the combine during harvest. Rather than openly teach us his valuable farming knowledge, my father tried to protect us from what he called "outside work." It was clear that should his crew need sandwiches, we were to bring them and with a smile. We were also supposed to help with livestock and the farming, but on an as-needed basis, and usually as a last-minute resort due to poor planning on my father's part. My father's approach to farmwork was to continue to do things in the same way as before—the way his father, my grandfather, did them. As adults, however, my sister and I have become critical of what needs to change before some women can live and work happily within this rural region.

Summer and I are now both studying the arts—she in ceramics and I in English. Though we are both pursuing graduate work in separate fields and states, Florida and Nebraska, our professional and personal interests are well aligned and continue to reflect a deep connection to place—rural Iowa. Through our studies, we have discovered that others are also interested in uncovering and, in some cases, discovering pertinent issues that are relevant to women living and working in rural Western regions as well as others

who may have interest in this body of work. Often, women's voices are buried beneath a rural social culture that encourages passivity and subordination. By bringing literature specific to the Western woman's experience to the forefront of literary discussion, women's experiences are further represented and communicated as valid and equal representations of Western life<sup>1</sup>, though it often differs from the experiences of men.

One such literary figure, Mari Sandoz, revealed early settlement experiences in the West. Chapter one of this thesis discusses Sandoz's early work, Old Jules, an account of her father's early settlement in Western Nebraska. Yet, at the same time, Sandoz incorporates much of her mother's story into the narrative, making Old Jules a diverse nonfiction narrative about the homesteading period and one that documented women's experiences settling the Western Nebraska terrain. Many critics argue that Sandoz's decision to tell primarily her *father's* story can be attributed to Sandoz's denying her mother's story. I argue instead that by documenting her father's story Sandoz was, in essence, identifying with a role that was previously unavailable to women. Sandoz's interests and aspirations were outside the confines of her mother's role. Given the harsh conditions of her mother's life and the abusive treatments that she and her children suffered, Sandoz's accounts of life on the frontier can be viewed instead as a progression for Sandoz, as well as for other women. By writing and publishing these accounts, Sandoz helped pave the way for others to document the truths that they encountered in Western regions.

Today, there are many more women writing about their experiences within the Western region. This is a sign that gender roles are continuing to shift and change. Many

women specifically seek out Western women's literature to hear about experiences that directly relate to their lives in the region. More women are joining this literary realm, as readers and authors, contributing to and diversifying women's collective history within the region. The majority of this thesis is devoted to three such contemporary voices: Mary Clearman Blew, Linda Hasselstrom, and Julene Bair.

One theme commonly found in contemporary Western women's literature is the mythical Western father figure and the ethos of privacy that surrounds this figure. The work of Mary Clearman Blew, a Montana native and current Idaho resident, serves as a significant example of such literature. Blew writes about her father as a mythical Western figure—a man who embodies the ideal or romanticized West and carries that through his everyday experiences so that it is not just a myth but a way of life. Blew's nonfiction also reveals a Western culture deeply aligned with a private and stoic lifestyle, contributing to the aura of the mythical Western father figure. Also common within Blew's writing is a growing unhappiness with the expected roles for women within the region. Blew voices disfavor about certain role expectations and begins to challenge the status quo by questioning what her family expected of her. For instance, Blew wanted a college education. She pursued school and eventually obtained her Ph.D in English, something that her family never really fully understood or supported. Blew's misgivings about her family's expectations pave the way for the discussion in chapter three of Linda Hasselstrom's work, which further confronts traditional gender roles and challenges the ethos of privacy.

Linda Hasselstrom, a South Dakota native and current Wyoming resident, takes a particularly strong stand against some of the patriarchal traditions within her family and the tight-knit ranching community in which she was raised. In Feels Like Far and Windbreak, Hasselstrom tries to juggle several responsibilities, particularly ranching and writing, in the face of great opposition from her father. Hasselstrom's work reveals the angst and grief over feeling forced to choose between two passions, two kinds of regional work. Chapter three also incorporates the work of Judy Blunt, a Montana writer, who also writes about her early, married life on the ranch with her husband, John, and their three children. Though Blunt always had aspirations for a college degree, she was not supported in this dream by her family or her husband. Blunt began her college career after she divorced John and moved away from the ranch. Both Hasselstrom and Blunt find that they must leave the ranch in order to fully pursue their goals and dreams. Though this decision greatly pains both women, neither wanted to sacrifice their own happiness and aspirations for the traditional roles their families had anticipated for them.

Chapter four focuses on Julene Bair's, One Degree West, and a more recent unpublished essay entitled "Home on Little Beaver." Bair's work reveals a solid connection to place yet also discloses a growing dissatisfaction with the farming practices within her native Western Kansas. This dichotomy in Bair's work exposes some conflict between her current and future stewardship responsibilities toward the land. By incorporating environmental discussions into the discourse about place, Bair presents an ecocritical perspective that offers new insight into modern farming methods while maintaining a certain respect for the unchanging habits of farmers from her father's era.

Interestingly, Bair's older brother, Bruce Bair, is also a writer. He too writes of this same dry Kansas farming region in his book Good Land or, My Life as a Farm Boy, which presents a technical, though supportive, discussion of the region's farming practices. Both Julene Bair and her brother chose the same profession and both write about similar regional matters, which allows, perhaps even calls for, a critical analysis of both works with a particular focus on gender. In Bair's essay "Home on Little Beaver," it becomes clear that the differences between the two siblings will affect the family farm's future, as together they begin to make decisions regarding the land and its use after their father's death.

Becky Faber, an academic advisor for the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and a scholar of Western literature, theorizes that "What binds their [Western women writer's] experiences is the rural setting and the consistency of the work involved" ("Women Writing About Farm Women" 115). When examining nonfiction by these Western women authors, several similarities reappear within their work such as a resistance to the private and stoic lifestyle, breaking away from traditional gender roles, an irresolute—often trying—relationship with their fathers, a solid and unfaltering connection to place, and environmental activism or land stewardship initiatives. The authors discussed in this thesis reveal their appreciation for place, yet they also voice their opinions regarding gender and environmental ideology and practices, contributing to a bioregional, non-gender specific community of thought dedicated to instilling positive change for men and women who live and work in the rural West.

## Chapter 1 – Mari Sandoz’s Old Jules: The Mythical Western Father Figure and the Divide between the Male/Female Frontier Experience

America’s love affair with the mythical West has held strong for more than a hundred years. We need to believe in it for if a frontier exists just over the horizon, those of us asleep behind bolted doors in cities are not trapped. We can imagine that somewhere a community of our own awaits us, a life on the land under the big sky.

Judy Blunt; *Breaking Clean*

Set in Western Nebraska during the homesteading period, much of Sandoz’s Old Jules recounts the life of her father, Jules Sandoz (Old Jules), and his quest to develop and populate the sandhills Nebraska region. Jules’s legendary presence within the region and his overwhelming presence within the narrative contribute to his mythical status. Yet, despite the heavy focus on Jules within the narrative, Sandoz weaves in the story of her mother and other frontier women, reflecting a sharp divide between male and female frontier experiences.

Sandoz, perhaps, saw her father as a mythical, larger-than-life figure. He was, after all, responsible for settling much of Nebraska’s sandhills area and was a prodigious figure throughout her childhood. Melody Graulich, an author and a leading authority in women’s literature of the American West, focuses much of her research and writing on Mari Sandoz. According to Graulich, Jules “[. . .] possesses the heroic virtues of the romanticized masculine West: a desire for absolute free will and self-determination” (“Somebody Must Say These Things” 3). Sandoz confirms that Jules was an important and active force in settling the territory:

There were people who looked for action from Jules to the last. Just what, none could say, but something. He had never failed his community. He fought drouth,

cold, hunger, and loneliness for them. He brought them in as penniless

homeseekers, many on passes, helped them to stay. (Old Jules 325)

Jules claimed that when new settlers moved on to another region after settling for only a short while in western Nebraska that “They knew nothing of the world’s hunger for land” (Old Jules 39). This quotation demonstrates Jules’ romantic vision of the West. It shows that he was unwilling to believe that the West could not be settled. His desire to own and work the land and live simply but freely was overpowering. Despite the harsh realities that it caused for his family, Jules never let go of this dream.

For Sandoz, Old Jules exuded a heroic and masculine bearing—an almost mythical presence—that is played out in Sandoz’s writing with an obvious reverence for her father. Indeed, in her foreword, Sandoz identifies Old Jules as “the biography of my father” (xii), seeming to confirm that Old Jules was primarily the story of her father. Some might even venture to say that she wrote Old Jules for her father.

Nevertheless, Sandoz also portrays the lives of frontier women within Old Jules. Through writing the story of her father, Sandoz, perhaps unknowingly, provides great insight into the herstory of rural Western women. For instance, many of the women Sandoz introduces in Old Jules moved Westward because of their husband’s or father’s desire to live and work in the region. In fact, Old Jules’s fourth wife and mother to Marie (Mari), Mary Sandoz, first came West to Nebraska to meet her brother and begin farming. When her brother did not arrive on time and came to be several days late, Mary met Jules and, scared by the prospect of being left alone in a new place and without word from her brother, decided to marry Jules. Sandoz introduces many stories about women



in this way; their presence within the region was often not due to their own desires but because of a man's. In many ways, Sandoz's narrative reflects the divide between two distinctly different male/female frontier experiences.

Though Sandoz's narrative incorporates women's experiences, this was a rarity for much of Western literature during this era. Rather, most literature focused on man's experience with the frontier, settling and working the land to farm or ranch. Nina Baym, borrowing a term from Wieland by Charles Brockden Brown, explains, "The certainty here that stories about women could not contain the essence of American culture means that the matter of American experience is inherently male [. . .]. I would suggest that the theoretical model of a story which may become the vehicle of cultural essence is: 'melodrama of beset manhood' " ("Melodramas Of Beset Manhood" 130). According to Baym, most of the Western literature that has traditionally described what is thought of as the "American experience" does not include the experiences of women. Some argue that Old Jules has suffered that same fate because Sandoz's account of the Nebraska frontier focuses too much on Jules, in essence, prioritizing his experiences. Betsy Downey says, "Until recently the frontier has been a largely male landscape, presented largely by males. During the last two decades, however, an increasing number of historians, many of them women, have started to examine American frontierswomen more closely" ("Battered Pioneers" 31). The detail and descriptions in the narrative reveal bits of historical information about the quality of life for women in the Niobrara community. Much as her father did in his quest to develop the sandhills region, Sandoz charts relatively unknown literary territory with her authorship and her nonfiction writing that explores

experiences juxtaposed between man's strong yearning to settle the frontier and woman's will to survive it. The West was often a very different place for women than it was for men, and Sandoz's narrative reflects this divide.

Sandoz seamlessly incorporates many of these women's stories, which allows for a very different perspective within the narrative, despite the heavy focus on Jules. Melody Graulich argues that Sandoz is one of the first Western women authors to document stories that include women's experiences, such as marriage. Graulich says, "*Old Jules* is one of the very few western histories to explore the pioneer West's dominant institution, marriage, and to imply that relations among men and women are a significant historical theme" ("Every Husband's Right" 3). By including details about her mother's daily physical labors in Old Jules's orchard, the drain of multiple pregnancies, the day-to-day tasks associated with child rearing, and the extent of domestic abuse within the family, Sandoz allows the reality of her mother's experience to emerge. Graulich argues, "As woman abuse was invisible in our society, so was it absent from our literary canon" ("Violence Against Women" 19). Graulich believes that Sandoz brings these issues to light for Western women and says, "Sandoz shows through repeated example that women are often the victims of the frontier's celebrated freedom" ("Every Husband's Right" 7). However, Sandoz's honesty in revealing these truths may have contributed to the strife between Sandoz and her father. By writing, Sandoz stepped out of the role that Old Jules expected of her and into one that he was unable to control.

Why would Sandoz write of her father at all given Old Jules's abusive treatment of his wife and children? Questioning Sandoz's motives for focusing on Old Jules

himself is valid—many do. Melody Graulich states, for example, that for her, “Old Jules came to be the story about Sandoz’s uncertainty about whether to identify with her father’s or her mother’s West, her ambivalent attachment to, admiration for, and fear of each parent shaping her narrative” (“Somebody Must Say” 4). For Graulich, Sandoz’s identification with her father—indicated by his domination of the narrative—was perhaps a reflection of her misidentification with her mother. Perhaps the abuse that her mother suffered caused this misidentification. As Graulich states, “The answer [. . .] lies in Marie’s relationship to her mother and her efforts to reject her mother’s devalued role” (“Every Husband’s Right” 13). The story of Old Jules does seem to dominate the narrative. However, Sandoz’s interweaving of her mother’s story casts some doubt on this argument. Perhaps, instead, readers should think of Old Jules as a narrative that reflects two separate but connected stories—the male and female Western experience.

The fact that Sandoz was able to write and publish Old Jules is encouraging and suggests that transcendence of traditional gender roles was possible. Sandoz initially encountered resistance to her work, due, perhaps, to the fact that many of the publishing houses during this time were located in eastern cities. Eastern publishers were not used to reading, much less publishing, nonfiction works based on life in rural Nebraska. This contributed to the misunderstanding of her work during this time in addition to misconceptions about the frontier life that Sandoz documented. Helen Winter Stauffer recounts:

Mari entered *Old Jules* in the *Atlantic* nonfiction contest in October 1932. The Atlantic Press held the manuscript eight months, considering it as one of five

finalists. When the manuscript was finally rejected and returned the following May, Mari found a penciled note in it saying that it was a dull book about a dirty old man. She vigorously defended her work. However, that spring of 1933, when the book was rejected by Atlantic Press after being held so long, Mari reached her nadir, ill, discouraged, and penniless. (87)

Shortly after receiving a rejection letter from the Atlantic Press, Sandoz moved from Lincoln to the sandhills to live with her family. At this time, Sandoz was thirty-seven and was not in the best health. Needless to say, it discouraged Sandoz to move back in with her family. However, the move did not deter her from writing. Sandoz continued with her manuscript and eventually accepted a job with the Nebraska State Historical Society and moved back to Lincoln. “Despite the therapeutic value of being close to the land once more”, writes Stauffer, “Mari was not happy in the sandhills. When A.E. Sheldon wrote in December that he might have a job for her at the Nebraska State Historical Society, she applied at once and returned to Lincoln in January 1934” (Mari Sandoz 91). Back in Lincoln, Sandoz continued to work on her manuscript about her life growing up in the sandhills of Western Nebraska, making revision after revision based on advice from several different publishers. Sandoz was resilient and never seemed to doubt that Old Jules would indeed be published one day. Stauffer says:

Once again Mari sent *Old Jules* to D. Appleton-Century. She told them she was willing to make revisions that would not emasculate the book, but by now she had received so much contradictory advice from publishers she was bewildered. When they returned it, she tried once more to enter the *Atlantic* nonfiction contest. She

reminded the editor that in 1932 they had held the manuscript eight months but had returned it after it reached the final judging. [. . .] Would she be allowed to enter the present work in the 1935 contest? The editor replied that the book would be eligible, and in April 1935 she sent it in, with the title *Home on the Running Water*. This time it won. (Mari Sandoz 94)

It had taken Sandoz several years to write and publish Old Jules. However, even after the book won the Atlantic Press contest, the work was still not as well known as Sandoz had hoped.

Stauffer speculates that place itself contributes to the resistance to the text. “The area she wrote of was practically unknown to the East—the sandhills of Nebraska, a relatively small, isolated, sparsely populated marginal farm area” (Mari Sandoz 108). The local collegiate community in Lincoln, Nebraska, was more accepting of Sandoz’s writing. In fact, Stauffer asserts, “Most newspapers in the region expressed pleasure that a native Nebraskan had achieved national success and praised both the author and her work” (Mari Sandoz 105). Still, there was some reservation from the locals about the frankness with which Sandoz wrote about her father. In Frederick Turner’s Spirit of Place: The Making of an American Literary Landscape, he interviewed both of Sandoz’s sisters, Flora and Caroline. Flora said:

Oh, there’s people here now who hate the Sandozes’ guts because of what Marie put in that book. I know a man here—I won’t say his name. When that book came out he’d read a few pages, then throw it across the room. Mad, you know. Then he’d pick it up again and start reading. And he did this all the way through,

because there were things in there he thought oughtn't to have been printed.

(Spirit of Place 201)

One must consider that Sandoz's gender contributes to some of the criticism of Old Jules. Graulich asserts that: "Women are often the victims of individual men, but in a larger sense they are victims of social and economic institutions, of gender expectation" ("Violence Against Women" 15). The fact that she violated these expectations may have contributed to questions about the accuracy of the text; however, those close to Sandoz backed her accounts, adding validity to Old Jules. In Turner's interview with Sandoz's youngest sister Caroline, he asked about the veracity of Sandoz's descriptions of life for women on the frontier. Caroline responded:

It's the truth as far as I'm concerned [ . . . ] and it's the truth as far as Marie was concerned. On the other hand, I suppose if each six children had written the book, you'd have six different *Old Juleses*. I know there are some things I saw differently from Marie, but that's what you have to expect, isn't it? The man Marie described—he was gone by the time I came along. He was really an old man by that time. But I'll tell you one thing: that book was true enough that when it came out Mama began it but never finished it. She said it just brought back too many painful memories. (Spirit of Place 198)

Nebraska celebrated Sandoz as one of its greatest authors, yet many Plains people were hesitant about what Sandoz had to say. According to Stauffer, the candid approach with which Sandoz wrote about her family and the region left people feeling uneasy: "When charged with forming a distorted picture of her father or the country, Mari invariably

replied that every incident could be authenticated” (Mari Sandoz 107). It must have been discouraging to have to continually explain and defend the narrative to both local people and to eastern publishing companies. Despite strong familial ties to the Plains and the fact that her work was strongly connected to place, Sandoz eventually moved to New York to be closer to her publishers.

When Sandoz first began writing, her family did not support her decision, particularly Jules. Jules came from an educated family in Switzerland and had himself studied medicine; yet, he did not encourage Mari’s writing interests. Stauffer says, “Her father, too, reacted predictably. Although he could no longer inflict physical punishment, when he learned of the award he sent her a short, sharp note: ‘You know I consider writers and artists the maggots of society’ ” (63). This did not dissuade her writing or her educational pursuits. Sandoz began college at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln even though she did not have a high school certificate. Also, she frequently submitted her work for possible publication, as if her father’s comments only spurred her drive.

Stauffer’s biography notes a surprising turnaround in Jules’s stance on Mari’s writing: “In November 1928, Jules dies in the hospital in Alliance. Mari was with him just before he dies, and his last words to her were, ‘Why don’t you write my life some time?’ This was the permission she so badly wanted” (Mari Sandoz 69). This contradiction in Old Jules’s behavior is unexpected. Even Sandoz’s sister Caroline expressed doubt in her interview with Turner:

Finally, I asked about her father’s deathbed request that Marie write his story, observing that it seemed so much out of character given his long-held loathing of

writers and artists. “Well,” Caroline said carefully, “she [Marie] was the only one ever heard that. I’m not telling you Papa didn’t say it. But we only have her word that he did say it. And, of course,” here glancing up at me briefly over the rims of her glasses, “it would have been very convenient for her to have had that....go-ahead.” (Spirit of Place 198)

It seems that the two vied for control against each other; however, Old Jules’s request implies that the two were actually quite similar. For instance, Sandoz’s quest for publication is comparable to Old Jules’s unrelenting dedication to settle the Nebraska sandhills. Old Jules wanted to be remembered, even revered, for his efforts in the Nebraska panhandle. He seemed to need that recognition. Jules’s constant efforts to settle the region and take in new settlers to ensure its continual prosperity indicate a strong desire for acknowledgment.

Jules was one of the most visible men in the sandhills area. Everyone knew who he was, and he enjoyed his notoriety. Mari’s tireless work toward publication, something she had enjoyed since childhood, brought her a similar form of recognition, as Stauffer confirms:

Delighted at seeing her name in print, she showed the story to the family. Jules was enraged; fiction was only for hired girls and hired men. Jules forbade all the creative arts to his children. [. . .] Now Jules beat his daughter and put her down in the dreaded cellar [. . .] a punishment she never forgot. Never again would she make it possible for her father to punish her for her writing, although she continued to write. The thrill of seeing her name in print was too great for her to



stop. She continued to send in her stories, using a series of pseudonyms. (Mari Sandoz 30)

This passage strongly hints at the power dynamics within the Sandoz family, especially between Sandoz and her father as they struggled for narrative control of the family's story. Old Jules's earlier admonishments of Sandoz's writing profession clearly represent this struggle. Yet, on his deathbed, Old Jules willingly turns control of the narrative over to his daughter, knowing that he would not be able to verify any of her stories or reap any acclaim. In the end, it is Mari's name that appears on the cover of Old Jules as the author, indicating that, perhaps at last, she controls him.

In many ways, Sandoz was well ahead of her time. By documenting her father's story Sandoz was, in essence, identifying with a profession that was still viewed by some as unacceptable for women. Though another Nebraska author, Willa Cather, was writing fiction during this same era, Sandoz certainly did not encounter many other women authors in her the sandhills region; at least, she does not reveal so in her narrative. Her mother, like many other rural women in the region, was fulfilling the traditional roles of wife and mother. At the same time though, Sandoz's mother was also handling much of the manual labor in the family's orchard due to the idleness of Jules. Sandoz, perhaps, noticed this break from tradition in her parents' marriage and used this as motivation for her writing career. In many ways, Sandoz's writing career, even early on, allowed her to carve out a niche for herself, much as Old Jules had done in settling the Nebraska panhandle region and as her mother had done with the family's orchard. The writing career freed Sandoz from having no other choice but to maintain the traditional roles like

wife and mother. She could get married and have children, but she did not *have* to, unlike her mother did when she first came to Western Nebraska alone and without her family.

By writing and publishing her frontier accounts, Sandoz initiates literary foundations, which encourage and inspire other women to document the truths they encountered on the Plains. Perhaps writing Old Jules was even cathartic for Sandoz—it allowed her to voice the truths that *she* knew about her life and her mother’s life. It also allowed her to voice the truths, good and bad, about her father. Sandoz receives much criticism from scholars for including so much of Jules in a text that clearly represents her mother’s life as well. Jules’s influence on the Sandoz family and other sandhills settlers was significant. He had great authority in the region by being a focal point to new settlers and by exuding his dominant presence within his family. Although he gained this domestic authority mostly by being abusive; it was the truth as Sandoz knew it to be. Still today, there is somewhat of a stigma attached to speaking out against physical abuse. For Sandoz to do so in the early twentieth century speaks volumes about the courage in her character and her willingness to break free from the silence of previous generations. I believe that she wanted readers to know Jules just as she knew him—dominant and abusive, but also courageous and visionary. This is, according to Sandoz, the complex and contradictory story of much of Western settlement. Even more importantly, it is a story, at least in the case of Old Jules, best told by a woman.

## Chapter 2 – The Cost of Words: Exposing the Western Ethos of Privacy in Mary Clearman Blew’s Nonfiction

The children and grandchildren of farm people forced off their land today may well be the ones to write about it. Perhaps, given the distance that the passage of time can provide, they will give us back the truth about ourselves. Whether or not we will listen, out here on the Plains, I cannot say.

Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*

At the 2001 Western Literature Association (WLA) conference in Omaha, Nebraska, I interviewed Western writer Mary Clearman Blew with another graduate student.<sup>2</sup> As Blew sat at the table during the interview, I could see that privacy—the tendency to withdraw from others due to isolation or preference or to maintain a reserved exterior—was an enduring ethos for Blew and her family. This characteristic, referred to within this chapter as the Western ethos of privacy, was evident not only within Blew’s nonfiction work but also within Blew’s own physical and emotional demeanor—stark upright posture, hands placed firmly in her lap, and a slight tendency to avoid direct eye contact for more than just a few seconds.

When I first read Blew’s All But the Waltz, I noticed that the male characters seemed to exude a unique and enduring impassiveness—a propensity toward privacy. The men were often withdrawn and somewhat removed from the hubbub of family life, especially when it concerned things of an emotional nature. This stoic presence carried throughout the male personalities that Blew described and was particularly evident in her aging father when he took off alone to die on a bluff overlooking the prairie. For women, it seems, that privacy had more to do with isolation on the frontier and feeling disconnected from their community of family and friends. Blew’s nonfiction and my personal interaction with her indicate that the ethos of privacy is still deeply embedded

within the social architecture of the rural Western region. At the same time, Blew's writing directly confronts this Western rural standard, and her writing becomes an act of rebellion against the standards that silenced earlier generations of women in her family. By voicing her opinion openly in our interview and also within her work, she challenges archetypes such as privacy embraced by her family and by the region.

I asked Blew about the portrait of privacy in her work and the work of other Western writers because its repeated appearance in Western literature seemed more than a mere coincidence. Did the Western landscape encourage this quiet stoicism? She replied:

Westerners sometimes act as though words cost money and you don't want to waste them. I think it's got to do with privacy. I also think it's about survival.

Some of those homesteader's stories are so dreadful. You wonder how people endured. One way was to wall it off. If they talked about it, it started to break down the wall. They saw this as an indulgence they simply couldn't afford.

They'd lose their composure and they'd lose strength, and they had to go on. They had to go on.

Blew referenced the tendency for Westerners to pull within themselves and how, in some cases, the often inhospitable landscape contributed to this tendency. I was particularly interested in the mannerisms Blew mentioned because I had noticed some of these same traits in my rural phlegmatic family; therefore, I asked Blew whether she thought that the need for privacy was still evident in rural Westerner life. Blew answered by offering this example:

I think the ranch people still speak in code, and the code depends on who you're talking to [. . .]. Sometimes, the code is so condensed that I wonder how an outsider can ever understand. I'm thinking about my husband's brother and his wife. They had a difficult relationship with their oldest daughter and her husband. They were wondering if they were going to have the whole family together for Christmas. He, my husband's brother, said to her, 'What's Sharon going to do?' and she, his wife, replied, 'Well, I said something to her.' (Personal Interview)

The example that Blew provided me revealed the depth of the Western "code" that Blew referred to and the tendency for Westerners of both genders to continue to adhere to this standard of privacy and to encourage its practice, contributing to a region-wide temperament that was supported at both a familial and community level. A closer look at Blew's nonfiction reveals the tendency towards this trait as well.

The Western ethos of privacy is first revealed in Blew's work in the descriptions of her ancestors—homesteading settlers who first sought land in the 1880s on the Montana frontier while it was still a territory. Blew's family was among the groups of settlers who began expanding Westward after the Homestead Act was passed into law in 1863 to claim quarter-section tracts of land. The geographical parameters around the Act meant that families were spread apart on 160-acre land plots. Homesteaders hunkered down on these plots and began to work the land, dig wells, build homes, and raise families, oftentimes several miles from each other in small, isolated prairie plots. If the settlers could manage these things within five years, the land would be theirs to own, which was a promising prospect to many young families.

In Breaking Clean, Judy Blunt, a Montana writer/rancher, says, “America’s love affair with the mythical West has held strong for more than a hundred years” (293). Indeed, the opportunity to own land was most often the incentive that attracted thousands of settlers to the West in the late 1800s, though many soon found that life in the unsettled West was much harder than they had anticipated. Blew’s memoirs reveal the hardships of homesteader life for her family. Blew had access to documented accounts of these times through her family’s journals. Much of Blew’s narrative draws from this written family history. She says, “I’ve been fortunate in my family’s being one of storytellers and private writers who have ‘documented’ their past. Tales, diaries, notebooks, and letters—they saved every scrap” (Bone Deep 6). For the early homesteaders, journal writing was both a personal and private outlet that allowed them to communicate without having to verbally do so. They wrote quietly and discreetly, their voices recorded not for public recognition but rather for private reflection. Blew first became aware of her family’s documented history when her grandmother gave Blew journal entries and poems written by her grandfather. In addition, after Blew’s Aunt Imogene passed away, Blew discovered that her aunt had jotted down short journal entries and was surprised to learn that her aunt’s journals spanned several decades.

As Blew exposes the contents of her family’s journals, she uncovers other recurring themes such as a sense of physical isolation and a deep connection to place. For example, when Blew sifted through her great-grandfather Abraham’s documents, she uncovered a familial connection to place. Abraham’s journals sparked Blew’s interest in the landscape. “Surely, if I kept transcribing,” she writes, “I might learn something about

the magnet pull of place” (Waltz 21). Blew’s great-grandfather spoke fondly of the West; his poetry incorporates details specific to the Montana landscape. The same river that captivated Blew as a child appears in her great-grandfather’s journal: “I knew almost to the mile where Abraham had sat in his buggy on a winter night in late 1902 [ . . . ] I knew about the snowfields on both sides of the dark running water, and about the bluffs [ . . . ] and the clear thirty-below zero night” (Waltz 21). While Abraham’s connection to place is apparent, he did not share this vocally with anyone, and Blew never knew how her great-grandfather felt about the land until after his death—a true testament to the enduring nature of privacy.

The ethos of privacy seems to have distinctive gendered levels, indicating that men seem to experience this characteristic differently. Men reflect certain characteristics of privacy such as stoicism, reticence, or withdrawal from the family and community. Men also seem to seek out solitude within the landscape more so than women. The most poignant example of stoicism in Blew’s nonfiction is that of Blew’s father Jack. Her father set out for a normal day of errands and never returned. Blew’s family later discovered that Jack had stayed a night in a motel in a nearby town. Later, they traced his steps to the Western edge of Montana where Jack had stopped to talk to another Montana rancher. The search party found his body just a few miles from where he had last spoken with the rancher. He had died on a bluff overlooking the prairie. After learning of the way Jack died, the family was not surprised. Blew refers to her father’s last encounter with another rancher: “You’d have known he was another old Montana rancher [ . . . ] and the last thing he would have done was ask another man his business” (Waltz 43). Blew

suspected that her father had made a private, though conscious, decision about where he died, and the fact that his family knew nothing of this decision reflects the depth of this reticence. Blew writes about her father's death in All But the Waltz and says, "So strongly did he believe in a mythic Montana of the past, of inarticulate strength and honor, and courage irrevocably lost, that I cannot escape the conviction that a conscious choice shaped the way he died" (45). Jack's need for privacy, even in death, was so profound that it influenced his choice to die alone on the prairie.

Blew discovers that both Abraham and Jack shared an emotional intimacy with the land, though neither man revealed this to Blew. For both men it seems, the fear of intimacy manifested itself not only with the men's relationship with the land, but also within their personal familial relationships. For Abraham, it was journal writing and poetry that revealed his fondness for the land. Jack's connection to the land was more remote but was still apparent in his decision to die alone on the prairie. Their discretion reveals vulnerability within their character. Each man kept this land bond private, suggesting that the men distanced themselves from the family. The true importance of the landscape to these men is not revealed to Blew and her family until after each man has passed. Both men spent a great deal of time working on the land because of their farming and ranching professions, so it is only natural that the land provided a respite for them. It was a chance for them to be alone, perhaps a place where both were most themselves. Yet, for a man to reveal these feelings (and others) would violate the mythic regional code of "inarticulate strength and honor." It would expose their vulnerabilities and that may have been too great a price to pay. In addition, the withholding of these personal



feelings and emotions might be seen as a type of control; it kept others at a distance both physically and emotionally. Sadly, I think this characteristic, for many rural men like Blew's father, correlates to an emotional isolation or distancing from family. Perhaps, for men, the intimacy with the land compensated for the lack of intimacy with family.

Women seem to experience gendered levels of privacy more acutely at the familial and community level. For instance, women experience privacy at a community level because of the long periods of separation from family and friends, which caused feelings separation and loneliness for women. In Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives, Lillian Schlissel says, "Separation, in fact, is one of the major refrains of overland diaries and letters. Families that had made the journey expended all of their persuasive energies in drawing after them brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, but when those efforts failed, there was an enduring loneliness and sense of loss and isolation" (85). As Schlissel implies, solitude for women was enforced physically by seclusion from extended family and neighbors because of the remoteness of the Western region. The homesteading act contributed to feelings of physical isolation because it required that families were spread apart on 160-acre plots of land. The nearest neighbors were often several miles away, which added to the amount of time that women spent alone. In addition, the settlers often moved away from their family and friends, distancing women from a maternal, supportive community. Perhaps this contributed to women's solitude on the frontier, although Blew's narrative suggests that the women were also enforcing a private exterior by embracing roles expected of them such as nurturer or caretaker, which tends to focus foremost on the needs and desires of other's rather than their own longings.

Was this merely loneliness at work, or was this a fear of being further silenced by men? This self-censorship is interesting because it, ultimately, extends outward to encompass their social identity—their willingness or ability to communicate with other women, both inside and outside the family structure. In this instance, women share the culture of silence with men.

For women, privacy at the familial level was primarily enforced socially through gender roles. While women were more willing to share their thoughts and to communicate with their family and friends, they were, at the same time, encouraged to maintain and support traditional-nurturing roles that teach women and girls to focus on the feelings, ideas, and needs of others. Families often encouraged girls to assume caretaking roles within the family at an early age. The female children often bore the brunt of this practice within large families because of the constant care necessary with the younger children. This practice caused women and girls to spend significant lengths of time within the home. The amount of time within the home increased if there were infants within the family who needed tending or nursing. In “Anglo Women and Domestic Ideology in the American West in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” Robert L. Griswold says, “To what extent such economic indispensability translated into power within the family is unclear, but the variety of work done by women both stretched and confirmed the fundamental belief that women’s first responsibilities were to her family and home” (19). Typically, eldest daughters carried much of this burden, especially if the family had many young children. Many rural families often encouraged young girls to attend to others’ needs first while their needs often went unnoticed or unfulfilled. There is

no doubt that these caretaking roles contributed to the family unit, but it bound the girls to responsibilities that were not their tasks to carry. It also circumscribed girls to nurturing roles within their families and did not encourage their interests in nontraditional tasks.

Blew found that the women in her family were deeply affected by the ethos of privacy, choosing like the men to record their personal feelings in journals. In “Land, Laws, and Women,” Nancy Taniguchi talks about women’s experience within the Western region and says, “Women who traversed the western land captured its power in vivid descriptions they wrote in journals and letters” (226). As Taniguchi points out, it was common for women to document their lives in journals because this was often the only place where women could openly and freely express their own needs. Through the journals of her Aunt Imogene, Blew discovered that Imogene felt isolated and withdrawn from the community. Though Imogene revealed a connection to place, this was referenced more as a tie to the home and family rather than to the physical landscape. After Imogene injured her foot in a mowing accident, she felt that the injury might impact her teaching opportunities, so she applied for jobs out of state. Imogene accepted a job and moved away from her family to Port Angeles, Washington. This move prompted some of Imogene’s most solemn journal entries in which she reveals strong feelings of isolation and separation from family.

Blew speculates about the unhappiness that she discovers in her Aunt’s journal entries, attributing this to the loneliness within Imogene’s life: “I now think I know something about Imogene’s isolation [. . .] I think the accident freed her for another kind

of isolation, this time self-imposed” (Balsamroot 127). In this passage, Blew indicates that Imogene’s move to the Northwest was a conscious decision to separate herself from the rest of the family in Montana. Yet, Imogene’s marital status and her career as a rural teacher necessitated some degree of isolation and separation from the family. Perhaps it was just too painful to be near her family and be reminded of what she did not have. The one man she noted in her journals is later jailed, which Imogene believed ruined any chances for her to marry and have children. Although Imogene returned to Montana every summer, Blew discovered in her journals that what she really wanted was a home of her own. “O for my own home—garden—cellar—chickens, pigs & milk cows—flowers—cattle” (Balsamroot 177). As close as Blew was to her aunt, she never knew of Imogene’s wish to return to Montana or of her desire to have a family. Like so many other rural Western women, she kept such personal, intimate feelings to herself.

As a single woman, Imogene’s isolation was even more severe than that experienced by married women. Blew’s narrative reveals that young women were encouraged to be married; it was better than the alternative, for single women were left few options save teaching. These women usually had two choices for living arrangements: boarding with a local family or living alone in the teacherage, which required long stretches of isolated living and displacement from family depending on where the rural school was located. Blew says, “She really had no choice [...] teaching in the far-flung schools was the one certain road to marginal independence for young women” (Waltz 112). Teaching did offer a certain independence and financial freedom

for women, as Blew suggests. However, this independence came at a cost. Blew portrays the dangers and fears of isolation for women in this setting in the following passage:

To be eighteen or twenty and living alone in one of those remote schools at a time when distance had not yet shrunk and telephones were nonexistent, when ten miles meant an hour or more by buggy or saddle horse, when outward standards of decorum and morality were one thing and community practice was another, brought some of the teachers to an edge of another kind. (Waltz 114)

Like many teachers, Imogene opted to live alone in the teacherage while school was in session, and during the summers she lived with Blew and her family. Based on Imogene's accounts, Blew recognizes the isolation and silence associated with woman's role as teacher or as wife and mother.

Blew continues to explore women's isolation in the West through the stories that her mother and aunts reveal to her over time. Blew uncovers these stories in Bone Deep in Landscape, as she concentrates more on the maternal relationships within her family. Only certain family members knew of these accounts, much like the private journals in Blew's family. The older women in Blew's family shared this history with each other orally, each generation passing along the family history in this way. Blew explains:

Often the events that beckoned to me most urgently were the ones that had been preserved in the 'secret stories,' [. . .] that my grandmothers and great-aunts told around their Sunday tables [. . .] in hushed voices that dropped or stopped altogether at the approach of one of the men or an unwise question from an eavesdropping child. (Bone Deep 5)

Blew discovers that many of the “secret stories” that she uncovers were shared with her by the women in her family only after she was older and only on rare occasion. Blew offers an example of one such story shared with her by one of her aunts. Blew’s grandmother lived alone on the homestead while her husband was away working. She was alone with her children for several months at a time without seeing another adult. Once, when fetching water from the spring, she started to hallucinate and saw her dead mother and sister across the stream. She was so ashamed of this experience that she shared it only once with Blew’s aunt. This story was whispered to Blew, as if it were a guarded secret and something one was not supposed to talk about or repeat. In this case, Blew’s grandmother feared that others would think that she was foolish. For Blew’s grandmother, the isolation was perhaps both physical and emotional; she was not only physically isolated from her extended family, but she also felt that she couldn’t share her true feelings, resulting in an acute sense of loneliness that, ultimately, silenced her. Blew’s narrative suggests that *women* as well as men contributed, even encouraged, a private lifestyle, though both genders seem to carry out this characteristic in slightly different ways. However, Blew’s position is interesting because it is she who breaks the pattern of silence within her own family, indicating that her generation places less value on reticence and that women are becoming less willing to abide by expectations that silence their voices and, instead, welcome opportunities for discussion within a larger regional community.

Blew speculates about the residual effects of this ethos for writing women in Bone Deep in Landscape and how privacy impacted this outlet: “I thought that the reason

why Montana women of my generation weren't writing fiction was because they had been unable to find their own stories within the dominating western mythology of solitude, questioning, conflict, and destruction" (97). In Blew's family, the women were not writing fiction, but they *were* writing. The format was just within the less celebrated realm of journals or letters. In the introduction of So Much to Be Done: Women Settlers on the Mining and Ranching Frontier, editors Moynihan, Armitage, and Dichamp point out that

Narratives by women settlers—diaries, letters, memoirs, autobiographies—are rich in evidence about personal attitudes and about day-to-day existence in the frontier West. [. . .] In fact, that is why so many scholars ignored women's narratives in the past. Public affairs and notable men were the preeminent topics of historical research. Literary scholars regarded most personal writing by women as 'subliterary' and most of women's published novels and autobiographies as, at best, 'local color'. (xii)

The journal format was traditionally a very private outlet. It was okay for women to write, but only as long as no one knew about it. For women who were often encouraged to stifle their opinions and desires, this format did not instill a belief in them that they might share or even publish their writings.

Blew's professional writing career ultimately undermines some of the same regional standards that silenced the women in her family. As Blew uncovered certain truths about her family from private journals, she not only talked about these discoveries but also disclosed this information in her nonfiction, indicating a willingness, or a need,

to break some of these traditional barriers and move forward. In Western women's autobiography, there seems to be a unique tendency for writers to reveal resistance to standards such as privacy, particularly when writing about their fathers. This challenges the ethos of the region as well as many gendered expectations. In Julene Bair's memoir, One Degree West, Bair recalls several instances of her father's stoic presence during her early childhood in rural Kansas. In one example, Bair requested financial assistance for a cousin from her father. His response was, "It never pays to go messing in other people's affairs" (Bair 39). Bair's father insisted on maintaining this detached demeanor even at the expense of turning away family in need of help. Yet, Bair's inquiry and subsequent writings about this memory challenge the patriarchal traditions that her father abided by so adamantly.

My interview with Blew brought perspective to my developing theories about privacy and the tendency for this characteristic to consistently appear within the literature of rural Westerners. For homesteading women, isolation was enforced by both gender and geography. It's important to acknowledge that these stoic beliefs survived homesteading generations and are still regarded as important codes of conduct within the region today. This is evident in the work of other contemporary Western writers, like Julene Bair and Linda Hasselstrom. As a rural Iowa native, I too can identify with the ethos of privacy. I certainly understand its value at times. However, I also understand how destructive it can be. Within my own family, privacy has been used to cover up generations of physical abuse, mental illness, and financial problems during the Farm



Crisis. My family attached shame to all of these issues, which I think discouraged speaking out about such topics.

Honest accounts like Blew's contribute to women's collective Western history and allow others to come forth and divulge similar truths about their own experiences. Within this traditional rural culture, it is often assumed that women will continue with caretaking roles much like previous generations did. Though my mother tried to raise me and my siblings in a fairly liberal environment, I still received pressure from extended family members to marry and have children. When I announced that I would be starting a graduate program, several family members raised questions about my commitment to my long-term partner, assuming that I was not interested in marriage because I had decided to attend graduate school. When I did finally marry my partner after nearly eight years of dating, I was met with immediate questions about children. In fact, several family members openly questioned my fertility. It was inconceivable to them that a woman in her thirties would choose to put off family to pursue other interests or, worse yet, to choose *not* to have children. Wasn't that, ultimately, what everyone wanted to do? Blew's writing shows, through her example, that women can break free from these expectations and go to college and maintain a career *and* a family.

Western women's autobiography is a buck against the stoic Western culture that encourages privacy through gender roles, family dynamics, and community practices. The autobiographical genre is shifting its long-standing history by providing more accounts by women about *women's* experiences with the landscape, the settlement of the region, and their family's perceptions of how they ought to think and behave. Despite

Blew's reserved presence during our interview, her writing reveals her willingness to change and to resist many long-standing practices by sharing her family's experiences. More importantly, it indicates that there is a *need*, a value, in sharing this information through writing. It invites others to communicate their own experiences through writing. Through her memoirs and essays, Blew counters the silence of previous generations by revealing what women (and men) from previous generations could not or would not publicly reveal. Blew's nonfiction represents a more progressive and, perhaps, more maternal approach to the Western region and its stoic history. It is an invitation for others, like me, to learn about and reflect on the same patterns within our own families.

### Chapter 3 – Western Fathers/Writing Daughters: Reaching beyond the Mythical Western Father Figure in Linda Hasselstrom's Nonfiction

The High Plains, the beginning of the desert West, often act as a crucible for those who inhabit them. Like Jacob's angel the region requires that you wrestle with it before it bestows a blessing.

Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*

Linda Hasselstrom, a South Dakota rancher and writer, struggles to find a comfortable niche within her conservative South Dakota family and community. As the only child of a traditional cattle rancher, Hasselstrom often worked the ranch alongside her father. Yet, at the same time, Hasselstrom's mother gave clear signals that her propensity toward ranching was neither a feasible nor an attractive life for a woman. For Hasselstrom, these mixed signals left her in a strange transient state in which she was not fully acknowledged by either parent as a complete and independent person. The consequences of this gendered duality greatly affected her relationship with her father, particularly. In fact, their relationship became so strained that Hasselstrom considered leaving the ranch for good after he asked her to make a decision between ranching and writing. Hasselstrom felt torn between what was expected of her and what she wanted for herself—a writing career *and* the opportunity to continue ranching. In the previous chapter, by comparison, Mary Clearman Blew appears to be more willing to disconnect herself from her family and the ranching community in order to pursue her educational and writing goals. This chapter incorporates the work of Judy Blunt, a Montana writer, who once ranched with her husband and his family. However, like Blew, Blunt left the ranch and her husband in order to begin her college career. Hasselstrom, in contrast, resists leaving the ranch for her writing. Her goal is to sustain both professions,

maintaining a balance between the two. Hasselstrom concentrates on this commitment and conflict within Windbreak: A Woman Rancher on the Northern Plains and Feels Like Far: A Rancher's Life on the Great Plains, where she often grapples with what it means to be a woman, writer, wife, and rancher within a region that does not always support or appreciate non-traditional approaches to these roles. Hasselstrom rejects the limitations imposed upon her and moves beyond what her family and community expect of her. She carves her own niche, allowing her to continue to work in both the ranching industry as well as the writing profession.

Hasselstrom's deep connection to the ranch on which she grew up is reflected in her rich descriptions about the South Dakota Plains area where the Hasselstrom family first homesteaded in 1899. "As an adult," she says, "I have come to believe that my physical life and my spirit are so deeply connected to that particular plot of land, the family ranch, that I might be a stalk of grass myself, rooted in arid and meager soil" (Feels Like Far 2). Her father's connection to the land helped foster this sensitivity in Linda. After Hasselstrom's mother Mildred married John, he adopted Linda. After the marriage, when Hasselstrom was nine, she and her mother moved to John's ranch. Hasselstrom immediately connected to the land, the wildlife, and the occupation of ranching. Hasselstrom explains John's early influence:

That first night [. . .] I sat on the railroad-tie steps and watched my new father through the dense green in his pickup. I went down the steps to meet him and we stood together enjoying the sunset, a ritual he has practiced all his life. Hundreds of birds dipped and swooped over my head, dark crescents against the sunset's

gold. When I asked about the explosive sounds from the birds, he told me they were nighthawks. At that moment, nighthawks became my favorite prairie bird.

(Feels Like Far 189)

John's dedication to the ranch instilled a sense of place within Hasselstrom, so much so that she writes extensively about the land in her nonfiction.

After first moving to the ranch, Hasselstrom began and was expected to help John with ranching responsibilities like branding, fencing, and feeding the cattle. This was expected of her, in part, because she was an only child and because the cost of employing hired help was expensive. John says as much in a conversation with Mildred: "Right now, I need her help because I can't afford to hire a man" (Feels Like Far 18). John implies that if he could afford to hire a man he would. The underlying insinuation is that a man could do the job better but that the labor costs more. This is the first indication in Hasselstrom's life that gender was something that could potentially influence her responsibilities on the ranch.

In "Women's Sense of Place on the American High Plains," Cary W. De Wit says, "A tradition of strong division between male and female roles persists today on the High Plains more so than it does in other contexts of American society. Men typically attend to farm, ranch, or business, while women tend to domestic duties and work as teachers, nurses, clerks, or secretaries" (31). Hasselstrom is keen to this division of labor within her own family. Her father attended to the outdoor ranching work while her mother took care of the household and family. However, Hasselstrom's position on the ranch was unique. She felt a pull from both directions. She was expected to fulfill a

traditional and primarily male role on the ranch like her father; yet, at the same time she was also required to uphold some traditionally female domestic responsibilities imposed by her mother. Hasselstrom explains her mother's viewpoint:

Mother wanted a daughter who would be a lady swathed in silk, but I was born to love denim. I see in that picture the distance between us, a chasm we can never cross. As soon as we moved to the ranch, I aspired to become a cowgirl. If she buttoned me into dainty outfits and sent me outside to wait while she dressed for church, I wrecked my clothes in seconds, no matter how hard I tried to stay clean. Mother would come out the door, perfectly garbed and smiling. Seconds later she would be screaming and slapping at me as she chased me into the house to change clothes. (Feels Like Far 12)

It is clear that there is a generational gender gap between the two Hasselstrom women. As Hasselstrom says, it was "a chasm we can never cross." In Feels Like Far, Hasselstrom recalls her mother's pleas to John to keep Hasselstrom away from the outdoor ranching work. She says, "She spent every mealtime telling my father that I should be inside with her. 'That sun will just ruin her complexion. She'll fall off that damn horse and break her neck' " (18). As this quote implies, the plea to keep Hasselstrom indoors may have stemmed from Mildred's own isolation within the home. Hasselstrom was the only child, so once she was old enough to assert her own independence and interests, Mildred may have begun to feel lonely and isolated from the rest of the family. While the details surrounding the ranching work do consume the majority of Hasselstrom's nonfiction,

Mildred often remains in the periphery. Perhaps Mildred felt as though she were an outsider to both the ranch and the lives of Linda and her father.

Hasselstrom's mother's conservative views about marriage further intensified their differences. Hasselstrom explains:

Setting the table for lunch, I once complained that I couldn't learn to be a rancher if I stayed inside. She replied, "You might need something to fall back on." She stirred the gravy furiously for a minute before whipping around to face me. "And don't marry a rancher. A doctor or lawyer would be nice, someone who can take care of you. So you won't have to work." (Feels Like Far 18)

Hasselstrom's mother believed that marriage was something that a woman should look to for stability and financial security. It was not a matter of *if* her daughter married; it was a matter of *when* and to whom. In addition, the assumption in the previous quotation is that the man is the primary breadwinner. Hasselstrom's mother does not relay the possibility that a wife could earn more than her husband. Instead, the man, a husband, is financially responsible for his wife and family. Therefore, if a man is financially secure, he makes a better husband. Hasselstrom recalls the period when her mother first began dating John. She says, "I don't know how long my mother dated John, but I remember her thinking aloud that marriage to him would be a wise investment in her future and mine. She asked a friend in the bank to look up his accounts and came home singing that day" (Feel Like Far 15). Hasselstrom does not give any indication that her mother did not love John. However, as a single mother during this era, Mildred closely associated her own security, along with her daughter's, with her marital status. She viewed it as an assurance of their

future. These traditional values were communicated to Hasselstrom, through both words and actions and she found that these values were not easily deconstructed.

Though Hasselstrom fulfilled all the same responsibilities that a son would, she often felt discredited because of her gender, as though it were a mark against her.

Hasselstrom says, “My parents tried and failed to have a child, hoping for a son” (Feels Like Far 120).

In addition, after Linda was older, her father used to remark to family or

neighbors, “Linda’s not much, but she’s all we’ve got” (Feel Like Far 217). Many

Western families place similar importance on male children. A son is often desired

because it is assumed that he will take over the ranching or farming responsibilities from

the father, as well as carry on the family name. In my own family, my father was the only

son and eldest child of my grandparents, who ran a modest family farming operation. My

grandparents also had three daughters. Yet, when my grandfather retired from farming, it

was my father who managed the family farming business even though one of my father’s

sisters was also farming along with her husband. Though my aunt participated in many of

the farming responsibilities and came from a farming background, it was always her

husband, my uncle, who was referred to as the farmer. My aunt’s situation was often the

expectation for many other rural women I knew. Women *married* a man who would take

over land from his father. Therefore, the daughter would neither need nor want any part

of her family’s business. The assumption often was that a woman’s role was secondary to

the man’s role; women support and sustain the dominant male role. Hasselstrom recalls

similar expectations for her mother. She asserts:



Still, at first she worked at being the perfect ranch wife. She created sumptuous lunches to take to my father in the hay field. When he came in dirty and tired, she'd say, "I made a picnic supper. Let's drive into the Hills." "Wife," he'd reply, "I can't quit early in the middle of a hay crop." (Feels Like Far 17)

As this quotation implies, even when women were fulfilling the roles expected of them, their contribution was often underappreciated. As well, this quotation reflects a survival mechanism that seems to be ingrained in Westerners. Hasselstrom's father, for instance, was not willing to leave the ranch during the mowing season for fear of losing the hay crop to too much rain or the prairie fires of which Hasselstrom often writes. This desire to endure—to persist—dictated, in this case, his interactions with this family. The adherence to this ethic caused Hasselstrom's father to miss opportunities to connect with his wife and daughter.

As Hasselstrom progressed into adulthood, her relationship with her parents, especially her father, became more complicated and strained as Hasselstrom began to defy and directly confront some of the traditional conventions she found within her family. After college and a divorce from her first husband Daniel, Hasselstrom returned to the ranch and made it her full-time livelihood. Later, Hasselstrom and her second husband George worked side-by-side with her father on the ranch. Eventually, Hasselstrom and George purchased five acres from her father and built their own home on the family ranch. Hasselstrom's position on the ranch was unique. She needed to be near the ranch in order to help run it properly, yet the adjacency to her parents allowed them to continue to think of and treat her as a child. In Feels Like Far, John often refers

to Hasselstrom as “daughter” or “child.” “My father”, Hasselstrom comments, “often reminded me that in his youth, both men and women were considered adults at ten or twelve years of age, but he still called me Child instead of using my name” (47). While these terms are not necessarily demeaning, the situations in which John chose to use them are telling of his beliefs about a women’s role. Perhaps not willing to acknowledge the fact that his little girl was now a grown woman and capable of handling the ranch on her own, John continued to refer to Hasselstrom this way throughout her adult life.

Hasselstrom found that her father resisted her efforts on the ranch, especially when she pushed for change. John’s resistance to Hasselstrom’s role on the ranch manifested itself in anger and an unwillingness to admit that he needed her assistance as he became older and less able to handle the physical demands of ranching. For example, even though Hasselstrom and George purchased the land that her house stood on from her father, he believed that she was still living on his property—*his* ranch. John viewed Linda and George as hired labor and not as collaborating partners. Even though she began to raise her own cattle and even obtained her own registered brand, her father did not consider her an equal partner. Eventually, Hasselstrom told him, “I want to be a partner, not a hired hand” (Feels Like Far 148). When Hasselstrom offers to buy more land from her father so that her five acres might be considered agricultural land instead of residential property, her father accuses her of wanting to take over the ranch and responds defensively, “You just want my place” (Feels Like Far 147). By offering to buy more land, Hasselstrom is threatening to disrupt the established power dynamics of their relationship. In a profession and region dominated by a long-standing patriarchal history,

Hasselstrom finds it difficult to escape traditional gender roles. Not fully accepted by her father as an equal ranching partner and not fully recognized or accepted within the domestic arena by her mother, Hasselstrom's position was inescapably ensconced within the power and gender dynamics to which her family and the rural region adhered.

Through the journal format in Windbreak, it is evident that Hasselstrom is deeply integrated into the daily aspects of ranching life; yet, she struggles with the duality of her position, both on the ranch and within the domestic arena. In addition, writing was another endeavor that she tried to manage and maintain along with her other responsibilities. She explains:

I was feeling too exhausted to do much today, but I did cook a roast for dinner, and made soup tonight. In these days of working couples, I wonder if only farm wives still regularly cook three meals every day. It seems to me I just get immersed in a story or poem when it's time to cook again. I could stand to eat less but George needs a constant supply of fuel since he's so active outside now.

(Windbreak 80)

Hasselstrom clearly prefers the ranch work to the more traditional roles performed by women: "This morning we repaired a stretch of fence the buffalo have been abusing over east. I enjoy fencing, partly because when I finish I can see what I've done and it stays done for awhile—unlike cooking meals and cleaning" (Windbreak 32). Hasselstrom readily identifies the dichotomy between male/female gender roles.

In addition to the contradictions that Hasselstrom notices within her family, the community does not fully accept her progressive ideals. For example, Linda kept the

Hasselstrom name after marrying George Snell. George was not originally from the region, but it was assumed by the community that he would take over the ranch from John. Hasselstrom explains:

I'm afraid the thinking is that I'm a rancher's daughter, and George is 'that fella she married from out east someplace like Michigan.' If you asked them to clarify they'd probably say, 'Well John is sort of training George to take over the place,' neatly shoving me back in the kitchen where I belong. (Windbreak 10)

Not only does this assumption overlook Hasselstrom's contributions to her family's ranch, but it also discredits the possibility that Hasselstrom herself might want to manage the ranch. Hasselstrom's position is clearly wedged between the traditional male and female roles found within the region. Many of these roles were enforced through social pressures from the community.

These same gender conflicts and contradictions within father/daughter relationships can also be found in the nonfiction of other Western women—their dominant fathers providing a significant connecting theme. For example, Judy Blunt, a Montana writer, was the fourth generation in her ranching family's homesteading history. Blunt's work deals specifically with the gender conflicts that she experienced within her family and later within her marriage to a local rancher. In fact, as the title of Blunt's book Breaking Clean reveals, she had to break away from the patriarchal traditions that she found particularly debilitating to her education and personal growth. For example, Blunt, on the advice of her parents, decided to marry young and have children, much like the three Montana matrilineal generations before her had done. Blunt recalls a moment with

her mother as John, the man she would eventually marry, gave her father his favorite bottle of whiskey, which was John's way of asking for her father's permission for her hand in marriage. Blunt recalls:

After supper one spring evening, my mother and I stood in the kitchen. She held her back stiff as her hands shot like pistons into the mound of bread dough on the counter. I stood tough beside her. On the porch, John had presented my father with a bottle of whiskey and was asking Dad's permission to marry me. I wanted her to grab my cold hand and tell me how to run. I wanted her to smooth the crumpled letter from the garbage can and read the praise of my high school principal. I wanted her to tell me all I could be. [. . .] "He's a good man," she said finally. (5)

For Blunt, this statement from her mother implied, albeit indirectly, that her parents expected her to marry despite her longings for a college education. A marriage to a successful and hard-working rancher with hundreds of acres and a good head of cattle was looked upon as a prosperous investment and a sound and practical decision for a young woman's future. Conservative traditions die hard, and Blunt's family resisted her outlook on education. The assumption was that women would continue to do what other women had done in previous generations. There was comfort and security in the unchanging nature of gender roles. Disregarding these traditional roles was frowned upon and virtually unheard of, especially in Blunt's rural Montana region where the nearest town was 70 miles away.

Only later did Blunt fully realize the consequences of her early marriage to a traditional rancher. For example, though she was expected to provide food and prepare meals for the hired men, she wasn't allowed to write the checks that paid for the food at the grocery store in town. Oftentimes, Blunt asserted her desire to be more involved in some of the financial responsibilities of the ranch, including the ability to sign and pay for many of the household needs. She recalls one such incident with John:

One time I argued for the power to sign bank drafts when I paid the ranch bills every month; another time I wanted a small wage check for field work; something in my own name. John listened. The last time I pressed him for an answer, he rose to his feet and grabbed his hat from a shelf by the front door. He turned, pointing the hat at me, straight-armed. "Don't think you're going to run this ranch," he said, and for once the truth lay between us, flat and unmoving. In the stillness that followed, his expression never moved, and my gut twisted with the finality I read in those clean straight lines. Old rules do not break; they simply stretch and snap back like a well-made fence. (279)

For Blunt, this encounter with her husband was a turning point in their marriage; she then realized that she could neither change him nor his viewpoints regarding her contributions to the family's livelihood.

Blunt understood at an early age that what was expected of her was inherently different from what was expected of males. "Our ranching community applauded the birth of stud colts, bull calves and boy babies," she writes. "We celebrated the manly man for doing the work of two men and the little woman for whipping up man-sized meals"

(90). Despite Blunt's awareness of the gender distinctions prior to her marriage, she was not able to assert changes within her marriage that would allow for more equality between she and John. Eventually, after having three children, Blunt decided to leave her home and marriage to begin college hundreds of miles away at the University of Montana—a dream that Blunt had relished since her graduation from high school. Blunt quickly found work with flexible hours as a manual laborer in the construction field, which allowed her the freedom to attend school and maintain her parenting responsibilities. “And gradually”, she writes, “in the hours before dawn and after dark, I found my voice again as my children slept. I began to write” (297). Blunt was able to begin experimenting with her own literary interests, many of which were deferred once she married. “Away from the physical presence of my past, I found it easy to argue that what mattered most was the story, the truth of what we tell ourselves, the versions of truth we pass along to our daughters” (303). By breaking through some of the gender barriers like Hasselstrom did, Blunt could provide a different perspective for her own children.

Both Hasselstrom and Blunt resist the patriarchal traditions within their families and communities and push to change these trends through writing. While Blunt did not begin writing until she left the ranch to start her college degree, Hasselstrom's dual position as a rancher and a writer further intensified the complications that she endured because her father wanted her to choose between the two careers. Hasselstrom's father viewed the writing profession as frivolous and unnecessary compared to the manual labor of ranch work. Therefore, Hasselstrom's dedication to writing muddles her

position within the dynamics of her family, especially the relationship with her father. According to John T. Price, a writer and Western literature scholar at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, “Linda recognized that her father’s response was the result of years of hard physical labor, economic hardship, and a deep sense of powerlessness shared by many of his neighbors. According to Linda, however, her use of personal nonfiction further complicated her relationship with her family and neighbors” (“Not Just Any Land” 248). Her father’s stoic Western presence and dedication to maintaining a private life were so strong it included not wanting her to continue her writing profession because he believed it revealed too much about their family. In fact, Hasselstrom’s father asked her not to include information about the family in her nonfiction. In “How I Became a Broken-In Writer,” Hasselstrom quotes her father: “ ‘If you’ve gotta write, find something to doodle about besides me and this ranch’ ” (Imagining Home 158). For Hasselstrom, her relationship and connection to place is deeply rooted within her writing. Though Hasselstrom shared this connection to place with her father, he never read any of her books—a telling indication of his stand against her writing.

Hasselstrom’s father never accepted that Hasselstrom’s writing was more than a hobby—it was a career that Hasselstrom wanted to balance with her ranching responsibilities. In fact, Hasselstrom’s father asks her to leave after Hasselstrom requests a partnership in the ranch and asserts her desire to continue to write. Hasselstrom does leave the ranch; however, the tension between Hasselstrom and her father was not resolved; it merely made things more bearable. In an interview with Hasselstrom on her family’s ranch in 1994, John T. Price says, “Since her father’s death in 1992, financial



circumstances forced her to move to Cheyenne, sell her cattle to a neighbor, and rent out her parents' house and the house she and George built together. She still owned the land, but at the time of our visit in June 1994 she had not walked through her pastures in nearly two years. 'I couldn't bear it,' she said." ("Not Just Any Land" 237). Hasselstrom's hesitation to return to her family's land implies that there were still unresolved feelings toward her father, even after his death. Hasselstrom still does not live full time at the ranch. She lives in Cheyenne and commutes to the ranch during the summers.

In Dakota: A Spiritual Geography, Kathleen Norris has this to say about rural Western writers: "Someone who wants to be a writer either has to break away or settle for writing only what is acceptable at a mother-daughter church banquet or a Girl Scout program" (80). Norris asserts that traditional Plains people are more comfortable with the historical, impersonal writings about the region and community because it appears to be stationary, changing little with time. "One popular form of writing on the Plains is the local history", she writes. "These books reveal a great deal about the people who write them but do not often tell the true story of the region. [ . . . ] They present tales of perseverance made heroic in the context of the steady march of progress from homesteading days to the present" (81). As Norris implies, autobiographical writing is often resisted because the writer's experiences shape the subject matter, which may vary from the community's general opinion. Embracing personal nonfiction requires others to recognize that differing ideas or opinions can exist within the same community. Accepting differences can be difficult because it allows the unknown to enter the realm of possibility. For rural Westerners specifically, change is often resisted—even feared and,

for many, the alliance to the tradition is greater than the willingness to change. Hannah Levin talks about this tendency and says, “Groups pull away from the foreign and the big, and toward the small and the familiar. There is a strong resistance to change. The impulse is to preserve the predictability of the environment by maintaining continuity with all the good old values” (“The Struggle for Community Can Create Community” 267). There is security in knowing that traditions, including writings about the local history, remain unchanged.

Both Blunt and Hasselstrom experienced this resistance to change. As they attempted to become more involved in the business aspects of the ranching industry, Hasselstrom and Blunt both voiced opinions about how the business could operate differently. This disrupted the established traditional power hierarchies within these professions and, more specifically, within their families. Both women leave their respective ranches after a series of conflicts over their participation with ranching. Not only were both women discouraged from a career in the ranching industry, their fathers and families also did not support their professional and personal pursuits, particularly those in the realm of education and writing.

While the nonfiction of Hasselstrom and Blunt does not concentrate solely on the conflicts between father and daughter or writer and community, the resistance to change does seem to be another dominant theme in their narratives. Perhaps, a fear of the unknown contributed to this conflict. To claim one’s voice through published writing leaves very little opportunity for rebuttal, which poses a threat to the framework of long-standing patriarchal traditions and to the unchanging nature of community and family

structures. For instance, writing was the one role that was completely separate from both of Hasselstrom's parents. They could not control when or what she wrote. It is not surprising then that Hasselstrom's father took a strong stand against her writing career, asking her specifically not to write about the ranch. Traditional rural families, much like Hasselstrom's, were not accustomed to women being so open about issues that affected them. Perhaps the tension also had something to do with gender because a writing career actually transcends gender—it is available to anyone for the taking. And, if women can *choose* a profession like writing, what then would stop women from *choosing* a profession like ranching? This muddies the clear-cut boundaries that have long-established lineage in the rural West. By writing, authors like Hasselstrom and Blunt violated long-standing traditions of power and privacy.

The nonfiction of Hasselstrom and Blunt also deconstructs many assumptions about Western women and provides insight into the impact of long-established regional standards for women. Hasselstrom and Blunt assert their positions not solely to challenge these traditions, but to make these traditions more inclusive for them and other women. For instance, Hasselstrom's struggles with her father, the ranch, and her writing show that some degree of change was necessary in order to maintain her hold on the ranch. Hasselstrom continues to live in Cheyenne and manages the South Dakota ranch from out of state. While leaving the ranch was no doubt painful for Hasselstrom, it was, perhaps, necessary in order for her to write openly and objectively about the ranch, about her family, and about her father. The move allowed her to view things from a different perspective and to prepare herself for change. Shortly after Hasselstrom's move, her

father passed away. Now, the Hasselstrom ranch does not operate as it did when her father was alive and she was living and working on the ranch. Instead, Hasselstrom rents the property to a local rancher. She also rents out her home as well as her parents' home. While these adjustments were no doubt difficult for Hasselstrom, she continued to look for ways that would allow her to continue both ranching and writing, refusing to give up either. Hasselstrom now conducts writing workshops for women in the summer months. The workshops allow Hasselstrom to open up her home and ranch to women writers both inside and outside of the region, allowing them to gain first-hand experiences of a working ranch. These workshops help promote Western women's writing and expand the literary community by encouraging Western women to join together for the sole purpose of telling their stories. In addition, Hasselstrom's nonfiction functions as a teaching tool as she mentors other writers based on her experiences as a writer and rancher. Though the changes Hasselstrom implemented may not have been ones that her father agreed with or ones that were easy for her, she creatively and resourcefully embraced these challenges.

Though Hasselstrom's writing was a primary source of contention between her and her father, Hasselstrom has now brought writing, hers as well as other women's, back to the ranch. While Hasselstrom's father probably would not have agreed with this arrangement, the writing workshops have allowed Hasselstrom to maintain the family's hold on the land. Given the financial disadvantages that ranching and farming now have in this era, Hasselstrom's resourcefulness should be commended. As well, this is a testament to Hasselstrom's connection to the ranch and to her father, despite their differences. Though Hasselstrom and her father never reconciled many of their conflicts,

Hasselstrom's efforts to keep her family's land and continue her writing career show her dedication and commitment to the land *and* to her writing, as well as to her perseverance in defining her own role within each.

#### Chapter 4—Settling Within the Bioregional Community: Environmental Sensitivity in the Nonfiction of Julene Bair and Linda Hasselstrom

All places exist somewhere between the inside and outside views of them, the way in which they compare to, and contrast with, other places. A sense of place is a virtual immersion that depends on lived experiences and a topographical intimacy that is rare today both in ordinary and in traditional education fields.

Lucy R. Lippard, *Lure of the Local*

In Mapping the Private Geography Gerri Reaves discusses the important of place and its role in a person's identity. She says, "The intersection of place and identity is the obvious starting point for reconceiving the autobiographical self" (15). Reaves's assertion that identity and place are closely bound is evident in the nonfiction of Western authors Linda Hasselstrom and Julene Bair. For each, their connection to place fosters an innate sense of stewardship toward the land. Both writers express great concern for the future of the region in their nonfiction. In Between Grass and Sky Hasselstrom says the following about the South Dakota area near her family's ranch: "These days, I meet more people, and collect more discouraging information on the disappearance of family ranches and the paving of prairie. [. . .] Yet, I'm certain that if Americans continue to buy, develop, and pave and drive at their current rate, we are all in for a major shock as food prices rise, and options dwindle" (13). Though Kansas native and current Wyoming author Julene Bair comes from a farming background, she has similar concerns. In One Degree West, Bair says, "Our way of life was dying. I sensed this even then. Only old people lived in the fifty houses in my great-aunts' towns. Nearer home, a crop of widows and divorcees—my parents' sisters—began migrating, with my cousins, to Colorado cities" (4). Bair's quote reveals deep concern for the farming culture in which she was raised. This spurs Bair's connection to the land.

Though each author appreciates the region for its character and strength and for their history within it, neither allows her love for the land to cloud her opinions regarding its long-term health. Both authors readily acknowledge the need for change. In fact, both Bair and Hasselstrom directly confront the traditional farming and ranching methods of previous generations, standards that their families followed due to long-standing, cross-generational practices. As a result, both writers encounter opposition within their families. Hasselstrom encounters resistance from her father regarding her work on the ranch and her writing career. As she petitions her father for more control and continues to write publicly about the ranch, her father questions her motives. Bair also experiences conflict within her family after expressing her environmental opinions to her father and brother. As Bair and her brother, author Bruce Bair, struggle to manage the family farm after her father's death, she and Bruce find that they disagree about the management of the farm. Though both Bair and Hasselstrom encounter resistance to their stewardship ideals, this seems to spur their connection to the environmental community. Through published writing, Bair and Hasselstrom expand their ideas outward to a larger audience that reaches beyond the boundaries of their immediate families, communities, and the landscape. By doing so, they help strengthen a bioregional and non-gender specific community that shares some of the same viewpoints about environmental preservation and stewardship.

According to Bair, writing about place sets Western writers apart from other writers because the landscape is a noticeable theme within their work. Its recurrence is so common that, often times, the land dominates the narrative. She explains:

Literary scholars [. . .] point to a tendency in rural writers to honor landscape by having it function on the level of character. But characters are actually overshadowed by setting in rural prose [. . .] which is nothing short of the right and natural order. We exist in a place. That place is our creator. This soulful truth is proven on every page of virtually any western's work, ranging from Willa Cather to William Kittredge. (One Degree West 116)

When place exists so pointedly in the work of Western writers, then, naturally, the connection to place is seen clearly in the dialog and mannerisms of those who inhabit the region. Bair suggests that place is perhaps inherent to an individual's character. She goes on to say, "Where you live becomes what you know, becomes who you are" (One Degree West 134). Bair's work is no exception, as she readily establishes the impact of place within her own life. In an unpublished essay, "Home on Little Beaver," Bair reveals her connection to place while also revealing her environmental concerns about the region's water use. She says, "I hark back in my bones to the ridges of the small canyon the Little Beaver sculpted in our north pasture. I know in my flesh that, dust to dust, I am of that ground, and when my blood seeps to the surface with some minor wound, I am reminded of the miracle water is to dry land" (2). Bair's work includes some history of the land, realizing that it extends beyond the history of farming within the region. She explains:

Our state took its name from the Kansas Indians, who were tricked and cheated by settlers until they were forced to abandon their last stronghold in the Neosha Valley for a reservation in Oklahoma. They were of Siouan descent, and like



other Sioux such as the Omaha, included a Kansas gens, who were 'keepers of the rites pertaining to the south wind,' Wakon. ("Little Beaver" 6)

For Bair, an awareness of the region's history fostered an increased respect for the land, allowing her to better understand its history and, as a result, its future care.

Now a Wyoming resident, Bair chose this location because she wanted to stay within the region while also maintaining her independence from her family. She reveals the conflict that she felt over leaving Kansas in One Degree West: "Staying to help my father farm—either with a husband, as he once expected me to do, or without one, as he allowed I just might be able to do when I returned after my second divorce—would have been a self-betrayal. But so was leaving" (131). As the only daughter, perhaps Bair felt that she should be closer to home to fulfill a caretaking role. Her nonfiction often outlines how gender played a big part in the conflict that she felt within her family. Bair recalls specific experiences with her brother and father that made her feel that her gender was a hindrance and that certain farming tasks, especially traditionally male tasks, were outside her expected role. In the following passage from One Degree West, Bair describes some of the perceptions that she encountered:

It would have been an honor for me to do my brother's work, but demeaning for him to lift a plate from the table or wield a broom. Everyone tacitly understood that through the men's largess, we females were allowed the luxuries of house and yard, but these comforts entailed a compromise in status. Only on the first Friday of each summer month did I partake of our luxury with little regret. These were

club days, charmed days. As my mother and I zoomed past the fields full of men on open air tractors, my resentment and envy of my brother dissolved. (54)

It was made clear to Bair and her brothers that the work of the home was of a lower importance than the work on the farm. Bair also reveals that the farm work, at times, did not appeal to her. This is an interesting juxtaposition because Bair also points out that gendered boundaries could be crossed, though it was more acceptable for the women to cross them. In this way, Bair confesses that her gender did allow her certain privileges, and she was glad, at times, for the distinction.

The inequality in work responsibilities seems to sustain inequality between genders. For instance, Bair noticed that her father and brothers had a special bond because of their shared work responsibilities on the farm. She often felt distant from her father and wondered if her domestic responsibilities mired their connection. Bair wanted to experience the type of relationship her brothers enjoyed with their father. She says, “I don’t ask what a beaver slide is,” she writes, “because I should know. It’s always disturbed me, how little I learned growing up. I envy my brothers and father their shared knowledge, the resulting equality between them” (109). For Bair, the equality that she saw between her brothers and her father meant that a certain inequality was intrinsic to her relationship with them. She was an outsider to their shared knowledge and experiences. In “Women’s Sense of Place on the American High Plains,” Cary W. De Wit says, “A tradition of strong division between male and female roles persists today on the High Plains more so than it does in other contexts of American society. Men typically attend to farm, ranch, or business, while women tend to domestic duties and work as

teachers, nurses, clerks, or secretaries” (31). As De Wit explains, the inequalities between gender roles were common, and the gender contradictions were not unique to a single-family entity; rather, women throughout the Western region experience similar stereotypes. Bair seems to agree. She explains: “While role rigidity prevents me from being my complete self at home, I also know that such limitations are what make this place this place. Culture, uniqueness, local flavor. Bias, narrowness, parochialism. These are reverse sides of the same coin. Native here, I am always trying to dispose of one side while keeping the other, an impossibility” (One Degree West 131). Bair acknowledges a paradox—she feels torn between paying homage to respected traditions and honoring the independent woman she has become.

While Bair struggles with the restrictions surrounding her role on the farm she does not hesitate to question some of her father’s traditional farming practices. As Bair begins to form opinions about farming methods and land stewardship, her family appears indifferent at first. She describes a conversation with her parents:

In town, over suppers my mother cooked, we had many conversations that ran like this: Mom, gazing out the window onto the street: ‘Look at that! Those neighbors up north must be running their lawn sprinkler again. They leave it on all day and just let the water run down the gutter. What a waster!’ ‘That’s nothing compared to the water we waste on the farm.’ ‘Well, yes, I know, but...’ ‘The government should regulate it so one family can’t use up several millennia worth of water in twenty years. Think about future generations.’ Dad, his head tilted in

my direction, his eyebrows lifted, furrowing his forehead, which rose to a shiny bald pate: 'What do I care about them? I got mine.' ("Little Beaver" 10-11)

Bair investigated the region's water use to better understand the farming practices that her father used and to determine the farm's impact on the regional water table. She felt strongly about the farm's liberal water use yet often felt helpless to change the farming practices. Bair hoped to use her research about the farm's water use to protect, or conserve, some of the region's water. She explains:

I read that in our region less than half an inch of rainwater makes it back to the aquifer in a given year, and we were taking out far more than that. The benign whirs and clangs of the windmill had been replaced by the chugging of engines from all directions, all summer. The noise plagued my conscience, reminding me that we were mining water at an unsustainable rate. The spring scent of fresh-turned dirt and new growth had been subverted by the malevolent odor of chemical, which wafted in through my farmhouse windows. Run-off from the irrigated fields went into a tail-water pit stocked by my father with bullhead and channel cat". ("Little Beaver" 9)

Bair's concern for the health of the environment transcends gender because she realizes that the region's health impacts everyone, including her family. She says: "I worried about the chemicals that dust was saturated with going into his lungs. I worried about the waste of water" ("Little Beaver" 11). Her father's indifference towards the farm's water use exemplifies a resistance to change. Yet, by acknowledging and writing about her

concern for the land and her father's health, Bair transcends traditional gender roles by becoming a protector of her father and one of the primary managers of the family's land.

After the death of Bair's father, she and her brother Bruce manage the farm operation together. Coincidentally, Bair and Bruce share a unique similarity—both are writers. This makes their relationship much more complex. In Bruce Bair's book, Good Land or, My Life as a Farm Boy, he outlines his experiences working on their farm as a boy and then later when he makes it his profession for several years. Bruce writes with nostalgia about the family farm, and his descriptions of farming methods are often more detailed than Bair's. "What we pulled were two iron-wheeled, thirties-era twelve-foot rod weeders. A rod weeder is simply a frame which holds a turning square rod about an inch in diameter. The rod is pulled just under the surface of the soil. Rod weeders are still in use. No finer machinery has yet been invented to finish summer fallow prior to sowing" (Good Land 38). He explains the machinery used and its history in farming, indicating his appreciation and alliance to an earlier farming era. Bruce's terminology is precise and technical, revealing an intimate knowledge of the procedures and the tools necessary to complete the task. He writes:

In the fall, I onewayed the wheat stubble to kill the volunteer wheat and weeds and chop up the stubble, around and around. In the spring, Clark and I did it again, and again, maybe three times, before the stubble had been finely enough chopped to 'get out the sweeps.' Sweeps were large V-shaped blades. Three of them hung on a frame would span twelve feet. The blades travel just under the surface of the soil, which is diverting to watch. They go under a big weed, lift it

up, and put it back down where it was, apparently undamaged. On the next pass, the weed is noticeably slumping and by the end of the day it is dried and dead. By early September, the oneways and the sweeps had reduced the soil cover to nothing, which for decades caused the topsoil to blow away when it didn't rain, and to wash away when it did. (Good Land 42)

Bruce has an obvious technical knowledge of the farming industry. Unlike Julene, Bruce is confident in his authority on farming. However, Good Land's individual chapters are often underdeveloped and merely regurgitate the processes rather than expounding on the worth and relevance of the methodology. In addition, Bruce's writing does not evoke a strong emotional connection to place. In fact, he appears at times to be indifferent, such as when he comments: "A farm is just land" (Good Land 12). Ironically, this impartial stand implies that, for him, farming is just a business much like any other—not inherently good or bad. The emotional investment in the land is secondary, which may help explain the distance that Bruce places between himself and his family.

In Good Land, Bruce Bair largely employs caustic and insentient descriptions of his family, especially his sister. His father is referred to simply as, "Harold," and Bruce frequently criticizes Julene. He remarks, "Julie, in adulthood, carries herself with an air of superiority that is unpleasant to me. It is the same supercilious smirk of her youth clothed in sophistication. I've always thought that her life should have taught her a bit of humility, and that she should remember she grew up playing in the same pigpen I did" (Good Land 152). Later, Bruce describes Julene's profession and says, "Near the end of her marriage she took off on a spree, traveling through South America, eating mushrooms

and visiting Machu Picchu. When she got back, she divorced Bruce [her first husband] and became artistic. She decided she wanted to become a writer” (Good Land 153).

Bruce seems to be implying that Julene’s writing was a fleeting notion—a whim.

However, Julene attended a well-known writing program at the University of Iowa, while also raising her son. In addition, Bruce clearly views his sister’s writing as

inconsequential, despite the fact that both write professionally. This smacks of sibling rivalry, but also, perhaps, speaks to traditional gendered assumptions on Bruce’s part.

Perhaps Bruce believed that it was his right—a man’s right—to tell their story.

The conflict between Bair and her brother grew as she learned more about the environmental damage that their farming has caused, and she questions some of their practices. Julene proposed dry-land farming in an e-mail to Bruce:

Did you know that in 2000, we pumped almost 339 million gallons of water, more than ever in the past? This amounts to over thirteen inches spread over the 920 acres we watered last year, when the recharge rate from rainfall is less than half an inch. What would happen if we stopped irrigating? I know this is a blasphemous suggestion and that we would be looked upon as utter fools, but really, have you ever considered this? What if we went strictly dry land? (“Little Beaver” 18)

It is interesting that Bair questions herself in her e-mail message. She expresses doubts about her ideas for the dry-land option even as she argues for it, almost apologizing for the suggestion. Perhaps she knew Bruce would not care for the idea, or perhaps the gendered limitations she experienced growing up damaged her confidence level when

discussing farming decisions. Bruce replies to the e-mail message, disagreeing with Julene: “As far as farming without irrigating, I think it is entirely possible, but look for a big income drop. Remember, dry-land rents for \$25 an acre” (“Little Beaver” 18).

Bruce’s reply indicates that, for him, the farm’s financial profits take precedence over concerns for the environment. Julene is much more willing to sacrifice some of the farm’s income in order to taper the farm’s water use. Yet, she admits to being dependent on the farm for a portion of her income, further complicating her position. She explains:

We are currently receiving \$80 an acre for our irrigated ground. I would have to get a job and reenter the work-a-day grind. I wouldn’t be able to travel as I plan to do when my son graduates from high school. I wouldn’t be able to help him as much with college as I planned. There would be little if any time left for writing.  
 (“Little Beaver” 18)

There is no reconciliation here for Bair, except in writing: “What I couldn’t change I could at least write about” (Little Beaver 11). Through writing, Bair confronts some of the differences she encounters with her family and with farming. She includes honest discussions about the difficulties she encounters, which allows others to learn from her experiences. Bair also includes several references to others’ work that significantly influenced her environmental research. As Bair found, there were many regional writers of like mind who also voice concerns about current practices that are detrimental to the region’s health. One such writer is Linda Hasselstrom.

Linda Hasselstrom grapples with what it means to be an environmentalist in a traditional ranching community in her most recent and environmentally astute book,



Between Grass and Sky. The essays in this collection reflect her deep awareness of place. In fact, she believes that an intimate relationship with the land is necessary in order to completely understand it. “I believe our protective devices have served to detach us, literally as well as figuratively, from the landscape. We have transferred our ambiguous feelings about the actual earth to those who work most closely with it, to anyone whose work requires getting dirty” (76). Hasselstrom’s knowledge about her South Dakota region reflects her relationship and connection to the land. Many of the passages in Between Grass and Sky reveal Hasselstrom’s intimacy with the landscape, a necessity she believes leads to successful ranching. Hasselstrom says:

Only grass keeps most of the West’s thin soil from blowing east in swirling clouds to fall into the Atlantic Ocean. Evolved over millions of years, grasses utilize unique combinations of nutrients and water in specific ways unique to each prairie region. Grass is the main product of Western rangelands. Disturbing the surface of the earth—plowing and bulldozing space for houses, highways, and parking lots—destroys grass and encourages weeds. [. . .] Every farming method tried on arid prairie has been less successful than Nature’s. Few crops could thrive under these tough conditions as well as grass does. (167)

Hasselstrom’s environmental views were, in many ways, similar to her father’s practical approach to ranching. She writes, “Of course, my rancher father didn’t teach me how to ‘sustain a naturally functioning ecosystem.’ He said, ‘This land will take care of us if we take care of it.’ I learned by watching his actions that he considered antelope, deer, badgers, and coyotes important to our ranch. He didn’t call it an ecosystem, but it is”

(167). Her father's pragmatic no-nonsense approach to ranching fostered Hasselstrom's growing environmental sensibility in Between Grass and Sky. She explains:

From Leopold's farming experience came an ethical judgment so blinding it caused me to examine and ultimately adjust my opinions on ranching, the basis of my life. [. . .] That simple truth gave me the courage to protest when my father poisoned prairie dogs or sprayed his alfalfa fields to kill grasshoppers. Nothing else in my experience had prepared me to clash so strongly with my father and the traditions of my ranching community. Every question that arose from my reading, every discussion, prompted me both to examine the practical aspects of the idea and to write. (Grass and Sky 11)

Though her father did not support all of Hasselstrom's environmental practices or her writing, they always agreed on a basic respect for the land. Despite their differences, their connection to the land strengthened their bond, showing that environmental sensitivity can transcend gender differences. In addition, the two have, in a sense, switched roles. Hasselstrom's father was once the provider for the family and caretaker or protector of the land. In a way, Hasselstrom's writing is an extension of her father's efforts as well. Ultimately, Hasselstrom's writing, like Bair's, now protects both her father's vision of the land as well as the land by educating and promoting environmental stewardship. Both women are now in a position to serve as guardian to the land, and, in their families, they are the first generation of women to do this.

The essays in Between Grass and Sky speak to Hasselstrom's strong environmental sensitivity. She presents her viewpoint more directly than in some of her

earlier nonfiction. For instance, Hasselstrom contrasts ranching practices that many believe are destructive to the Plains to the general destruction of the environment by humans. She explains:

Cows leave trails that cause erosion; so do humans. Cows defecate in their own water supply. Have you ever heard what generations of humans have put in your water? Not only sewage, but chemicals that will literally curl your hair and dissolve your bones, not to mention those of your unborn children. The worst an animal can do to a water supply is defecate or die in it. Cows may do both, but so do other animals, and the contamination can be corrected by boiling. Humans are the only species that poison their own water, know they shouldn't, and still can't stop themselves. Cows don't neatly cover their manure piles the way a fastidious feline does, but neither do most humans. I've seen backcountry campgrounds surrounded by mounds of human excrement festooned with toilet paper—a human product that's not even necessary for clean defecation, and something cows never leave dangling from the scenery.” (176)

Hasselstrom is vocal and assertive, at times adamant, about her opinions towards nature. She presents the information as she sees it and, often, it's not the cattle that Hasselstrom reproves, but human ignorance. She believes that most people could be more actively engaged in protecting our natural resources since we all share a part in depleting these resources. Hasselstrom feels strongly about living what you preach. She exemplifies this by including simple examples of her own environmental responsibility such as picking up litter, growing her own food, raising grass-fed cattle, or planting trees for a windbreak.

Her nonfiction works to break barriers between the environmental community and those who are not engaged with environmental issues.

Hasselstrom also bridges the gap between the ranching industry and the environmental movement by openly challenging both in her nonfiction. Long-standing ranching practices, Hasselstrom asserts, actually damage the land, the native prairie grass, and the few natural water sources still available to her Plains community. Yet, she also denounces the environmental community for making claims about the ranching industry without fully understanding the industry or its practices. She explains:

While ranchers in some states use millions of acres of public land, in my home state of South Dakota the percentage is low. Still, in this state where nearly everyone knows everyone else or their cousin, we experience most of the misunderstandings that arise nationally between ranchers and environmentalists. For years, in my writing and in talks before varied groups, I've urged ranchers and environmentalists to get acquainted, to listen to each others' positions instead of squaring off. (158)

Hasselstrom encourages communication by inviting further discussion on existing debates. Her passion for both ranching and nature effectively show that her position is not a conflict of interest. It is possible to have a vested interest in both arenas. Her dedication to both ranching and the environment functions as a juncture between the two.

Hasselstrom's efforts within the ranching and environmental communities help establish the groundwork that ensures her ranch continues to function as a family ranch. Hasselstrom purchased her family's land from her mother after her father's death and

now owns the entire Hasselstrom ranch. The location of the ranch is near the Black Hills, and much of that land is now being sold for housing developments. With no children to leave the ranch to, Hasselstrom wants the ranching practices that she established to remain in place on her land even after she is gone. This is, perhaps, the true testament of an environmentalist—the desire to preserve/conservate the land through methods that will ensure its health and integrity beyond an individual’s lifetime. Her environmental work will endure, not only for its pragmatism, but also for its lasting imprint on the health of the region. “Finding native plants like sego lily and Indian turnip” she explains, “helped me to understand their place in the community of forage that my cattle use, and was part of my inspiration to establish in my pastures a botanic garden of species native to the Great Plains” (Between Grass and Sky 11). The effects of Hasselstroms efforts are two-fold. By re-introducing native plants on her ranch, Hasselstrom nurtures both the land and the health of the cattle.

The nonfiction of both Bair and Hasselstrom functions as a tool to educate, inform, and promote environmental stewardship. It encourages participation in the environmental community. Hasselstrom is forthright about this. She invites others to take an active role by experiencing nature firsthand: “Let’s get those students out of their desks and into the country. Send nature writing classes to talk with people who work in any kind of agriculture available in the immediate neighborhood” (Between Grass and Sky 9). She believes that responsibility for the environment comes from establishing a personal relationship with nature. She also suggests getting involved with the environment on a political level to help implement positive change. She says, “As we run

out of clean air, water, and food, not to mention fuel, each of use has a greater stake in environmental reform. The attitude of the George W. Bush administration suggests that folks seriously interested in improving their environment face an invigorating challenge” (Between Grass and Sky 6). Hasselstrom’s direct language and enthusiasm is intended to rally others to the cause. Bair’s literature, on the other hand, is less assertive, perhaps because Bair must manage the farm with other family members. Bair is less attached to the specifics of the farm as she is to the specific bioregional principles. She refers to her son and says, “I’ll tell him other things as well. *Land and where you are from are part of who you are.* That’s why I moved us to Laramie, where there are mountains and undestroyed wilderness for him to fall in love with. He may want to leave when he grows up, but then he’ll want to come back. I will tell him all this often, the obvious” (148). Bair hopes that through raising her son to understand the importance of being conscientious toward natural resources, regardless of rural or urban location, that he can then use this information as a tool within his own life. Perhaps Bair is also serving as an educator by preparing the next generation to continue farming with a bioregional approach. As Bair’s only child, her son may well have the opportunity to help manage the Bair family farm one day.

Writing openly and honestly about traditional practices enriches the discussion to include new and/or different practices, often ones that their fathers’ generation had not yet contemplated. Each author uses her knowledge about the land to argue for progression in bioregional stewardship. Many of these advances were unrealized, even unwelcome, by their fathers’ generation. In taking a stand like Sandoz did with her father,

both Bair and Hasselstrom transcend the roles that their families, especially their fathers, expected of them. Both of their fathers held traditional views about women's role in ranching or farming. Yet, both women *want* to take on a central role within each respective business, and both do become actively involved in the management of their families' land. The role of caretaker, or manager, was one that their fathers expected that women might want to *participate* in through marriage, though never direct alone. Though each struggles for her family's acceptance of her role, their position alone serves as an example that the gender limitations imposed on women are starting to change, becoming more inclusive and accepting of nontraditional roles.

Sandoz was a pioneer with her writing. Her literary stewardship influenced contemporary voices like Bair and Hasselstrom. In turn, these voices inspire the next generation of writers, who, like me, are dedicated to *both* writing and the region. The nonfiction of Bair and Hasselstrom fosters further opportunities for others to voice their own opinions about ranching or farming or about Western life, bridging the divide between male and female. Their writing encourages regional authors to come forward with their own experiences and to continue to communicate with each other. Western literature is greatly enriched by these dauntless voices. Their nonfiction can also serve as an opportunity to teach their experiences with farming and ranching, extending their voice—their authority—further into other arenas, such as agriculture or academia.

Their nonfiction can also be seen as an extension, if not a progression, of their families' farming and ranching practices. By writing about farm/ranch environmental issues, Hasselstrom and Bair offer their insights to a wider bioregional audience. Women

have a voice *and* a place within the region. Their opinions matter and can make a positive difference by bringing together both genders for the common good of the region and those who inhabit it. An examination of their nonfiction and experiences gives others the information and the tools necessary to apply similar concepts to their own regions. Their experiences instill an awareness of the land and its health among upcoming generations. Their voice helps protect the health of the region. They are guardians for the land. In addition, their writing is a lasting extension of their voice; it softens barriers by challenging certain aspects of the Western ethos of privacy and expands outward to a larger audience.



### A Voice from the Farm Crisis Era: A Personal Conclusion

In my family, my father divided us (his children) by our gender. This was the easiest way for my father to make a clear distinction between us. There were four of us, two of each gender, so we divided evenly when it came to assigning chores. Doing laundry and babysitting applied to my sister and me and combining crops or hunting applied to my two brothers. My sister and I were often excluded from the farming responsibilities that were expected and, at times, demanded of my brothers. When Ben, the elder of my two younger brothers, indicated his distaste for farming, finding the tasks to be monotonous and boring, my father used words like “lazy” to belittle and embarrass him. Farming simply did not interest my brother. Instead, he enjoyed spending his time in the kitchen making cheesecakes from scratch or searching through a cookbook to find an interesting recipe. My father failed to realize the contribution that Ben’s cooking brought to the family. The time and effort put into cooking went without thanks, though everyone, including my father, enjoyed the fruits of Ben’s labor. What my father also did not recognize was that our interests did not have to align with our gender. In fact, cooking or farming, among other traditionally gendered tasks, could interest any one of his children.

My father’s discrimination angered me—I saw the resentment that we all had for the limitations that were imposed upon us because of gender. Yet, as an adult, I became interested in understanding the underlying principles that went along with my father’s reasoning. What was it about my father that allowed him to think this way? Had my grandparents treated my father—their only son—this way? Was my father resentful for

having to take over the family farm after my grandfather retired? Had my grandparents expected my father to farm and to take over the land from my grandfather though he'd always had interests outside of farming? Indeed, my grandparents had anticipated my father's role on the farm. He was their only son and the eldest of their children. My father's responsibilities on the farm were a matter of tradition as well as obligation and necessity.

I needed to better understand this family history—the traditions and foundation—because I wanted to prepare myself for parenting my own children one day and for mentoring my niece and nephew. I want to encourage their budding interests, whatever those might be. I want to foster their curiosity about nature. I want them to learn about the place in which my father grew up and, in turn, the place in which my parents raised me and my siblings. Though I don't live in Iowa anymore and my role on the farm is uncertain, I want them to understand what it means to farm, to live in and of the land. I want future generations of my family to establish a connection to rural Iowa and, more specifically, to my family's Iowa farm and its history. I want them to know that the land my grandfather started farming in north-central Iowa was passed down from his wife, my grandmother, and her Edgington family and not from the Zickefoose side of the family as many might assume. I want them to know the interesting history regarding my father's acquisition of the farm in the woods—land that he had admired as little boy and stubbornly sought after and struggled to keep as an adult. Would it be possible for future generations to establish a connection to the land without them living on the farm or even within the state? Would the connection be the same? The uncertainty here is unsettling

for me because the future of my family's farm is also unclear. Will my family be able to hold on to our farm-land that was divided in two with the divorce of my parents? I don't yet know the answers to these questions. What I do know though is that I plan to continue my involvement in topics regarding rural Iowa, especially those focusing on women and their connection to the land. I also know that I will show future generations that their interests, whatever those might be, can be aligned with the interests and needs of the family and the regional community. Their voices can make a difference, though it may differ from the family's views as well as the community's. Recognizing that I wanted things to be different within my own life was an important, even necessary, first step. Surely others had experiences or struggles that related to mine. Could I learn something from them?

When I first began my graduate program in English, I had inklings that I wanted to focus my studies on literature pertaining to the West. I was particularly interested in gender issues and have always enjoyed women's literature, particularly nonfiction. Though I grew up in Iowa and now live in Nebraska, I had only been exposed to a handful of Western women authors: Laura Ingalls Wilder as a young girl and a couple of other authors through my undergraduate studies at Iowa State University. Upon starting my graduate program in Omaha, I hesitantly voiced my interests to university faculty members, thinking that they would persuade me to focus on canonical authors such as Twain or Hemingway. I was surprised to find that the faculty recommended courses that directly related to my regional interests. Through their counsel, I discovered a multitude of regional Plains authors, which bulked up my course load and my reading list. Through

the graduate-level course work, the literature, and my own research and reading, I came to understand and appreciate Western women's literature, ranging from Willa Cather to Mary Crow Dog to Kathleen Norris. Plus, I have grown to recognize the significance of the contribution these women make to the region and its literature. Their insights are unique and inspiring. Their contributions greatly enrich the region's literature and counter many of the perceptions about women from this region. Women *are* interested in the land and its health. Women do make valuable contributions to their family's ranch and farm businesses as well as many other arenas.

Western women's literature and, more specifically, the authors included within this thesis facilitated a greater understanding of my own experiences on my family's farm in Iowa. I now have a better grip on what other women have encountered within their families and within the region. I can apply some of their insights to ongoing issues within my own life such as my family's struggle after the Farm Crisis, and even now, to keep our one remaining farm. As well, their insights have allowed me to better understand the silence within my father's family over disputes regarding the farm and the sometimes-strained relationship that I have with my father. For instance, during and after the Farm Crisis, my father struggled, most often silently, with the financial problems that overwhelmed most farming communities. The worry and stress made him physically ill—he stopped eating during particularly stressful times and when my father injured his back in a jogging accident, he told no one that he could no longer feel his left foot and part of his left leg (nerve damage). My father had canceled the health insurance without telling us because he was ashamed and embarrassed that he could no longer afford to

cover the expense. In many ways, the silence that my father invoked only gave these problems more power and, ultimately, it was too much to bear. The lack of communication—the silence—among other factors contributed to my parent’s divorce as well as the sale of three of my family’s four farms during the late 80s and early 90s. Reflecting on these experiences now, I can say that had my family talked about the Farm Crisis and its affects on the family and on the farm, the dialog could have alleviated some of the stress, worry, and mystery surrounding it. It also may have allowed us to voice our individual concerns about what was happening. As it was, I never really knew that my thoughts about the Farm Crisis were even worthy of being spoken. I thought it was a problem specific to my father’s era. This was, after all, what my father believed when he tried to carry the burden by himself. I didn’t realize all of the ways in which the Farm Crisis had affected *my* thoughts and feelings and those of others within my generation. My sister’s artwork has a heavy focus on rural issues, as does my writing. I don’t think this is a coincidence. We are connected not only by family and a shared familial history but also by *place*.

Western women’s literature has facilitated my understanding of some of the tribulations that women experience within Western regions. Now, I have a better grasp on where I fit within my family and community and what I can bring to both in the future. This literature has also cultivated my recognition of the validity and strength of my own voice. My voice is of value and makes a contribution to my family and the community as well as the region’s literature, especially texts focusing on the Farm Crisis—an era that I believe has yet to be fully represented within autobiographical literature by women from

my generation. By writing about my experiences in rural Iowa perhaps I too can be an example to other writers interested in Western literature and regional issues that affect women. This thesis is a testament to the discovery of the importance and place of my own voice.

### Notes

1. When used within this thesis, the terms, the West or Western, are referring to the predominately rural, grasslands region that is located between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains.
2. The Western Literature Association (WLA) annual conference was held in Omaha, Nebraska, in October 2001. During the conference, I met with and interviewed Western writer/author Mary Clearman Blew. I have incorporated only portions of the interview within this thesis, primarily those pertaining to privacy. A fellow University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) English graduate student, Linda Riffner, met and interviewed Ms. Blew with me.

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