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"THAT UNDERSTANDING WITH NATURE"

Region, Race, and Nation in Women's Stories from the Modern Canadian and American Grasslands West

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"MY FIRST MEMORY of this quiet home in the Wild West is one of terror," wrote Annora Brown remembering life in southern Alberta, Canada. She and her two sisters had been "turned out for an airing" on their family's homestead circa 1900. All three girls ambled along until, suddenly, one of the sisters "became firmly embedded in mud." Annora recalled the panic in her two-year-old body: "There stood Helen, screaming with helplessness, rooted in gumbo. There I stood, rooted to the path, in terror of I knew not what."[1] Sticky gumbo terrified Brown. The pairing of "quiet" and "Wild West" in this memory is clearly meant to be ironic. Readers might have expected marauding cowboys or an encounter with Native Americans to follow her invocation of "terror" in the "Wild West," not gumbo mud. Readers who were familiar with prairie

landscapes, however, would have recognized a sticky old foe. Throughout her autobiography, based on a lifetime of firsthand experience and study, Annora Brown asserted her place in the grasslands West by claiming expert knowledge about the region's natural environments.

Women who came of age in the Canadian and U.S. northern grasslands in the first half of the twentieth century left numerous writings that begin to suggest the contours of a post-conquest, modern western regionalism and the significant roles women played in the region's creation.[2] To better understand how women placed themselves in the modern West in relation to the settlement generation, masculine narrative traditions, and American and Canadian national western myths, this essay explores the autobiographical writings of three women, Annora Brown from Alberta (1899–1987), Era Bell Thompson of North Dakota (1905–1986), and Thorstina Jackson Walters, who grew up in a transnational, Manitoba–North Dakota community (1887–1956).[3] These three women are relative contemporaries, each a representative of second-generation grasslands residents (they considered their parents "the pioneers"), but located in diverse communities running from east to west across the prairies and plains, and from north to south over the 49th parallel. Though they published their books at different life cycle moments, the three women shared the same general historic times (the late 1800s to the mid-1940s), their self-identification as westerners, and an attachment to the ecology and history of the continental northern grasslands. Historian Hal Barron has described this period as the "second great transformation in the northern countryside." Regional landscapes were being transformed from wild grasslands to commercial crop acreages, but development had not yet reached the "Great Disjuncture" of the post–World War II years when agriculture consolidated intensely and became fully mechanized.[4]

Annora Brown, who is discussed first, became a regionally known painter of prairie subjects, primarily grasslands flora and Blackfoot Native American scenes. She wrote as she entered her senior years, when memory often becomes both hazy and acute. Working with her memory was "like living with a poltergeist," she said, with "fragmentary memories

buzz[ing] about angrily."[5] This essay draws on her ideas about the grasslands West as she set them out in *Sketches from Life* (1981), her well-documented autobiography, and *Old Man's Garden* (1954), a prairie plant lore collection based on historic observations of the grasslands and legends she collected from the Blackfoot Nation.[6] Brown is discussed first because her narratives provide the clearest evidence of a distinct modern women's way of laying claim to western land. Her writings also best suggest themes important to comparative study of Canadian and American mythic Wests. Era Bell Thompson's autobiography moves the analysis from Canada to the U.S. side of the 49th parallel. She moved from an Iowa city to rural North Dakota when she was a child and published *American Daughter* (1946) in midlife after winning a fellowship for regional writers. Living in Chicago, she wrote explicitly to explain the presence of a Dakota-identified African-American to a nation not too familiar with either a realistic North Dakota or its multicultural population. Thompson wrote the autobiography just before she started a long career as editor for *Ebony* magazine.[7] The final case study focuses on Thorstina Jackson Walters, who lived in Icelandic communities on both sides of the 49th parallel in Manitoba and North Dakota. As a borderland resident she was uniquely exposed to the culture and history of both the Canadian and American Wests. Walters also received a regional fellowship in the 1940s to write *Modern Sagas* (1953), a unique combination of autobiography and Icelandic community history. She collected material for her study for most of her life, first finishing her father's long-time project of recording pioneer family histories of Icelandic immigration to Canada and the United States, then moving beyond him to complete a sociological interpretation of the same community with added analysis of her generation. Until multiple sclerosis began degrading her nervous system, Walters promoted Icelandic-North American history and foreign relations on a lecture circuit that saw her travel among Canada, the U.S., and Iceland.[8]

This sample of three women's autobiographies begins to answer several important questions. Classic Canadian narratives center on a peaceful, orderly West, while the more popularly well-known American West

holds violence and risk at its core. Did such national mythologies make a difference in the self-presentation of these three women, though they lived in an ecologically unified region? Canada and the United States share mythic attachments to the West as a "manly" space, even though the conceptions of manhood are not the same. The representative Canadian western man is identified with duty, courtesy, and calm, and can seem almost feminine when compared to the wild, aggressive, ruggedly independent, and too-frequently brutal American western man.[9] Given the persistence of male-inspired icons (and the values, norms, and ideals they stand for), such as the farmer, rancher, cowboy, and Mounted Policeman, how did modern women writers locate themselves in the West? Finally, what, if anything, competes with region, nation, and gender in the ways each woman represented her western life and times?

Examined individually in the sections that follow, the writings of Brown, Thompson, and Walters suggest that their generation claimed the West as a birthright and possessed its land by developing physical and emotional affinities with prairies and plains landscapes. They relied more on regional and racial identities than on national affiliations to represent the lives they lived in their unique corners of the grasslands. If men laid claim to the land with legal titles to farms and ranches, women claimed land by acquiring regional environmental knowledge. Brown referred to this process as becoming "one with Nature."[10] Environmental historian Richard White has called it "knowing place."[11] Many women gained legal title to homesteads, and women may have sometimes thought about land in the same ways men did, hoping, for example, that commercial agriculture would be profitable.[12] Men, too, surely acquired a sense of place. What is distinctive about these women's narratives is the *emphasis* placed on appreciation of a general grasslands aesthetic sense rather than on a profound manly effort to tame the grasslands with commercial agriculture. If Brown, Thompson, and Walters were typical regional representatives, then their narratives show how central an ecological consciousness was to twentieth-century western women's identities. Only racial status concerned them as much.

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AS THE DAUGHTER of a Canadian Mountie, Annora Brown could have employed stock characters and emphasized familiar mythic themes in her autobiography. But she did so only selectively. Instead, sticky gumbo symbolized her place in the West more than her father's service with the North West Mounted Police, the group credited in Canadian history for establishing law and order in the West. She found the iconic Mountie appealing when she was a child. Brown recalled how she used to study old photographs of her father in "scarlet tunics and yellow leg-stripes." Even then, however, it was "in my imagination" only, she wrote, that she could see her father "still in uniform." He had not worn a Mountie uniform since before she was born. She remembered, also, how during childhood she felt that the Mounted Police barracks "belonged to me." Brown, however, never knew her father as a Mountie. In her lifetime her father found duty only in the mundane actions of a town bureaucrat. As an adult, she chose to provide readers with a realistic portrait of him. Brown stressed her father's economic insecurity. An economic depression drove her father out of England to the Canadian West. Then, although he wished to farm in the West, he joined the Mounted Police because he lacked the money to develop a government homestead. He could not even ride a horse before he joined the Mounted Police.[13] Her father's lack of skill and desperate motives for joining the police force do not come across as heroic. Brown could have presented a myth-sustaining story of her father's involvement in establishing law and order in the Canadian West. By locating her awe of the Mountie in her own childhood, however, and then juxtaposing that admiration with a more realistic history of her father, Brown suggested the oversimplification at the core of mythic icons. Her father's story undercuts the standard attributes of the beloved Canadian Mountie. Similarly, when she claimed to be related on her mother's side to the "Colonel William Frederick (Buffalo Bill) Cody of Wild West Fame," Brown invoked a quintessential, popular U.S. western man.[14] Again, however, Brown chose not to engage in mythmaking. The brave, forceful

Buffalo Bill signaled her West no more than a methodical, manly Mountie.

Just as she refrained from turning her bureaucrat father into a mythical Mountie, Brown refrained from telling a traditional western narrative of rural life. Indeed, she depicted her family *leaving* the land for the nearby town of Fort Macleod in her very first chapter. Her clearest memory of leaving centered on patting goodbye the "soft nose of the gentle farm horse" named Queenie.[15] Brown covered in very few lines the rural conquest that typically consumes entire memoirs.[16] She continued to demote the traditional rural homesteading story when she used municipal growth to symbolize conquest. She recalled gazing at streets and avenues laid out but torn apart for the installation of water and sewer pipes:

> Gangs of men laid out straight lines of sticks and cords along the streets and then began to dig deep trenches so the pipes would be safe from winter frosts. With what interest I watched these men disappear! First the feet, then knees and hips, then shoulders, and finally heads; all the while a spray of gravel and earth flew from their shovels to the side of the pit [until,] finally, it seemed to come magically from the earth itself. The head of a shovel, a spray of gravel, emptiness; the head of a shovel, a spray of gravel, emptiness.
>
> ...The prairie sun beat down on a level plain sprinkled with houses. All down the street was a row of trenches ten or twelve feet long, separated by two-foot-long bridges of earth, each trench accompanied by a pile of gravel.[17]

>FIGURE 6.1: *Annora Brown (center) at play on the prairie, Fort Macleod, Alberta. The photograph is taken from one of her scrapbooks, under which is penned, "Rubble from ditch in background."* *[Courtesy of the University of Alberta Archives, (83–116–16–2)]*

>FIGURE 6.2: *Annora Brown and her father, Edmund Forster Brown, outside their Fort Macleod home in the middle of well-developed gardens and mature trees, "about 1950." In one of her scrapbooks, Brown compares this photograph with another taken at the same location "about 1911," when the only landscape feature was worn-to-the-dirt prairie.* *[Courtesy of the University of Alberta Archives, (83–116–17–2)]*

Amy Annora Kathleen

Rubble from ditch in background

By connecting the prairie sun with pipes and a level plain with houses, Brown is deliberately pairing nature and development. The beauty she saw was a manmade counterpoint to the "great prairie distances, high skies, foothills, [and] blue mountains" she also admired. Along with water and sewer pipes, Brown noted the introductions of telephones, electricity, plumbing, gas heat, and automobiles. Her West included modern amenities that ran counter to the stereotypical image of the West as an isolated wilderness.[18] The vignette also related the development of Brown's identity as an artist. The memory celebrates her early artistic sight. Indeed, one of the main themes of Brown's autobiography is the process by which she established herself as a professional artist in a male-dominated art world, at a time and in a place where the regional population seemed to her little interested in art generally, prairie landscapes even less.

The stereotypical "wild" and "orderly" opposition between American and Canadian Wests does make one appearance in Brown's autobiography. Brown remembered how she "avidly" listened to stories from her father's "colourful past" and treasured his memories as "the very stuff from which the country had been built." Once she overheard a conversation between her father and another old-timer about when the latter was a young man. The old-timer explained that he left Indiana for the West after his fiancé "was killed." "I was pretty wild," he said. "I come west and I was a pretty wild one.... I was all strung up and nervous and lost my temper easy. 'Dynamite' they called me and I was pretty handy with my gun—too handy with it—but that wasn't me, you know." Later, the man headed north to Canada, where he bought land, married, and helped raise two children. The shift in the man's location from the American West to the Canadian West corresponded to a change, in Brown's words, from "wild one" to "good citizen," the stereotypical opposition between men in the American and Canadian Wests.[19] The anecdote also reinforced belief in a special male healing power intrinsic to North America's

<FIGURE 6.3: *In addition to her prairie flora watercolors, Annora Brown became well known regionally for paintings of Native Americans in the Blackfoot Confederacy, such as this camp scene. She lived near the Piegan Reserve, and her scrapbooks include many photographs of local First Nations peoples and photos of her paintings depicting them.*

[Courtesy of the University of Alberta Archives, (83–116–17–12)]

western spaces. A "virgin" territory allowed a broken man to conquer his feelings for a woman as he rebuilt his masculinity. A West where a damaged man might renew himself by acting wild in the wilderness (in the United States) or one where he could start over and settle comfortably as a responsible family man despite injury (in Canada) are two variations of one escapist theme.[20] With this story Brown seems to be supporting national western stereotypes, but it is unclear whether Brown in her recalling or the old-timer in the telling invoked the national difference.

Brown used a specific environmental definition of *wild* that did not mean lawless or uncivilized (in accordance with U.S. tradition). Nor did it mean an uncharted or isolated wilderness (in accordance with Canadian tradition). For Brown *wild* meant the natural prairie, plains, and riverbank environments—the gumbo—of her youth. Most of the autobiography explains how Brown became "one" with the prairie as a girl; how she explored that prairie intellectually and physically as a young adult; and how she retreated to these grasslands with paint and memory for most of her adult life. After witnessing the distress of the 1930s, she described how the "white man hoed out" native grasslands plants "with merciless determination" and provincial agricultural departments classified wild roses as weeds. The familiarity with Blackfoot traditional culture that she gained from her Blackfoot friends helped her to see the conflict in the reclassification of sweet grass from "sacred" plant to "noxious weed."[21] As Brown wrote her autobiography in the 1970s, when many people were awakening to a new environmental awareness, she explained how "much of the public was not yet ready for it" in the 1950s, when she first published her plant lore book.[22]

What Brown termed the "Wild East" tamed her Wild West.[23] To her the "Wild East" consisted of uncontrollable agricultural industrialization represented by increasing crop acreages, unsustainable grazing, and the bulldozers, tractors, and automobiles that rolled over native plant life. Brown wanted to freeze the environmental configuration of the prairie of her youth and halt development *after* conquest admitted her family to the region. She critiqued the industrial culture that destroyed grasslands, but she did not see herself as part of these forces. Brown saw

herself as organically prairie, in the same tradition by which Native peoples claimed the place as homeland. She and her Blackfoot friends aligned in attitude against the powers of commercialization that threatened the prairie they all loved. This alliance meant that Brown could deny the differences in status and power that accrued to her from past territorial conquest, which had been rationalized in large part by ideas of racial superiority.[24] Individual claims to the land made by generations of people such as Brown, who were of imperial national heritage but born and raised on the grasslands, served to entrench national claims of ownership by conquest and/or treaty. Even if she considered herself a friend of the Blackfoot, Brown appropriated Native peoples' lands and furthered the conquest of her parents' generation by intellectual and artistic, not treaty and territorial, methods.

When Brown mentioned Old West or mythic themes, she often did so when referring to her parents' generation. Sporadically, Brown noted how her mother and father often shared "recollections" of what Brown called "the old, old West," such as "long lines of oxen-drawn Red River carts" and "precarious crossing of the Lethbridge coulees" in the early years.[25] Accepting her pioneering parents' role in the conquest of the West allowed her to identify with classic western themes *through* them (and the pioneer generation generally), which freed her to write about different themes in her own life. Brown also indirectly challenged the crucial connection between classic western men and their West, agricultural mastery of the land, when she made intimate knowledge of prairie ecology key to a distinctive women's way of claiming regional land.

* * *

"TO MANY, I was the First Black Child in a land that is still burying it's [sic] First White Children," explained Era Bell Thompson of her experiences growing up on the prairies and plains of North Dakota.[26] She titled the first chapter of her autobiography "Go West, Black Man"[27] and placed the decision of her family's move to the West squarely with her father. In this and many ways, Thompson's is a typical prairie story.

American Daughter

THOMPSON

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

American Daughter

ERA BELL THOMPSON

The family followed her father's brother, who had migrated before and steadily praised Dakota land and life. In anticipation of the move, her mother had "tears in her eyes" and worried about howling coyotes and social isolation. However, Thompson's autobiography also continues the post-Civil War journey of African-Americans to find a secure place in America. Her grandparents left Virginia to find opportunity in the "great Northwest," and Thompson's father wandered all over the country working as a cook, restaurant owner, and janitor before settling in Iowa, where Era Bell was born. Expecting the U.S. West to be marked male more than white, Thompson's father embraced the profession of farming as one of the few respectable occupations open to black men. Thompson recalled her father trying to convince her mother that they should, as he said, "take the boys to Dakota." Thompson explained that the move was the last hope of her father "to find a new home in the wide open spaces, where there was freedom and equal opportunity for a man with three sons. Three sons and a daughter," she added, including herself, though her father seemed little concerned about her when he made the decision to "go west."[28]

Thompson carried with her to North Dakota many romantic and racist images of the U.S. West. One theme of her autobiography is the gradual throwing-off of western stereotypes. To begin with, the move evoked fantasies of "going to fight the Indians, and ride the range in search of buffalo." But snow was not an appropriate setting for "dreams of Indians." An ill-fated search for Indians continually interrupts her story. Once she thought she saw a settlement of Indians, but the mass of tents turned out to be pitched for a religious revival. She dreamed frequently of escaping to "live with the Indians." Instead she found Indians confined to reservations and day schools. The "little girls in pale blue dresses" at the Indian school did not measure up to her preconceptions. Horse rides

<FIGURE 6.4: *A mock-up of the dust jacket for the 1946 University of Chicago Press publication of Era Bell Thompson's autobiography,* American Daughter. *Thompson received a fellowship from the Newberry Library's "Midwestern Studies" initiative, funded in turn by a grant-in-aid from The Rockefeller Foundation in New York City.*

[Courtesy of the Newberry Library Archives, Office of the President, Stanley Pargellis Papers (03/05/03, Box 3, Folder 94), and also courtesy of the University of Chicago Press, Illinois]

caused her to imagine herself amidst "cowboys in a Western thriller." Since no Indians ever chased her, she also remembered the difficulty she had sustaining this western fantasy. When she attended the Mandan rodeo, she "loved" the "Indian war dances" most. It was a "picturesque thing, weird and exotic," with "bloodcurdling yells" and "chiefs and warriors wearing long headdresses and carrying hatchets in their fringed buffalo pants." All of her childhood searching, however, led to no buffaloes, "no wigwams, no squaws, no warriors," and no "red" faces.[29] Even a college-aged Thompson imagined "Indian ceremonial fires" in the burning surface-coal mines of the prairie night and "could almost see the red men dancing about the blaze, copper bodies bending, hatchets shining in the eerie light." Though she showed empathy in wanting to "live with the Indians," Thompson also resisted a direct association. She recalled one celebration when she joined a circle dance with "the squaws," but noted also how she quit when "some brash individual asked what tribe I belonged to."[30]

As her sensitivity to racial classification indicates, skin color distinguished her family in the Dakota West. U.S. law did not bar the Thompson family from owning western land, but Era Bell and her brothers suffered many incidents of racial prejudice and much *de facto* segregation. Children stared and voiced racial slurs. One even screamed at the sight of a young Era Bell. A theater manager refused her a main floor seat. Her school textbooks argued blacks were innately inferior.[31] But Thompson also took some comfort in the "the world," as she phrased it, that truly lived in North Dakota. She lived with only handfuls of African-American and Jewish people, but found diversity in the state's large European immigrant and Native American populations. Thompson was not the only girl who *looked* different. Indians "wore native clothes" and Icelandic, German-Russian, and Norwegian immigrants donned Old World costumes. Many people sounded different as they "spoke the mother tongue," and families celebrated a host of different traditions according to various "ways of the fatherland." She recalled how she felt she could "share" their "foreign peasantry." Thompson identified with what she called the "second generation," a cohort of young people making their way in

America between two worlds, the Old and New, only her two worlds were white and black.[32]

Although Thompson appreciated the diversity she found in North Dakota, she still felt compelled to try living in a predominately African-American community. One by one she saw her brothers leave the farm to join black communities in St Paul, Minnesota, and elsewhere. She soon followed them to St Paul, but where her brothers found fellowship, she felt "hemmed in, apart from the rest of the world." She found herself surrounded by Minnesota's verdant growth, but longing to see "one ragged tumbleweed" and "one alkaline slough."[33] She viewed a life in North Dakota with more ambivalence than did her brothers. Thompson explained, "Three times I came down from the prairies to live with 'my people' and twice I returned to my plains."[34]

Thompson's attachment to what she called "my plains" competed with a desire to live in an African-American community. Looking back from the middle of the twentieth century, Thompson realized that the sensory complexity of what she called "prairie silence" became a force pulling her home to the grasslands. She described "still days, silent, hot, motionless days when not a blade of grass stirred, not a stalk of grain moved. You didn't talk much then, you hated to break the prairie silence, the magic of its stillness, for you had that understanding with Nature, that treaty with God." Silence magnified the details of the land: "tumbling tumbleweeds," wild roses, purple crocuses, and even snow appeared quietly striking. But silence also had qualities one could feel and see—the "warm silence of twilight," for example. And silence could be seen and heard in the hills of grain fields "whispering gold, undulating ever so softly in the bated breeze." She explained to readers that although "the silence wore hard on those who did not belong," it was essential for those suited to the place. When she visited two friends, single sisters, on their homestead, she recalled that the three of them automatically "lapsed into prairie silence."[35]

Thompson laid claim to land in the West as she explained the growth of an affinity with "prairie silence" that no other member of the family *but* her father, ironically, seemed to share. "Something in the vast still-

ness," she understood, "spoke to Pop's soul."[36] He had believed he and his sons would share the West, but in the end it was he and his daughter who developed the same attachment. After his sons left, her father moved into town. His vision did not include a land-inheriting daughter. Thompson enjoyed the countryside and felt at home in it, but there is no evidence she pursued or even desired a homestead of her own. Her sense of the land signaled a feeling of place in a way that legally owned land sometimes did not. She developed a visceral attachment to the natural environment, including the "nature"[37] of commercial grain fields. Her West privileged the senses, not gender or race.

Thompson's environmental West also included a popular West. Even as she began to substitute real Native Americans for those of myth and to comprehend the complexity of the grasslands' natural habitat, Thompson began to embrace popular western imagery anew. Only now she did so from an insider's perspective, one that let her use such imagery to entertain her readers. This "popular" West was already thriving on the grasslands when Thompson and her family arrived. She recalled how on winter evenings her uncle told "hard-to-believe" pioneer tales, and her cousin played on the harmonica sad, slow "cowboy laments" about the "lone prairies." Stories and lyrics about stock western characters—the pioneer and the cowboy—kept mythic imagery alive and appreciated on a tale-telling level. As tourism began to develop in the early twentieth-century West, western peoples used mythic Wests to their advantage.[38] Thompson recalled how American Indians near Mandan left their reservations "to greet the tourist trains." In her late teenage years, Thompson, already a budding writer, began to fictionalize the "commonplace events" of her extended family in the West for the prominent African-American *Chicago Defender* newspaper. The popularity of her father's manly West lived on in the "colored pen pals beyond the hills" who wrote to her literary persona "Dakota Dick," a man she identified as "a bad, bad cowboy from the wild and wooly West." Looking back on this creative endeavor, she observed "The Mandan Chamber of Commerce could not have done better," presumably to distinguish and sell the small western city.[39] The "commonplace" situations she fictionalized in a mythic West style as a

teenager involved some of the same people and places she wrote about at midlife in her autobiography. In this way, both myth ("Dakota Dick") and anti-myth (her autobiography) were real in the twentieth century, because Thompson had embraced both the popular West she hawked to eager readers *and* the realistic day-to-day West in which she once lived. She hoped mid-twentieth-century readers would find the latter an appealing story too. By the early twentieth century, western residents like Thompson could embrace popular western elements without feeling that such imagery defined genuine life in the West.

As much as Thompson embraced the stock characters of the U.S. mythic West, she did not seem aware of any myths associated with Canada's West. Other than a train trip through Canada, her only mention of the Canadian West involved an incident she had with 1920s U.S. Prohibition-era, law-breaking Canadian "rum runners." The episode occurred at a time when she had returned to her father's home to be with him when he died (of natural causes) and while she was living in his used furniture store. The "booze truck began making regular runs from Canada," she explained, and continued on to describe a special clientele that loitered around her father's store, waiting for deliveries. She slept with a "revolver under my pillow." Expecting a drunken attack one night, she stood at the screen door with the gun in hand. When her cat scared her, she pulled the trigger, fainted, dropped the gun, and woke up later wondering what had happened. Although the incident provides comic relief in the middle of one of her most serious chapters, the humor emerged as she thought back on that girl with a gun, not from what she actually experienced at that time in her life.

Thompson could have engaged in mythmaking or debunking, but she chose not to take or did not recognize the opportunity. Certainly, Thompson's boundary "runners" do not conform to the law-abiding men of Canadian myth (though their clients seem to fit stereotypical "wild" American men).[40] Nevertheless, the realistic rendition of this illegal exchange has the effect of undermining classic icons key to a popular U.S. West. A cat, a truck, and an armed girl injected a subtle realism that ran counter to popular expectations for mythic cowboys with guns and

horses. Similarly, inebriated men and illegal transactions might be set in an Old West saloon, but not outside a furniture store. Thompson's insistence that the West provide the frame for her life story, together with her realistic style, however, worked against widespread mythic preconceptions that she argued were *part* of the reason she desired to publish her autobiography.

Thompson explained to the regional fellowship committee that she wanted to write about both the "remote and isolated" North Dakota (a "little known state…God Forgot") and the "humorous incidents" of her "Negro family" in the West.[41] Many people she encountered, black *and* white, felt that *anyone* who came from Dakota, regardless of race, must have lived in the "strange white world." It was odd to meet a black self-identified Dakotan, but the state's reputation as a "frozen wilds" of ice and snow made all of its residents exotic.[42] Thompson wanted these people still caught up by a mythic West to know a realistic Dakota environment and to know also that a black woman claimed this western region as her own.

As she told her life story, Thompson critiqued American race relations as well as the U.S. West. Indeed, publishers seemed more interested in what her life revealed about race relations than they were in what she said about the West. (Never mind that regional life ostensibly was the primary focus of the fellowship program that supported her writing.) One publisher remarked that "between the lines of her narrative, one can see her solution [to America's race problem], although she never presses it or uses sociological language."[43] But Thompson gave race and region nearly equal importance. She described the grasslands as a "country that is new and free and strangely beautiful."[44] These words flow out of classic manly western themes of starting over, taming wilderness, and finding freedom. When it was Thompson, and not her brothers, however, who laid claim to the land by embracing its environmental aesthetic, she indirectly challenged the manly West that originally pulled her father and his family to Dakota. Even the simple inclusion of a moderately successful "middle class" black family in the West countered dominant perceptions of the West's whiteness. The uncle and other black families

who made appearances in her western story and the persistent attention she paid to the multicultural population of Dakota argued that diversity was central to the *real* West and, by extension, to America. Her mother and father both died and were buried on the prairie, providing her a lasting tie to a grasslands West. Nevertheless, the lack of opportunity her brothers found in the West and the racism Thompson experienced in "free" Dakota showed that troubled race relations had a history in all of America's regions, not only the South. Racist people and ideas lived even in the West, the archetypal place of American opportunity. Thompson herself struggled with the country's deeply condoned racism against Native peoples as they appeared in the mythic U.S. West she once embraced (until she became an insider and had real relationships with Natives). Thompson eventually left the prairie and settled in Chicago, the city she described as "the crossroads of America," where she found black communities as well as a multicultural diversity similar to that of North Dakota.[45] Although she left the place physically, the important roles the West and its environment played in her narrative suggest that Thompson's departure from the grasslands West was never complete.

* * *

THORSTINA JACKSON WALTERS situated her narrative of Icelandic immigration in a western frame but, like Thompson, her story of Icelanders in North America focused as much on racial identity as it did on laying claim to western land. Walters made clear her western roots in the title of her introductory chapter, "I Grew Up with the Pioneers." Similarly, using classic manly West phrasing, she cited an 1860s Icelandic proponent of immigration who, she said, urged, "Go to America, young men."[46] For Walters, the Wests of Canada and the United States became one denationalized *Ameríku,* a word used to denote all of the North American West. When Icelanders "felt the urge to take up the trail to the West," they started by crossing an ocean. Once in *Ameríku,* Icelanders lived an international cultural life, crossing and re-crossing the 49th parallel. In the 1880s a religious dispute, for example, sent Icelanders

from Winnipeg, Manitoba, to North Dakota, while during the early twentieth century Icelanders from North Dakota moved back to Canada to claim newly opened prairie. Walters' father immigrated to Winnipeg, then to North Dakota (where Thorstina was born), and retired in Winnipeg. Walters grew up in North Dakota but attended college in Winnipeg. Well into the twentieth century, she claimed, this North American immigrant population operated as "loosely federated Icelandic colonies in the U.S. and Canada."[47]

Walters argued that Icelanders shared with their regional neighbors a common "desire to conquer a wilderness," but when she explained what motivated Icelanders in the North American West, she turned to what she held to be the core Icelandic ideals of "liberty, culture, advancement."[48] She claimed agriculture as "the staff of life" and asserted that Icelandic "heritage" was one of a "rural civilization," using language that suggests a strong connection to the theme of manly land transformation. But she mentioned her father's work as farmer in North Dakota only once. Instead, she praised her father's library and language skills, and her mother's milkhouse and midwifery expertise. Walters' father found his most important place in the family living room, reading aloud from traditional Icelandic sagas, while her mother prepared traditional foods and sang ballads. The Icelanders of her generation had a western "Adventure in Education," which frequently took them, the sons *and* daughters of the pioneers, off the land into the professions as scholars, doctors, writers, musicians, and lawyers. Even the farmers of her generation had the "desire for education in agriculture" and became "Master Farmers" who contributed to the "scientific development of American agriculture."[49] Walters created a uniquely Icelandic western persona based on cultivation of the intellect first, and the land second. Both women and men could become her typical, idealized westerner: educated, good-natured, and poetic.[50]

Walters passed over opportunities to distinguish between American and Canadian Wests, which suggested that she and the community she

>FIGURE 6.5: *A young Thorstina Jackson Walters with her father, Thorleifur Jóakimsson.* *[Courtesy of the Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University, Fargo (2010.2.1)]*

presented did not absorb nation-specific western imagery and ideas (at least on a level that was important enough for her to include). She noted, for example, that "disregard for the law of the land was all too prevalent" in the United States, as represented by the "berserk shooting and robbing" as committed by iconic western outlaws Frank and Jessie James. She showed no awareness, however, that regard for the law was any different in the Canadian West (though this may have been implied in her exclusion of Canada in this observation). "Custer's last stand against their [Indians'] fury was still on everybody's lips," and the "warlike mood" of the "Indians" in Canada that led to the 1885 Riel Rebellion, according to Walters, seemed to cause equal anxiety in early Icelandic settlers. Walters recalled visiting Métis communities in her North Dakota neighborhood and referred to them as "French-Canadian half breeds." That there were Canadian-identified Natives on the U.S. side of the international boundary did not seem unusual to her. In this Manitoba–North Dakota borderlands area, both Métis and *Ameríku*-Icelanders had "people...scattered on both sides of the boundary line."[51] Walters did write of the historic competition by Canada and the United States for Icelanders who would "populate and build up the vast areas of the central part of the American continent." She related one occurrence when an immigrant agent "in the service of the Dominion Government" and a representative from the U.S. Icelandic community both met a group of "165 Icelanders who had just landed on the Canadian shores at Quebec." The group split, with the majority staying on in Canada, and 50 crossing the boundary to the United States.[52] Here Walters emphasized the positive qualities of Icelandic immigrants, not those ideals voiced by the agents of the two nations vying for settlers.

Loving reminiscences of their family home, made from "hand-hewn oak logs," and a chapter titled "The Winding Road from the Log Cabin," about the rise to prominence of Icelandic youth, however, suggest that Walters knew classic U.S. symbolism well.[53] The log cabin had been linked to U.S. westward expansion as far back as the eighteenth century, when immigrant settlers flowing through the Delaware valley (originally New Sweden) picked up the Finnish design and building method

as they made their way to the backcountry West.[54] Walters talked about "us who lived on the fringe of the frontier" and viewed Theodore Roosevelt's well-known cowboy tradition in North Dakota's western badlands as a version of her own heritage. She "never tired of hearing my mother tell about her journey from Iceland to the Dakota plains," a story reinforced by her father's collection of "pioneering" tales.[55] With these reference points, Walters attached the Icelandic immigrant experience in the West to the traditional American ideal of opportunity for all.

Unlike the serious tone of her discussion of pioneer success, which seemed to accept western myth uncritically, Walters told other stories in a way that undermined mythic West meanings. These tales focused on incidents passed down in the Icelandic community and were collected from the experiences of her contemporaries. For example, she turned her good friend's experience herding cattle one summer when he was a boy into what she called a typical "Wild West thriller." Walters emphasized how this young "cowboy" fought "relentless" mosquitoes by wearing a hat of blue netting for protection. This was not a typical mythic story that revolved around a rugged cowboy donning a Stetson hat and fighting "Indians." She did something similar to a story passed on in the Icelandic community about a North Dakota 1880s "Wild-West frontier town." While Walters included all of the classic elements of a mythic western, mentioning a "new saloon," "beer bottles," and people in the streets "shooting revolvers into the air," this "wild" town turns out to be holding only a "noisy" celebration for the grand opening of the new tavern. It was only friendly revelers with no targets who shot their guns. Moreover, the central character of this story, a preacher, sought a "peaceful haven" on the edge of town "near the tent of the Indian," the opposite of what might happen in a cross-cultural encounter in the U.S. mythic West.[56] With this type of vignette Walters had fun with western myth and with her readers, too. By linking classic western language with realistic stories of day-to-day living in the West, Walters indirectly challenged myth.

The majority of Walters' narrative, however, focused on the serious value of Icelandic democratic and racial cultures to North American

communities. She argued that both the United States and Canada came to value Icelandic settlers because they already "had a democratic appreciation of other people's achievements." Walters asked readers to recall that it was the Norse Vikings in 930 who established in Iceland "the first democratic body of its kind North of the Alps." Icelanders indeed, according to ancient sagas, belonged in both Canada and the United States, because "Leif Ericsson and other Vinland heroes" had originally discovered the New World.[57] Traditional Icelandic democratic experience related to what Walters implied was the very important racial fitness of Icelanders for the continent. She argued that Icelanders aimed only to give "the best in the Icelandic racial inheritance to the adopted country," and as late as the 1950s she wrote that "individualism is still their most pronounced racial trait." Walters never thought of Icelanders as ethnic, she always identified them as a race. It is probable that part of Walters' emphasis on racial characteristics came from living the prime of her life during a time when scientific racism rose in acceptance.[58] A heritage of "Viking blood and its pristine purity," she implied, meant Icelandic stock could replenish blood clouded by the supposedly less-advanced races.

The promotion of the purity of the Icelandic race also may have grown out of fears that came with original Icelandic North American settlers. Walters repeated stories passed down from the 1870s that suggested how Icelanders might be targeted for violence, "eaten alive by red-skinned savages" in the "far West," or "worse yet, be driven to the deep South of the United States and thrown into slavery like Negroes." The first Icelanders feared they could become a race classed forever apart from

>FIGURE 6.6: *Thorstina Jackson Walters delivered lectures to promote better relations among the people of Iceland, Canada and the United States. The back side of this pamphlet includes endorsements for Walters' talks from, among others, Arctic explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson, Isaiah Bowman, director of the American Geographical Society, Louis C. Tiffany of New York City, and a representative of Duluth State Teachers College. Listeners described her lectures as "interesting," "instructive," and "entertaining." One audience member thought her presentation "unite[d] the best tradition of the Icelandic family sagas with the finest spirit of American democracy." Stefansson, a personal friend, grew up in the same Icelandic Manitoba–North Dakota community as did Walters (he is the young "cowboy" who fought "relentless" mosquitoes in what Walters dubbed a typical "Wild West thriller").*

[Courtesy of the Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University, Fargo (Mss 630, Box 3, Folder 3)]

THORSTINA JACKSON WALTERS

Author and Translator

Lecturer and Traveller

TWICE DECORATED BY THE
KING OF DENMARK AND ICELAND
FOR HER WRITINGS AND LECTURES ON

ICELAND

THE "HERMIT OF THE NORTH ATLANTIC"

Will the mellow culture of the past blend with the practical spirit of the modern age, proving there is poetry and idealism in action, and thus guard the charm of "Sagaland" and prevent it from being lost in materialism, now that "Young Iceland" has embraced the era of "modernism" with all the enthusiasm of youth.

the mainstream, rather than how Walters wanted to present Icelanders, that is, as a race simultaneously capable of assimilation and of making cultural contributions that would strengthen the continent's peoples. This older fear echoed during World War I, and Walters recalled how her generation "proceeded very cautiously" in the promotion of heritage organizations, such as the Icelandic National League. For her own part, Walters thanked her mother for early instruction on "racial equality" (she had been "frightened" by Métis children she encountered when her mother was delivering a baby, and questioned whether God had made "those black children").[59] The perceived potential for established North American societies to exclude Icelanders based on race shaped Walters' writing, rather than a desire to prohibit other races from taking their equal place.

Even though Walters' main agenda was to praise Icelanders as desirable settlers, she too, like Brown and Thompson, used the idea of becoming "one" with land to define a western identity. Her grasslands identity existed alongside pride in her Icelandic heritage. She viewed the "bright summer nights and the flaming Northern Lights of the winter season" in Iceland as parallel to "the opalescent colors of daybreak" and "the fiery brilliance of the sunset" in North Dakota. Similarly, she explained how her husband, the painter Émile Walters, observed that North Dakota's badlands and Iceland's sub-artic terrain created similar artistic "problems"; the two areas attracted him because of their similar "stark," lonely qualities. But Thorstina was also quick to highlight the willingness of her people to exchange Icelandic poppies for prairie roses and thrush for robins. She recalled fondly local rivers, "mighty oaks," serviceberry bushes, "banks upon banks of clouds," "the level plain," rolling hills, and the colors, deep blue and purple, of distance. Her personal claim to the land rested in these environmental elements. The initial "confusion" by the first Icelandic settlers over an environment that seemed "prodigal," she explained, gave way as they gradually "learned to recognize" the "possibilities and limitations" of the grasslands. Walters' definition of the region's "natural" environment included the "first nature" of grasslands habitat and the "second nature" of commercial crops. Understanding the grasslands allowed Icelanders to better subdue the countryside with

"larger fields, more equipment...and greatly increased livestock." Over time and generations, Icelanders succeeded in building the same "communion of nature" with the prairie environment as earlier generations had done long ago back in Iceland.[60]

Thorstina Jackson Walters claimed a prominent place for Icelanders in *Ameríku* by weaving their history into a generic western "pioneering" experience. Walters used classic western content to link Icelanders to major founding events in the history of both Canada and the United States. Her trade in imagery and mythic West themes seem more pronounced than either Thompson or Brown's narrative use of mythic Wests. Moreover, she reinforced the mythic West's whiteness when she suggested that the biology of Icelanders made a renewing contribution to North American peoples. Nevertheless, on occasion, Walters challenged stock western language when she tied mythic West imagery to realistic day-to-day western living. Also, her emphasis on education and intellect created space for women in Icelandic definitions of western success, which in turn indirectly challenged dominant male assumptions tied to popular Wests. Finally, when she attached herself to the grasslands environment, she participated in what seems to be a common female narrative strategy for claiming land and a place in the West.

* * *

WHILE ANNORA BROWN, Era Bell Thompson, and Thorstina Jackson Walters each referred to both Canadian and American western content in their autobiographical writings, these women did not construct their narratives with *steady* awareness of competing national western mythologies. Brown suggested some knowledge of stereotypical Canadian and American Wests when she linked divergent manliness ideals with opposite sides of the 49th parallel. Only Brown, however, wrote specifically against a Canadian mythic West. Thompson included Canada only when Canadians happened to cross her path and as one place she visited among many (including New York, the South, and California). Walters' unique experience as a member of the transnational northern border-

lands Icelandic community caused her to recognize historic events and persons in western Canadian and American history, but her "saga" overall exhibited little awareness of any significant differences between the two nations. Her combination autobiography–community history suggests that some immigrants may have identified with variations on western myth, as in Walters' case with an Icelandic version.

When they thought in regional labels, they identified with the geographic label *West*. The generally cursory references to the details that would distinguish American and Canadian mythical West traditions suggest these women may have condensed many mythic elements into a simple, sometimes inconsistent, generic North American West.[61] But they redefined older meanings of the "West" as they delivered New West messages about environmental activism, racism, and the value of immigrant populations. They contextualized Old West imagery with the details (the gumbo mud, a cat and a truck, and mosquitoes) of everyday life. They used humor and irony to expose the fictional components of such imagery. However, in the end these women critiqued more by implication than by directly challenging either the Canadian or American mythic Wests.

While these narratives suggest that Brown, Thompson, and Walters developed a distinctive way to lay claim to western land by growing close attachments to its environment, their narratives also reveal an important subordinate point about western myth's racial assumptions. Whiteness marked grasslands space for these women. Race for this generation of women proved to be a powerful category. By right of common birthplace, Brown minimized racial conflict by aligning herself *with* Native peoples of the region, all of them *against* the commercial destruction of grasslands habitat. Her lack of attention to race generally suggests how well her own English racial heritage matched the whiteness of the myth. Thompson's characterization of Dakota as a "country that is new and free and strangely beautiful" suggests that she shared Brown's feeling of regional ownership, one that denied the long history of Native peoples to which the same places would have seemed *old* and *occupied*. Thompson, too, aligned herself with Natives (and also Old World immigrants) on

the basis of their shared generational status. As an African-American, however, Thompson also shared with Natives and immigrants an uncertain racial status. The potential for exclusion based on national origin drove Walters to draw constant positive parallels between Icelanders and their Old World heritage and the dominant white "Americans," so as to be admitted *because of* race. The whiteness of Icelanders, according to Walters, made them perfect for either American or Canadian citizenship.

The development of a personal attachment to the grasslands environment explored and asserted to differing degrees by Brown, Thompson, and Walters, if they are representative, suggest that modern western women developed a distinct way of laying claim to western land. Brown called this environmental attachment "oneness." She became environmentally aware by studying and painting the details of flora and wild grasses as they changed over the seasons. Thompson referred to "that understanding with Nature." She appreciated a "strangely beautiful" place rather than land acquisition. Walters wrote about a "communion with nature." For her, successful immigrant integration into North American society included the essential step of comprehending the "limitations and possibilities" of the environment. They all claimed to know a regional aesthetic. Their emphasis on environmental consciousness shaped a modern regionalism that included women in the role of typical westerner. These case studies of women's voices suggest complexities worth considering in the search for the roles western women played in the construction of a modern sense of North American Wests.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thanks to Laura J. Moore for helping me impose order on the larger free-ranging exploration from which this essay is drawn, to Jennifer Ritterhouse and Regina Sullivan for helpful suggestions, and to Betsy Jameson and Sheila McManus for careful readings of earlier drafts. Thanks a second time to Sheila McManus for comments and questions that improved the clarity of this essay considerably.

This article began as a very different exploratory paper delivered at the "Unsettled Pasts" conference held in Calgary, Alberta, in June 2002. In the conference paper I compared Lillian Smith of the United States' Deep South to Canadian Annora Brown's Grasslands West. (See

Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (1949; 1961; repr., New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1994). The larger project and this essay are designed to move beyond what Robin W. Winks long ago identified as the tradition of "insularity" endemic to regionalism studies. See his "Regionalism in Comparative Perspective," in *Regionalism and the Pacific Northwest,* ed. William G. Robbins, Robert J. Frank, and Richard E. Ross (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1983), 13–36.

NOTES

1. Annora Brown, *Sketches from Life* (Edmonton, AB: Hurtig Publishers, 1981), 11–12.
2. For an introduction to Canadian-American comparative work, see Sterling Evans, ed., *The Borderlands of the American and Canadian Wests* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006); C. L. Higham and Robert Thacker, eds., *One West, Two Myths: II* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2007); Higham and Thacker, eds., *One West, Two Myths* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004); Higham and Thacker, eds., "One Myth, Two Wests: Special Issue on the West(s)," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 4 (Winter 2003); and William G. Robbins, "The American and Canadian Wests: Two Nations, Two Cultures," in *Colony and Empire*, ed. Robbins (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994).

   Both nations have a long tradition of thinking in regional terms. For a quick history of regionalism in the United states, old and new, see Brown's "The New Regionalism in America, 1970–1981," in *Regionalism and the Pacific Northwest,* ed. Robbins, Frank, and Ross, 37–96; Peter S. Onuf, ed., *All Over the Map* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Robert L. Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); and for a discussion of the way humans "think" regions into existence using the U.S. central grasslands, see Elliott West, *The Contested Plains* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998). An important caution to the recent growth in the study of regions is Robert Maria Dainotto, "'All the Regions Do Smilingly Revolt': The Literature of Place and Region," *Critical Inquiry* 22 (Spring 1996): 486–505.

   For Canada, see Winks "Regionalism in Comparative Perspective," Gerald Friesen, "Defining the Prairies: Or, Why the Prairies Don't Exist," in *Toward Defining the Prairies*, ed. Robert Wardhaugh (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2001), 13–28; Peter McCormick, "Regionalism in Canada: Disentangling the Threads," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 24 (Summer 1989): 5–21; Richard Allen, ed., *A Region of the Mind* (Regina, SK: Canadian Plains Studies Centre, 1973).
3. On autobiographical writing see Jill Ker Conway, *When Memory Speaks* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998); Helen M. Buss, *Mapping Our Selves* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993); Ruth E. Ray, *Beyond Nostalgia* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000); Patrick B. Mullen, *Listening to Old Voices* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "'You Must Remember This': Autobiography as Social Critique," *Journal of American History* 85 (September 1998): 439–65.
4. Hal S. Barron, *Mixed Harvest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 10; Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press,

1995), 4; and John L. Shover, *First Majority—Last Minority* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976), xiv.

5. Brown, *Sketches from Life*, 10.
6. Brown, *Sketches from Life* and *Old Man's Garden* (Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1954). Brown's personal scrapbooks and period correspondence complement both of her books. See Annora Brown Manuscript Collection (AB 83–116), The University of Alberta Archives (BARD), Edmonton, Alberta; and Canadian Artist Gallery, Annora Brown (File 31, M8403) and Annora Brown Photograph Collection (NC–10), Glenbow Archives, Calgary, Alberta.
7. Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter* (1946; repr., St Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1986). Period correspondence supports her stated autobiographical intentions. Stanley Pargellis Papers, RG 03, SG 05, Series 3, Box 4, Folder 136 "Erabell [sic] Thompson," Newberry Library Archives, Chicago, Illinois (hereafter cited as Pargellis Papers). Subsequent publications help to sketch an outline of her career. By 1947, Thompson was associate editor for *Ebony* magazine, which began circulation in 1945; her articles appear occasionally up to the mid-1970s. She also edited with Herbert Nipson, *White on Black: The Views of Twenty-Two White Americans on the Negro* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1963) and authored *Africa: Land of my Fathers* (New York: Doubleday, 1954).
8. Thorstina [Jackson] Walters, *Modern Sagas: The Story of Icelanders in North America* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1953). The book is supported by the Thorstina Jackson [and Émile] Walters Papers (Mss 630), North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University Libraries, Fargo, ND. Debilitating illness also seems to heighten memory; Walters' chapter, "I Grew Up with the Pioneers," bears a reflective distance to past events similar to parts of Brown's autobiography.
9. Sarah Carter has summarized the different qualities of the Canadian and American western men outlined by John Herd Thompson at the conference "One West, Two Myths: Comparing Canadian and American Perspectives," The Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming, May 2002, in "Transnational Perspectives on the History of Great Plains Women: Gender, Race, Nations, and the Forty-ninth Parallel," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 4 (Winter 2003): 565–96.

   On masculine-centered landscape discourse see Krista Comer, *Landscapes of the New West* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 11, 13–14, and 27. Both Canada and the United States drew on language inherited from European imperial "landscape discourse" to define the links between men, women, and nature. See also Catherine Cavanaugh, "'No Place For A Woman': Engendering Western Canadian Settlement," *Western Historical Quarterly* 28 (Winter 1997): 493–518; Joan M. Jenson, *One Foot on the Rockies* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995); Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Vera Norwood, *Made From This Earth* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); and Virginia J. Scharff, ed., *Seeing Nature Through Gender* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003).

   Glenda Riley argues that women naturalists "feminized public images of western environments" and "envisioned a feral yet accessible west that neither deterred nor intimidated women…" (5) and further, women's attitudes toward nature changed between 1870 and 1940. Women's writings "generally lacked the twin themes of

conquest and domination of land that marked so many men's works of the same era" and "stressed [instead] the beauty and spirituality of nature women emphasized the necessity of living with the demands of the physical world rather than subduing them, which allowed women to perceive the violent side of nature without feeling overwhelmed or threatened by the environment" (13). See her "'Wimmin is Everywhere': Conserving and Feminizing Western Landscapes, 1870 to 1940," *Western Historical Quarterly* 29 (Spring 1998): 4–23.

10. Brown, *Sketches from Life*, 42.
11. Richard White, "'Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?': Work and Nature," in *Uncommon Ground*, ed. William Cronon, (1995; repr., New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 171–85.
12. For a good summary of the U.S. Homestead Act (1862) and Canadian Dominion Lands Act (1872), including their different provisions for women, see Sheila McManus, *The Line Which Separates* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 37–41. Basically, single women in the United States could file on government land, while, with a couple of exceptions, in Canada they could not.
13. Brown, *Sketches from Life*, 14–18.
14. Brown, *Sketches from Life*, 71. Although Buffalo Bill Cody is a classic U.S. mythic West reference point, he was well known throughout the continent. Buffalo Bill toured Alberta. Jim and Stasia Carry, Brown's contemporaries, were famous Wild West performers in Canada and both had links to the U.S. Wild West tradition. See Lorain Lounsberry, "The Real Wild West of Jim and Stastia Carry," *Glenbow* 17 (Summer 1997): 23–25.
15. Brown, *Sketches from Life*, 12.
16. Many contemporary autobiographies either focus on a family's move and eventual departure from a homestead, in Canada or the United States, or cover only the years up to the author's departure from the family homestead, even if others remained. For a sampling see Hal Borland, *High, Wide and Lonesome* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1956); Nell Wilson Parsons, *Upon a Sagebrush Harp* (Saskatoon, SK: Western Producer, 1969); Sarah Ellen Roberts, *Alberta Homestead* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971); Faye Cashatt Lewis, *Nothing to Make a Shadow* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1971).
17. Brown, *Sketches from Life*, 47–48.
18. Brown, *Sketches from Life*, 6, 54, and 67–68.
19. Brown, *Sketches from Life*, 210–12.
20. See Carter, "Transnational Perspectives" and Henry Nash Smith's classic study, *Virgin Land* (1950; repr., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978). The archetypal story fits a pattern popularized by Theodore Roosevelt's 1880s tenure in (North) Dakota Territory. It is well known that Roosevelt built his body and proved his manliness (at least to himself) in the U.S. West, but it is less often observed that he headed West after the near simultaneous deaths of his first wife and mother. See David H. Murdock, *The American West* (1988; repr., Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2001).
21. Brown, *Old Man's Garden*, 59, 196, and 151.
22. Brown, *Sketches from Life*, 217. *Old Man's Garden* was reissued in the 1970s.
23. Brown, *Sketches from Life*, 37.

24. For a discussion of the links between territorial conquest and ideas of racial superiority in Canada see Doug Owram, *Promise of Eden* (1980; repr., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), especially 70–100. For a similar brief discussion of U.S. racial attitudes see Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own"* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991). See also C. L. Higham, *Noble, Wretched, and Redeemable: Protestant Missionaries to the Indians in Canada and the United States, 1820–1900* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000).
25. Brown, *Sketches from Life*, 7, 37, 66, 69, and 73.
26. Thompson to Pargellis, May 24, 1944; "Report on Era Bell Thompson, American Daughter," n.d. [1945?], Pargellis Papers.
27. The classic U.S. West phrase "go west, young man" has been attributed since the 1850s to Horace Greeley, editor of the nationally influential newspaper the New York *Weekly Tribune* and strong supporter the Homestead Act. He took the phrase from an Indiana newspaper. See Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, *The American West* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 331–33.
28. Thompson, *American Daughter*, 13, 27, 30, 93–94, 14, and 21–22.
29. Thompson, *American Daughter*, 128.
30. Thompson, *American Daughter*, 26, 86, 47, 63, 42, 190, 149, 128, 149, 27, and 190. Thompson revealed, however, that her family ancestry included Native Americans (13).
31. She cites many incidents of racism. See Thompson, *American Daughter*, 83, 86, 117, 126, 128, 139, 151, 141, and 143.
32. Thompson, *American Daughter*, 147–48, 164, and 214.
33. Thompson, *American Daughter*, 164.
34. Thompson to Pargellis, May 24, 1944, Pargellis Papers.
35. Thompson, *American Daughter*, 50, 46, 42, 52, 100, 58, 66, 47, 50, and 190–91.
36. Thompson, *American Daughter*, 23–24.
37. William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 56–57. Cronon discusses the difference between "first" and "second" natures, arguing that locals "often forgot the distinction between them. Both seemed quite 'natural.'" Commercial grain fields, "designed by people and 'improved' toward human ends," constitute a "second nature" laid overtop a "first nature," the "original landscape."
38. For the rise of tourism in the United States in the post–Civil War years and the way it challenged already established senses of place in the West, see Hal K. Rothman, *Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998). When Thompson (and others) began to promote a popular West by catering to tourists and outsiders, they engaged, I believe, in what Hal K. Rothman described as the "innocuous" "initial development of tourism." "The embrace of tourism," Rothman argued, "triggers a contest for the soul of a place" (11). Rothman continued, "The railroad made tourists out of travelers, especially in the western United States. To be a tourist meant to be divorced from the realities of any visited place, to re-create its essence in the context of the cultural baggage brought along in a manner previously impossible." In this way, residents of any place with tourist activity live with both the image created and a reality grounded in a non-tourist "social shape" embedded in a specific "economy, environment, and culture" distinct from the image (39).

39. Thompson, *American Daughter*, 33, 145, and 152. Thompson turned to the stock cowboy character when her opinions on Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement received criticism. Her account of this newspaper column is brief.
40. Thompson, *American Daughter*, 204–05. Some fifty years earlier the Canadian government organized the North West Mounted Police force in part to control illegal U.S. liquor distribution to Native Peoples in Canada. Now in the 1920s, it was Canadians who supplied the liquor, albeit to still law-breaking Americans south of the border. See Stephen T. Moore, "Refugees from Volstead: Cross-Boundary Tourism in the Northwest during Prohibition," in *The Borderlands of the American and Canadian Wests*, ed. Evans, 247–61; Paul F. Sharp, *Whoop-Up Country* (1955; repr., Helena: Historical Society of Montana, 1960) and Walter Hildebrandt and Brian Hubner, *The Cypress Hills* (Saskatoon, SK: Purich Publishing, 1994). Thompson seems unaware of these parallels.
41. Thompson to Pargellis, May 24, 1944; Joseph A. Brandt to Thompson, August 4, 1945; [Rosemary B. York] to Thompson, March 5, 1945, all in Pargellis Papers. Brandt changed the name from "I Found It Fun" to "American Daughter."
42. Thompson, *American Daughter*, 7, 26–27, and 194–95.
43. The "tone" of her work, she wrote to a potential publisher who praised her for her "lack of a 'chip on the shoulder attitude,'" "is the thing I most wanted to stress." The style "make[s] the reader like you," one editor told Thompson. It seemed an "unusual" tale with "no bitterness as in Richard Wright," observed another. Thompson to Pargellis, May 24, 1944; [Rosemary B. York] to Thompson, March 5, 1945; Thompson to York, March 10, 1945; [Pargellis to Guggenheim Foundation?, Recommendation Letter?, n.d., October 1945?]; Pargellis to Thompson, June 11, 1945; Doris Flowers to Stanley Pargellis, February 15, 1946, all in Pargellis Papers.
44. Thompson to Pargellis, May 24, 1944, Pargellis Papers.
45. Thompson, *American Daughter*, 294.
46. See footnote 28 above.
47. Walters, *Modern Sagas*, 33, 14–15, 31, 84, 178, and 150. The family histories collected by Walters' father, Thorleifur Jóakimsson (Jackson), reveal that the destination *Ameríku* stood in for most places in Canada and the United States.
48. Walters, *Modern Sagas*, 46 and 136. The quote is the motto of an early short-lived immigrant self-help society; Walters felt the edict "lived on" in the Iceland community at large. These Icelandic principles might be compared to those of "peace, order, and good government" for Canada and "life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness" for the United States. For standard characterizations of Canadian and U.S. political values, see William H. Katerberg, "A Northern Vision: Frontiers and the West in the Canadian and American Imagination," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 4 (Winter 2003): 543–63.
49. Walters, *Modern Sagas*, 116, 177, 12–13, 2–3, 102, 141–76, and 179–80.
50. Her gender-neutral westerner was unlike the "wild" and "orderly" model males of the U.S. and Canada's Wests, respectively. The Icelandic ideal westerner might be comparable to the law-abiding Mounted Policeman and the rugged, aggressive U.S. cowboy.
51. Walters, *Modern Sagas*, 116, 117, 4, and 32. Walters made reference to the possibility that Canada was a safer place than the United States only once. She mentioned 1870s

immigrants thought their money might be safer in "British banks in Canada, asserting that in their opinion they were on a firmer foundation than the American banks" (42).

Custer and Riel received Walters' equally perfunctory treatment. Her understanding of the Riel Rebellion may have been quite rudimentary, because she thanks a few Canadian informants for their assistance in explaining this history. She does not elaborate on Custer either. Her slight mentions may show how little an educated Icelandic person who considered herself "western" may have understood the history of even the most prominent actors in U.S. and Canadian narrative traditions.

Métis peoples had traveled through the land that became North Dakota between Selkirk, Manitoba, and what became St Paul, Minnesota, since the early nineteenth century. There were Métis settlements at Pembina, south of the 49th parallel and south of Devils Lake, in the future North Dakota. See Robinson, *History of North Dakota*, 65–67, 105, 110–11, and 118–20.

Despite efforts by Mounties to educate new immigrants "about what set Canadians apart from other men," that is, an "orderly and law-abiding" nature, Walters did not seem to have absorbed the Canadian nationalist lesson. R.C. Macleod discusses the influence of nationalism among immigrant populations in "Canadianizing the West: The North-West Mounted Police as Agents of National Policy, 1873–1905," in *The Prairie West: Historical Readings,* ed. R. Douglas Francis and Howard Palmer (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1992), 229. Walters' North Dakota publisher no doubt also influenced the construction of her West.

52. Walters, *Modern Saga,* 41.
53. Walters, *Modern Saga,* 11, 14, and 1.
54. William Henry Harrison also used the log cabin symbolically in his successful 1840 presidential campaign. The log cabin's association with the West became complete when Congress passed the 1841 preemption land law, known widely as the "Log Cabin Bill." See Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, *The American West* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 72–73 and 331.
55. Walters, *Modern Saga,* 11, 14, and 1.
56. Walters, *Modern Sagas,* 1, 141, 189, 77, and 117.
57. Walters, *Modern Sagas,* 13, 15, and 18–19. She noted there had been no "scientific retracing" of Ericsson's journeys (29).
58. Nordic peoples, according to one popular theory of the 1920s, for example, existed at the top of a white racial hierarchy (over Alpine and Mediterranean peoples), while all of the white races ranked above African-Americans, Africans, Asians, and Native Peoples. See Mathew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); John Higham, *Strangers in the Land* (1955; repr., New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); April R. Schultz, *Ethnicity on Parade* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994); and Howard Palmer, "Strangers and Stereotypes: The Rise of Nativism, 1880–1920," in *Prairie West*, ed. Francis and Palmer, 308–34. Walters did not wholly embrace the idea that Icelanders contained "pure" Nordic blood; she argued that Icelandic blood could not have remained pure over some nine centuries. She also referenced debates in the Icelandic community over whether Viking blood was pure or

had grown "mixed" and "thin" over time (191). She does not argue against concepts of race tied to blood, and she clearly considered Icelanders to be good stock.

59. Walters, *Modern Sagas,* 79, 16, 33, 192, and 3–4.
60. Walters, *Modern Sagas,* 167, 1, 17, and 75–76.
61. The mythic symbols of the U.S. West may have been more pronounced in this generic version than their Canadian counterparts because it is likely that the former were more visible in popular North American media and entertainment, but the sample of women studied here is not large enough to reach any conclusion. As early as 1927 American companies controlled Canadian movie theaters and their screenings. When A. D. Kean, whose "goal as a filmmaker was to make films about Canada, shot in Canada, and presented on Canadian screens," tried showing a Canadian "epic feature film that chronicled the formation of law and order in the Canadian West," he found only one movie theater in Canada, in Toronto, willing to show it (6). See Melanie Kjorlien, "Cowboy Kean," *Glenbow* 17 (Summer 1997): 6–7. For the influence of U.S. popular culture in Canada see Lee Clark Mitchell, *Westerns* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); and Pierre Berton, *Hollywood's Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975).