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## Worldviews And The American West

Polly Stewart

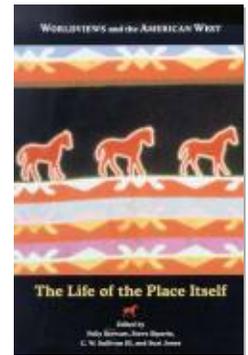
Published by Utah State University Press

Stewart, Polly.

Worldviews And The American West: The Life of the Place Itself.

Utah State University Press, 2000.

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# *In Her Own Words: Women's Frontier Friendships in Letters, Diaries, and Reminiscences*

Margaret K. Brady

As more and more examples of women's non-traditional literature—letters, diaries, reminiscences—become available in both published and unpublished form, historians, folklorists, and literary scholars alike can begin to understand more fully the nature of the relationships between women on the western frontier, as they have been articulated in these various genres. These previously ignored pieces of writing provide us with an intimate, self-revelatory perspective on the western experience as it was lived by women. Through a comparison of female relationships on the ranching frontiers of Texas and in close-knit Mormon communities in Arizona and Utah, this essay will explore the range of interactions among western women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Susan Armitage, in discussing the diary of Amelia Buss, has provided a sense of direction for the present study, as she suggests the high degree of importance communication with other women held for those in a sometimes alien, always demanding environment. As Armitage points out, when the impossibility of such direct communication between women became all too obvious, they often turned to their diaries to provide a kind of surrogate support (Armitage 1982).

Such support, whether in the form of letters from a sister “back in the states,” infrequent visits from neighbor women living thirty or forty miles away, or the comfort of confiding in one's own diary, was indeed critical for women pioneering in the trans-Mississippi West. As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has suggested in her research on relations among nineteenth-century American women, a specifically female world developed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America that was based both on rigid gender-role differentiation, including severe social restrictions on male-female intimacy, and on the shared experiences and mutual affection of women that eventually

became institutionalized in significant female social conventions and rituals: in a “world bounded by home, church, and the institution of visiting—that endless traipsing of women to each other’s homes for social purposes[—] . . . women helped each other with domestic chores and in times of sickness, sorrow, or trouble” (Smith-Rosenberg 1986, 233).

A woman’s life in nineteenth-century America was, then, a life lived in the presence of other women; womanly friendship was not only casually accepted, but it was the very cornerstone of social relationships within and outside of the family itself. These female friendship networks played significant roles in providing mutual emotional and physical support, in holding communities and kin systems together, and in providing an arena of status and power for women, who were so often denied a place of value in male-dominated society. Whether in intimate discussion of family problems or in letters of support sent across hundreds of miles, women consciously constructed and reconstructed those important female networks. Drawing on the work of Shirley and Edwin Ardener, Cynthia Huff points out that “the knowledge women share with each other when they experience a space reserved for them functions as a wild zone where women can create ideologies and symbol systems they control, where they can inscribe themselves in codes not understood by men” (1996, 124). In East Coast cities and in settlements sprinkled across the western prairies, women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries continued to do just that.

Women who traveled west had to struggle not only with leaving behind significant others—most of whom were women—but they also had to deal with a reorientation of both sexual roles and social relationships. The initial physical separation itself became a symbol of the dramatic kinds of social and sexual readjustment which followed. As Lodisa Frizell so eloquently questions in her journal:

Who is there that does not recollect their first night when started on a long journey, the wellknown voices of our friends still ring in our ears, the parting kiss feels still warm upon our lips, and that last separating word Farewell! sinks deeply into the heart. It may be the last we ever hear from some or all of them, and to those who start . . . there can be no more solemn scene of parting only at death. (Jeffrey 1979, 371)

And Agnes Stewart provides us with an even more intimate understanding of the agony these women felt in leaving women friends, an agony it may be hard for some to understand fully in the context of twentieth-century reserve. In her diary, Agnes reveals the depth of her sense of loss: “O Martha my heart yearns for thee my only friend . . . O my friend thou art dear to me yet my heart turns to thee I will never forget thee . . . the earliest friend . . . I know I can never enjoy the blessed privilege of communing

with thee yet look for the loss of one I will never see on earth . . . I cannot bear it" (Schlissel 1982, 28-29).

While women back in Pennsylvania or New York might find it a difficult enough task to move from a world almost completely comprised of female relationships to a life with a new husband, apart, at least physically, from former family and friendship networks, the social and psychological impact on the thousands of new brides who moved along the trail to Texas or California or Utah was even more startling. For most of these travelers, not only had all former female relationships been severed, but their sexual identity came under strain from other quarters as well. As women took on tasks ordinarily considered "men's work," thus blurring traditional sex roles, the need to maintain intimate contact with other women in any way possible became even more important to the preservation of a continuity of both personal and social identity in this rapidly changing society. While some historians have argued that maintaining outrageously bulky and cumbersome women's fashions was the main way women constantly reaffirmed their womanhood in this role-threatening environment of the frontier (Schlissel 1982, 29), women's insistence on maintaining (through letters) significant relationships with women back home and on forming steadfast new friendships in the West were far more important and the primary means through which they adjusted to the reorientation of sex roles. Through these female friendship networks, as tenuous as they sometimes had to be, women creatively responded to the new social environment of the West, as well as to the new physical environment.

This essay presents several relevant perspectives for understanding the kinds of relationships women shared with women in the trans-Mississippi West. I focus here on Mormon women in Utah and Arizona and isolated women ranchers of Texas to illustrate the range of intensity and frequency of relationships among women in the West, as well as the underlying similarities found in the importance of maintaining meaningful connections with other women at all costs. The different genres in which these women wrote—diaries, letters, reminiscences—provided significantly different opportunities for displays of expressive power. These women recognized the power of words to create and transform their daily experiences, experiences that often involved interacting closely with other women. As Patricia Meyer Spacks has suggested in *The Female Imagination*, "women dominate their own experience by imagining it, giving it form, writing about it" (1975, 322).

Some of the most intense new relationships formed among women on the American frontier were those of Mormon women in Utah and Arizona. Because the Mormon (or LDS) church moved westward *as* a community, its female members more easily maintained the kinds of relationships so important to them in the days before their westward trek; in many ways Mormon women stand at the far end of the social-relationship spectrum, since the

intensity of the interaction between these women was made possible by both geographical proximity and community expectation. Almost all of the Mormon women whose diaries and letters are available lived in close communities with proportionately large numbers of other women. While the practice of polygamy has been cited as at least partially responsible for this female-dominated society (at least in actual numbers), more significantly, the fact that many Mormon men were sent off on proselytizing missions for two years or more created the possibility for the kinds of intense female friendships more often found among unmarried women in the East.

The friendship between Mary Harkin Parker Richards and Jane Snyder Richards, the wife of Mary's husband's brother, is an example of such a relationship. During the two years that Mary Richards stayed at Winter Quarters preparing for the Mormons' journey across the plains, she kept a journal which reveals that much of her time was spent in the company of "Sister Jane." Both of their husbands were away on missions—Mary's husband Samuel in Scotland and Jane's husband Franklin in England. Indeed, the intensity of their friendship seemed somehow foreordained. Mary writes about their meeting: "never was I more rejoiced to meet with a friend than I was to meet with Sister Jane . . . [W]e talked over many of the scens that had past during our abcance from each other, rejoiced in each others welfare, and sympathized with each other sorrows" (Richards 1996, 89). From that moment on, scarcely a day passed when they were not together—washing ("Friday 25th a beauty full day in the morn went home and getherd together a large washing of clothes and returned to Jane's to spend Christmass over the wash tub"); writing letters ("Thursday 17th a cold day. was writing in my letter. eve Jane came to stay with me I being a lone. she was writing a letter to Franklin, and I was writing in my Journal. She read me her letter, and I read her most of mine"); or visiting ("Tuesday 19th . . . I accompanied Jane to Maria's were we spent the day very pleasantly"; "Tuesday 26th . . . early in the morn Sister Chester Snyder sent for Jane and my self to come to her house to a quilting"). They also spent almost every night together as the following passages suggest. These are the last lines of five consecutive journal entries (leaving out a Monday entry that implies but does not explicitly state they stayed together), and they are by no means uncharacteristic: "I remained with Jane all night[:] Friday 25th . . . spent the night with Jane[:] Saturday 26th . . . felt very tired staid all night with Jane[:] Sunday 27th . . . went and slept that night with Sister Jane[:] Tuesday 29th . . . Jane Eley & myself spent about two hours trying to see which could Compose the best Poetry, then retired to bed" (Richards 1996, 102–4, 106–7). The intensity of this relationship cannot be overestimated, I think, and it is certainly not unusual, especially among women who had the advantage of geographical proximity.

Perhaps even more important, these women also operated within a set of community expectations which not only accepted female friendship, but

exploited and extolled it as a base of community strength. Mormon women like Mary and Jane lived close enough together to share washday tasks, dressmaking, and child care; they also joined with other women to make quilts for the needy, to “lay on hands” and pray together for the sick, and to provide the direction and energy for enterprises such as the silkworm industry in southern Utah. It was clear to the women *and* to the men in the Mormon West that together women found strength: physical, emotional, spiritual. Lucy Flake, one of the early Mormon pioneers in Arizona, expressed the inter-relationship of those strengths in this diary entry:

January 1, 1889 Sister Mary J. West and I went to Elsie’s to give her a blessing before the birth of her child as was customary in those days. . . . Sister West and I had many wonderful experiences together and we loved each other with a devotion that was closer than that of any earthly ties. Often when I felt despondent I would go up to my dear friends and we would talk and then we would go upstairs and pour out our souls in prayer. We would feel the power resting upon us. I would put my hands on her head and bless her and then she would bless me. I fasted and was greatly blessed and felt so thankful for this wonderful privilege. I always received comfort when we offered up our prayers together. (Flake 1932)<sup>1</sup>

Clearly some of the closest relationships among Mormon women were those of plural wives, although the extent to which polygamy was practiced has been greatly exaggerated. One of the most important points to remember in any discussion of polygamous wives is that every relationship was unique. The relationship between each husband and each of his wives, the way in which new wives were acquired, the personalities of the women involved, whether these wives even lived in the same town—all of these issues, among others, influenced the nature of the relationships which existed between polygamous wives. In many cases, the women found strength and comfort in each other, each wife using her own skills to the advantage of all; in other instances, outright antipathy existed between wives, and any kind of cooperation was marginal at best. Although it is impossible here to examine in detail the range of attitudes expressed by polygamous wives toward one another and toward their husbands, I would like to look briefly at a not-at-all uncommon example of the interesting possibilities of polygamous relationships for women. Eliza Maria Partridge Lyman and her sister Caroline were both married to Amasa Lyman, who in time also married another Partridge sister, Lydia, along with several other women. Eliza and Caroline lived together, and indeed their relationship with their husband seems entirely tangential to their own intimate relationship. The two shared everything from washing to gardening to actually building a house. (Where

their husband is during this time is entirely left to conjecture; for, in fact, he is rarely mentioned throughout Eliza's diary). She writes:

November 1847, Monday 1st . . . My sister Caroline and I have been trying to build a log house for ourselves as we do not feel quite comfortable where we are. We first got possession of an old house which we pulled down and had the logs moved to a spot where we wanted it put up again. As we could not get any one to lay it up for us went at it ourselves, and laid it up five or six logs high, when more brethren came and laid it up the rest of the way. . . . Then I built a fireplace and a chimney. . . . (Lyman 1820-86)

The presence of a man in the family is usually marked only by a terse comment about the birth of a child "daughter of Paulina Lyman and Amasa Lyman" or "son of Caroline Lyman and Amasa Lyman." In polygamous households such as this one, we see most clearly the possibilities and necessities of close female relationships. In many ways, Eliza and Caroline are the family unit.

Such a lack of attention to men in the diaries of women is not restricted to polygamous wives. Elizabeth Hampsten points out in her analysis of nineteenth-century working-class diaries of women in the Midwest that "women's descriptions of men are apt to be blurred, just out of focus or to one side. I had to read a long time in Grace Decor's journal before I realized that T. H. was the man she was married to" (1982, 118). Even though the diaries of women, not only in Utah but all across America, reveal these blurred descriptions of men, the relationships between Mormon women, polygamous or not, often lie at one end of a continuum of intensity of female interaction. Geographical proximity and community expectations contribute to an environment in which female friendships dominate the day-to-day lives of the women involved.

At the other end of that spectrum are the lives of women like those Texas pioneers who settled on ranches far from the hub of community activity. The kind of loneliness that their isolation brought is often revealed in the most understated tones. For example, Ella Bird-Dupont, one of the first settlers in the eastern panhandle of Texas, noted concerning the arrival of several wagons that "this was the first women I had seen in about twelve months" (Bird-Dupont 1935). Other Texas women were more direct in their expression of such loneliness. Margaret Armstrong Bowie confided often to her diary that she could scarcely bear the isolation she experienced as a teenager in the Kekchi Valley of Jack County, Texas. On 28 September 1872 she wrote, "Ma is ready to go back to Waterford and so am I. It is so miserable lonesome here. No church or society nearer than Black Springs six miles away" (Bowie 1872-77). Festive occasions seemed to make Margaret's loneliness all the more acute. On 11 October 1872, she penned



vegetables for the winter. In addition to these day-to-day activities, often women would gather together for special work-related occasions, such as sewing or quilting bees. For many women, the quilt itself became a symbol of the kind of strength provided by the women who helped in its creation. Texan Nancy Jane Logan Teagarden describes such a process quite straightforwardly when she writes in her diary for Tuesday, 1 February, 1870: "Well we have finished our quilt *at last* and I am so proud of it I can hardly—well I don't know how to express my pride. Now I am sure to remember 28 of my friends *a long long* while" (Teagarden 1870-71).

Work-related activities provided women the occasion to visit, exchange information, and accomplish tasks which, undertaken alone, might prove difficult and often monotonous as well. On the ranching frontiers of Texas we find women engaged in a variety of such joint endeavors: Ella Bird-Dupont, for example, writes that shortly after she and her buffalo-hunter husband moved to the panhandle to file claim, "Mrs. Johnes and I also practiced together, as she was learning to use a gun too. Sometimes we would go down on the creek and shoot turkeys" (1935, 32). Although she informs us that "there was but few women on ranches at that time," Bird-Dupont carefully notes the range of possibilities for social interaction that these few women took advantage of (1935, 54). Besides rifle practice, she and the other women she managed to encounter on the plains went berry hunting, rounded up milk cows, and drove miles into town to a dance (leaving all the children with a friend's husband).

In fact, women on early Texas ranches surprisingly often also found occasions for socializing before or after their work. Visiting other women, spending the night or several nights, was carefully noted in diaries and letters. Henrietta Baker Embree's diary, written between 1856 and 1861 in Belton, Texas, reveals her to be an amazingly social young woman. Living in a more populated area than many of her contemporaries in this study, Henrietta delighted in visiting and being visited. Her first diary entry sets the tone for the many pages which follow: "Jan 1 I have been out calling. Spent some hours very pleasantly conversing with my old school mates talking of things that have passed and gone. I too have had visitors this week. It is so pleasant to have friends and associates that you can love and place confidence in as you would a sister" (Embree 1856-61). A less carefully worded but more animated version of the same sentiment reads, "Monday 21st . . . I was this eve, seated flat, on the hearth, my lap full of rags [for making rugs] and dirt—not thinking of companie when, before I was aware of it, Aunt Betsie and Mrs. Kees, were in the back room, they spent the afternoon and didnt we dip spit and talk? I think we did" (Embree 1856-61). For Henrietta Embree, and I suspect for many other nineteenth-century western women, a good talk with friends was a kind of cure-all. Of her sister she writes: "Jan 1, 1859 She has the blues tonight but I am hoping she will be over them by

morning—as she is spending the night with a much loved friend.” Many women on nineteenth-century Texas ranches were not as articulate in describing their visiting patterns as Henrietta; nonetheless it is clear from page after page of their diaries that female friendship was highly valued in many different contexts.

Ritual occasions such as births, weddings, and funerals epitomize the intensity of interaction of these ranch women, for they often confide in journals and reminiscences that it is the strength of other women which supports them in these rites of passage. When her first husband dies, it is Ella Bird-Dupont’s friend Mrs. Bailey who goes with her to place the tombstone she had carved on his grave, and when she marries again, she notes that “several of my best old time lady friends made two cakes each for me, two or three dressed turkeys, and everything else in accordance, a regular oldtime wedding dinner with Mrs. Campbell as director” (Bird-Dupont 1935, 191). Later, when her young son dies, Ella writes of her experiences as both the comforted and the comforter:

Baby [her daughter] could not be consoled; one of her little girl friends Paula Harwell came and spent a week with her which helped some to drive away her sorrow. Mrs. Richard came and insisted that Baby and I go and spend a few days with her. I did not want to leave Mr. Dupont alone, but he insisted so hard I should go. . . . They had lost their only little baby about the same age of ours a few months before, and they know how to sympathyze with us. She drove with us quite a bit while we were there. We called on Mr. and Mrs. Barron. They were ranchers on Buck Creek. . . . She looked so young and inexperienced for the hard western life that we lived here. She told me in after years how lonely she had been at that place and how very much she appreciated our visit. (1935, 201)

This is a fine example of the ways in which women relied on each other to provide the kind of mutual support so necessary in the demanding isolation of the frontier; here both mother and teenage daughter are comforted by their women friends and, in turn, reach out to support another woman laboring to make a life in the West. Simple geographical separation was just not enough to destroy the compelling force which drew women together on the frontier.

One of the few widely published accounts of women living on isolated ranches, although not a Texas example, demonstrates probably better than any other document the resilience of pioneer women, especially in terms of their ability to maintain and nurture relationships with other women under the most unlikely circumstances. In *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* (1914), Elinore Pruitt Stewart not only continues her strong relationship with her former boss, Mrs. Coney, through her letters, but she focuses the bulk of the

content of those letters on her adventures with two other women who live miles and miles away from her Wyoming homestead. With Mrs. Louderer, a strong, seasoned pioneer, Elinore Stewart rides all over the countryside, bringing Christmas dinner to sheep camps, rescuing starving women and children, and simply enjoying the "fresh air." Her other friend, Mrs. O'Shaughnessy, reads her fortune in tea leaves, helps with a sewing bee to provide clothes for an unfortunate family, and shares every holiday celebration. With Mrs. O'Shaughnessy, Elinore participates in an outing in which a group of Wyoming women traveled annually to Utah for fresh fruit; this outing provided nourishment for both the bodies and the spirits of these friendship-hungry women settlers.

Although Elinore's relationship with the brusque and very Scottish Mr. Stewart appears to be a satisfactory one, it is her relationships with these two women which provide focus for her writing and, one would suspect, for her life. Elinore's letters to Mrs. Coney about her friends also direct our attention to the other important consideration of this kind of research: the necessity of examining each genre of women's writing—diaries, letters, reminiscences—to discover the writer's intent in each. One of the most interesting facets of Elinore Stewart's letters is that they are just that, letters, and as such they have a specific rhetorical intent. Through these letters we see Elinore's life not as she lived it but as she wished her friend Mrs. Coney to believe she lived. Just as we select only the choicest, most interesting tidbits to include in our personal narratives shared with friends, so Elinore selected those parts of her life which she believed would most interest Mrs. Coney. The letters also demonstrate quite clearly how, for many women, such correspondence took the place of the kinds of feminine conversation to which they were accustomed. In one letter Elinore says, "I know this is an inexcusably long letter, but it is snowing so hard and you know how I like to talk" (1914, 13); for Elinore, writing to Mrs. Coney is talking, talking to a dear friend so far away.

Through letters, nineteenth-century western women accomplished a number of personal goals. For the all-too-often isolated Texas women ranchers, letters provided a kind of mutual support system, in which problems were aired, advice given, joys shared. Through letters, an important exchange of information took place for these women, who often had no other close female friends in which to confide. When Lizzie Scott Neblett became depressed at finding herself pregnant for the sixth time, she wrote her cousin Jennie, baring her soul and threatening to end her life. Jennie's reply, on 2 January 1860, is a masterpiece of psychological rhetoric. She urges Lizzie to consider how much worse off she could be, comparing Lizzie's plight favorably with her own poverty, ill health, and constant family problems. She employs the strongest combination of gentleness, religious rhetoric, and appeals to motherly sensibilities. But in the end (after more than eight

pages), she provides Lizzie with specific information that might allow her some hope for the future:

I wish I could say something to you, I am unhappy about you, for I understand how you feel, and would fain console you, but I know you are too determined to be miserable, to listen to any reasoning. . . . Lizzie, I know that “The Sponge” *will prevent conception* and tho I deem that a sin, still it is not so bad as killing ones self—So after you are over this trouble remember, if you get so again this will be your own fault. I know the Sponge is a safe and sure preventative. . . . (Neblett 1860)

Such exchange of important information occurs over and over again in the letters of women on the Texas ranching frontier, and other western frontiers as well. Perhaps even more often we find that letters served as significant vehicles for self-expression, wherein women’s voices were allowed to be heard. Letters offered the generic possibilities of both immediacy of expression (like diaries, which we will consider later) and of specific epistolary expectations.

Writing in the immediacy of their experiences on the frontier, these women nevertheless were quite familiar with the generic conventions of letter writing in the nineteenth century. In fact, they almost certainly had been exposed to these epistolary conventions through a number of related reading experiences: manuals of letter-writing techniques, popular since the late sixteenth century; epistolary fiction, such as Mary Austin Holley’s *Texas*; and perhaps most important, the letters of their own friends and family.<sup>2</sup>

Women’s personal letters often included specific instructions for letter writing, such as these words to Bettie Beall from her friend Lucy Bridgewater on 7 June 1869: “When you write, tell me everything new, and do not close until you write me a long letter” (Bridgewater 1869). This urging to tell everything and create lengthy letters is one of the most common meta-epistolary comments in the writing of western women. Every word was held precious, and quite often the arrival of a letter provided the occasion for contact with other women closer by. Henrietta Baker Embree, for example, in reading a letter received from home, reports, “amidst my excitement and joy I just concluded to run over to see Mrs. Arnold and get her to participate with me” (Embree 1856–61). The writings of other Texas women suggest that reading letters aloud was an important form of entertainment, especially in the earliest days on the frontier.

The anticipation of reader expectations surely helped determine the form of these nineteenth-century letters, just as it does in letter writing today. The extent to which rhetorical intent was molded by the urgency to provide needed information, the desire to achieve literary excellence, or even the fatigue of the writer is certainly an important variable in all of this. With

respect to generic differences in the expressive forms available to women on western frontiers in the nineteenth century, the presence of an identifiable audience coupled with the specific rhetorical intent of the individual writer contribute significantly to an understanding of the ways in which the expressive power of letters differs from that of diaries.

Many of the journals of women on the frontier also make it abundantly clear that if we are ever to really come to terms with these individual diaries and journals, we must also look more closely at the rhetorical reasons behind journal writing itself. Several contemporary scholars have suggested that women wrote in their journals simply when they didn't have anyone else to talk to. While that may have been the case in some instances, there are a wide variety of other reasons for diary writing: to provide travel notes for future travelers, to satisfy personal literary ambitions, to provide something for one's grandchildren to treasure, to respond to a religious dictum, and the like. And although diaries frequently differ from letters in their solitary, reflective nature, the diaries of some Texas women seem clearly to have been written with a specific audience and purpose in mind. For example, Henrietta Embree's diary for 18 May 1858 suggests that

I have nothing in my journal interesting to be seen, but then if my friends wanted to see or here it ready why should they not, I have no secrets in it, I expected for it to be seen I intend to take it to Kentucky with me for my Relatives, I thought it would give them some idea of a life in Texas, they could judge for one year of my life, I also thought it would be interesting to read myself in after years. (Embree 1858-61)

Susan Newcomb expands on this last reason in her own diary for 14 June 1867:

I am writing these things just to keep practice, and perhaps I would be glad to see these scribbling twenty years hence if I should be so fortunate as to live that long. They would call to memory the days of my youth, the days that I spent in my cottage home far in the west, on the frontier of Texas, the only settler of Throckmorton County. (Newcomb 1865-71)

Occasionally the intended audience may change within a single diary. Interestingly, three years after Henrietta Embree suggests that she will send her diary to her "Relatives," she decides that she doesn't "intend to keep the book but send it to Jen." After this statement, the diary frequently addresses Jen until 1 January 1861, when she mysteriously switches back to using the diary as a place to record the most private feelings, oaths, etc., as the following entry attests: "Jan 1, 1861 Mrs. H. Embree promises this, New Years morning that she will lay aside narcotic weed and its *companion*, the pipe excepting at night she must have a few draws" (Embree 1858-61).

This is a particularly interesting journal from the perspective of the analysis of rhetorical intent, since the tone, diction, and other stylistic devices change as the audience changes. In other diaries the writer herself has a nebulous idea of audience as she begins writing but then clarifies both audience and rhetorical intent over a period of weeks, or sometimes years. Susan E. Newcomb began her diary on 1 January 1871 from Waterford, Texas, with an attempt to clarify for herself just who might read this work:

Sunday Jan 1st:—This is the first day of the week—the first of the month—and the first of the year. The year 1870 is dead, and buried in the past by old time; and a new year has taken its place. It has been very pleasant to day, and I hope it will continue to be pleasant all the year

But it will not be; there will be dark clouds and raging storms ere the year 1871 draws to a close; and there will be many disappointments, and troubles, to encounter during the year, that will look as black—as thunder clouds, and feel as piercing and cold as the wind from the North Pole.

I think it advisable to brace ourselves up and prepare for the worst, but others may look at things in a different light. How ever I have a right to express my opinion any way I choose on this paper, for I dont suppose it will ever be read. It isn't for the public.

Perhaps some one will see it when I am numbered with the dead; but then I will not know it, and as a matter of course I'll not care, and surely no one would ridicule the writings of the dead. I may like to look over this old journal sometime, but it will be of no importance to any one else, until my boy is old enough to read and understand. (Newcomb 1865–71)

We see, then, how Susan Newcomb works out within the first few lines of her diary the fact that her words may well be read by others in years to come, certainly by her son, and that even though she is ostensibly writing for herself and not “for the public,” there is an understood silent audience waiting to respond in the future. The attempted eloquence of style further attests to this understanding. Lizzie Scott Neblett opens her diary 16 March 1852, with much the same understanding of audience and purpose eloquently stated; she adds a self-reflective articulation of the power of women's written expression:

I intend this book as faithful repository of my inmost thoughts, my hopes, my sorrows, my joys. I have ever found relief from sorrow by recording my grief, and in joy have reaped a double harvest—I find in writing, my thoughts assume a tangebility, that I can never arrive at by mere thinking. My heart is now young full of hope, life, and

animation. Reasoning from the regular course of nature, I may have many years yet to live, and as it is insurance to prepare for the wintry season, not only of the year, but of Human Nature, I think it may perhaps afford me some pleasure in those dark hours, when perhaps every earthly tie may be rendered, to read over the thoughts, the feelings of my youth “when life seemed formed of sunny hours. . . .” This book may yet bring me sorrow, for it shall certainly hold my most secret thoughts of everything. Yet I hardly suppose any one will have curiosity sufficient, to prompt them to search into its pages. Yet if anyone should ever read this I hope they will be benefited by my trials and experiences, and that I will not be judged too harshly, if occasionally I err slightly in both precept, and example. (Neblett 1852)

This understanding of the relationship between privacy and the possibility of public perusal is enhanced by Neblett’s own sensitivity to the act of writing itself. For she sees in writing a powerful tool for self-examination as well as a benefit to future readers. The recognition of the power of words has rarely been so directly stated. As Cinthia Gannet suggests, such women diarists

have found ways to inscribe themselves, to make their own modest, but unique and lasting imprint, on texts. They have created texts out of their lives and new lives out of their texts. Texts are marks on the world; they are physical objects, and journals and diaries, while silent, are visible, potentially permanent markers of a life lived, even if just for the diarist herself. (1992, 136)

Examples such as these should make it abundantly clear that to view letter writing as an interactive and diary writing as a solitary endeavor is far too simplistic; diaries, like letters, often were addressed to specific audiences (or to the more general “future reader”) and were carefully created with those audiences in mind. Recent scholarship on diaries and their writers suggests that the diary form itself is particularly appropriate for women. Lorna Martens, a critic of the “diary novel,” writes that “[a] diary can be written in snatches and with little concentration; it is adaptable to the housewife’s interrupted day” (1985, 182). And Suzanne Juhasz reminds us that

In their form, women’s lives tend to be like the stories that they tell: they show less a pattern of linear development towards some clear goal than one of repetitive, cumulative, cyclical structure. One thinks of housework or childcare, of domestic life in general. Dailiness matters to most women; and dailiness is, by definition, never a conclusion, always a process.

The classic verbal articulation of dailiness is, of course, the diary. In form the diary moves in independent units of experience in

an extended present tense. . . . The perspective of the diarist is immersion, not distance. The diary is finished when the pages run out, not when some denouement and conclusion are reached. (Juhasz 1980, 223–24)

For women on the western frontiers, the form of the diary was one that allowed self-expression within the stringent time constraints imposed by life in nineteenth-century Texas or Utah or Arizona. For many women the specific forms taken by their journals reflect the exigencies of their lives. While Susan Newcomb's prose is rich in description and philosophical musing, other journals are stark, listing only the most significant events in the lives of women too busy or tired or both to pen more than a few words at odd intervals. Diaries reflect a whole range of exposure to modes of writing—from those written by women well-versed in literary techniques, to those by readers of *Godey's Lady's Book* and other popular periodicals of the day, to those of other women whose reading experiences consisted primarily of the Bible and an occasional letter from home. It is this adaptability of the genre itself that makes it so appropriate for nineteenth-century western women. Moreover, this adaptable genre by its very existence provided a connection with other women diary writers. As Gannet also points out, "keeping a journal as part of the social—or domestic—discourse network seems a central and unique aspect of women's journal traditions" (1992, 133).

Reminiscences differ considerably from diaries and letters, since they provide the writer with the perspective of time. Written some years after the immediate frontier experience, these works are often based on diaries, letters, or both. The intervening time allows the writer to shape the narrative more carefully, to include the most salient features of the frontier experience, and to edit out any comments or incidents the writer has decided are better left unsaid. For example, Mary Maverick's 1881 reminiscences, based closely on her 1850 diary, leave out this sentence from 27 September 1850: "Susan came and spent the night with me we slept together and held most loving communion" (Maverick 1850). Although women spending the night with each other was certainly a common custom, especially before marriage, apparently this particular entry concerning her friend Susan Hays was left out rather than have it be misinterpreted by later readers.

Sharon Kaufman has also suggested that reminiscences are often structured in terms of recurring themes that are relevant to the way individuals envision their lives as meaningful. She writes,

In the description of their lives, people create themes—cognitive areas of meaning with symbolic force—which explain, unify, and give substance to their perceptions of who they are and how they see themselves participating in social life. As each life is unique, so too

are the themes. But all themes have their sources in the historical, geographical, and social circumstances in which people live, the flow of ordinary daily life, the values of American society, and cultural expectations of how a life should be lived. (Kaufman 1986, 185)

This suggests another way in which the author of a reminiscence may draw on the perspective of time—to re-order significant events and the very evaluation of those events. Similar themes may emerge from diaries or a collection of letters, but they may be more deeply embedded and frequently less self-conscious.

Stylistically, reminiscences are frequently more sophisticated than either journals or letters, since the writer has had more time to fashion the narrative. Those reminiscences that are based closely on diaries include more detailed description, tend to be less romantic, and give a truer picture of nineteenth-century life as it was *lived*; those based solely on recollections are more likely to gloss over details, be more romantic, and provide the reader with a picture of life as it was *remembered*.

Each of these genres of women's writing provides different possibilities for powerful self-expression. While reminiscences are often written by women in the leisure of later years, reflecting on the most important moments of their lives, diaries and letters reveal in the immediacy of the experiences the true contours of what life was like for women, how they dealt with everyday problems, and how they celebrated significant occasions. Within the wide range of individual expressive acts that constitute the basis of this analysis, what becomes increasingly clear is that an understanding of the importance of women's friendships as presented in each of these genres is long overdue. Although women in the West differed considerably from their sisters back East in the kinds of roles they adopted within the family, the kinds of work they engaged in, and the kinds of relationships they had with their male counterparts, these women steadfastly re-created on the western frontier a pattern of intense female friendship that, at its deepest core, was little different from that of women in other parts of America.

Whether women found themselves together in a Mormon community where feminine friendship flourished or alone in Texas, miles from the nearest other woman, these pioneers creatively managed to sustain themselves through the words and works of their friends. Here, I have discussed primarily the everyday activities of women as they gathered together with other women to share the joys and the sorrows of their lives. Such activities organize themselves structurally around work, religion, sickness, health, and a somewhat more nebulous category we might call sociability.<sup>3</sup> It is also important to examine the entire spectrum of interactions among women, ranging from these day-to-day occurrences to the special celebrations of personal rites of passage and annual community-wide festivities. One thing is

clear in all of this: whether we look at one woman reading a letter from a dear friend or two women huddled over a washtub doing the week's wash or a group of five or six women with fingers flying over a half-done quilt or an entire community of women celebrating the birthday of the eldest, in each case we find a kind of mutual sustenance, a celebration of the ability of women, through friendship, not only to endure, but to rejoice in the circumstances of their lives because they are lives lived together.

### Notes

Part of the research on which this article is based was conducted with assistance from the University of Utah Research Fund. The article was written during sabbatical leave from the University of Utah.

1. This entry is an interesting example of a mix of diary entry and reminiscence, where the events of a particular day call up past memories which are also recorded.
2. Manuals such as Samuel Richardson's *Familiar Letters on Important Occasions* ([1781] 1928) and others which followed were popular in America throughout this period. Mary Austin Holley's *Texas: Observations, Historical, Geographical and Descriptive, in a Series of Letters, Written during a Visit to Austin's Colony; with a View to a Permanent Settlement in That Country; in the Autumn of 1831* (1833) was especially influential for Texas women writers.
3. The examples I have offered here have been drawn primarily from the writings of middle-class Anglo women, but both social class and ethnicity add important dimensions to a study of this kind, and future research should broaden the base of our understanding of female friendship among women of other classes and ethnicities as well.