



Rachel Toor

# A Place of Invention

Image by Kathryn Turner

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by Rachel Toor

It starts, I think, with the horse.

Take a small girl child, with an affinity for animals and a cold and controlling father, show her a huge creature and tell her she can sit astride and direct it. Let her stroke the velvet place between equine nostrils, and use every muscle in her body to reach up and curry out the dirt; let her lug a saddle weighing nearly as much as she and swing it gently onto the back of her waiting mount; finally, let her sit way up there—where the world looks different, a new vista opens—and tell her she is free to go.

In 1969 I was seven years old. It must have taken *True Grit* a few years to get to the Drive-in theaters, which is where my family went to see it. In the movie, fourteen-year-old Mattie Ross is out to avenge the death of her father. She has the money and the power. She hires the toughest man around, the old drunk, Rooster Cogburn (played, of course, when I saw it, by John Wayne), and off they go, into the West.

Mattie Ross had short hair, self-righteous piety, and a horse named Little Blackie. She could ride and keep up with the men. Who, I grew up thinking, wouldn't want to be Mattie Ross?

I want to believe in a place of invention, a workshop for the self. I can't resist the call of Milton's Satan, that "Space may produce new worlds." I want to believe that an environment, magnificent, vast, but also hellish, desolate, difficult, may be fertile ground for creation, for a triumph of imagination set free from the fetters of convention and constraint. I want to believe that from beneath calluses earned with labor, skin toughened by weather, fingernails packed with dust, there may arise the chrysalis of an identity that is the same but different—

me, but better, stronger, more true. So I packed up the dream and moved west. To the northern Rockies, to Missoula, Montana.

The landscape is wide, the sky, yes, the sky is bigger. A settling quiet allows the wind to sing. The greens are different from back east. At first I found them wanting—lacking the gaudy opulence of my accustomed hardwoods. But it is simply that the portrait of the seasons is less pornographic here, subtle—autumns, except in town, are without the grief of dying leaves, winters without those sad, skeletal reminders of waiting again for the spring. The grasses are brittle, stiffer. I am smaller here, feel younger, away from the aged buildings of the eastern cities, the patina of grit and grime that rests on the edifices of the seaboard.

The West is a place of vistas, and when I look out, far, so far, I squint to see the vaporous shimmering of the evolutionary savannah, the time when we humans stood up, leaving behind our primate cousins, and looked around. Perhaps this is how we tap into something in the collective soul. We stood up and became human. The West is a place that has been peopled and de-peopled for 10,000 years—there are ghosts, understood as spirits most of us will never be able to conjure. I know natives have been here for millennia, centuries, and generations and that I am only among the most recent travelers; this sense of both newness and belatedness gives me hope. The light feels lighter here, different. I feel lighter, different. A pilgrim.

Perhaps it is a characteristic of those who seek something outside of themselves that will transform and transfigure their lives, that we follow the direction of the setting sun. Thoreau writes, "We go eastward to realize history, and study the works of art and literature, retracing the steps of the race,—we go westward as into the future, with a spirit of enterprise and adventure." Like most of us, Thoreau wrote with the echoes of other writers' sentences rattling in his head. Freshman year in college I had to memorize in Middle English Chaucer's foreign lines. A quarter century later I began to understand them: "Then folk long to go on pilgrimages,/And palmers long to seek the stranger strands Of far off saints, hallowed in sundry lands."

Or—does the aridity, the reluctant give of salty soil, the readiness of mountain peaks to shroud themselves in snow, the land swept barren by wind, present a challenge, an affront? Do I come and ask, as Satan did when he fell from the happy realms into a strange new world: "Is this the Region, this the Soil, the Clime...That we must change for Heav'n, this mournful gloom/ For that celestial light?" Will this place, less hospitable, less comfortable, than the cultivated parks and gardens of orderly eastern cities, help me know how to weather hardship, to withstand provocations by natural elements, show me what to do when confronted with rocky ridges, shrubby and sere lands? Will it ask me to prove my most rugged self, my mettle?

A Midwesterner, not yet middle aged, Frederick Jackson Turner stood before a group of men at the annual conference of the American Historical Association at the conclusion of a long day, toward the end of a century of "progress" and spoke of the frontier. Turner proffered an idea that has taken root as widely and wantonly as the noxious, imported weeds that are now choking out native Western wildflowers. The frontier has closed, he said, and we have closed it, we Americans; we the coarse and strong, the inquisitive, the inventive; we the clever, the adaptive, the exuberant; the pragmatic, the restless; we the people. The West was where the frontier ended. We are the West, or, the process of Westering. Pioneers came to a rugged place, leaving behind the known world to push civilization against savagery; the frontier was vanquished and the American character defined.

It is kinder to speak of these events in the passive voice, a voice that explains without blame, that omits and elides. The legacy of conquest that made the romance possible is best left unmentioned. Turner erased people who were already living on land that would soon become contested. Or perhaps he just saw right past them, the way European Jews, who traveled to the Middle East around the same time, believed they had found an empty homeland. Turner didn't see women. He didn't see girls like Mattie Ross. He wouldn't have seen me.

Those intrepid men who ventured westward vanquished—land, people, place—and certain character traits flourished. That seems true. It seems heroic, even, this belief. To what extent the process set a national characterological agenda seems less certain. A century of scholarly work has labored to vanquish the notions that Turner set forth in lyrical language that day in Chicago. His ideas, however, continue to echo through the

landscape of imagination. When I think about the West—when I think about women in the West—I realize that I have been infected with the notion of a place of invention.

By middle age, I knew who I was in the East. I wanted to find out who I could be in the West. I came propelled by a dreamy quest that went the way of all such endeavors: smacked hard into the wall of real life.

My pilgrim's vocabulary expanded to include brucellosis, cow-calf pairs, cheatgrass, grazing rights, and red beer (PBR and Clamato juice). The stories I heard were of winters so cold the ears and tails of livestock would freeze and break off, of wildfires creating blankets of ash that collected on cars like snow. You kept a sleeping bag and extra water in your car; gates on the highways could be closed when they became impassable. You couldn't count on spending long drives chatting on your cell phone because reception in the Rocky Mountain west is unpredictable. You go to a potluck and someone asks, "What's for the dinner?" When the answer is "steak," you learn not to be surprised by the next question: "What critter?" Blaze orange, in the East a signifier of class difference, here is worn here by professors and lawyers who hunt and fish and hang dead animals above blood-spattered newspaper in their garages. Men wear cowboy boots and pearl-button shirts without irony. Tassled "ropers" turn out to be manly.

As is so often the case with immigrants, I asked unintentionally rude questions: "How much land do you have?" "How many cows?" In New York City, a common conversation starter is to compare monthly apartment rents. It didn't occur to me that inquiring about the size of a ranch was like prying into someone's bank account. Everyone knows the price of cattle; everyone can do the math. You don't ask, you don't tell.

I looked around and missed what I didn't know how to see. Racial diversity here was too subtle for my grasp; intertribal politics formed a complicated mass of history, geography, and tradition. Native Americans referred to themselves as "Indians." Montana historians called them Indians. The only people who said "Native American" were transplants like me, desperate to be politically and racially sensitive, yet ignorant and wrong in so many basic assumptions and facts.

And then there were the women, the Western women. Here they were, grown up Mattie Rosses, the embodiments of Turner's thesis: the pioneers, the exceptional creatures that made the West so appealing. They scared me a little, these tall new friends. Judy would serve plates of elk lasagna and then describe how she'd shot and butchered animals, how she fed all the men on her family's ranch and then helped pull calves, or built barns. No double cheek air kisses from these women, sometimes not even a hug hello or goodbye, but if you needed to be taken to the hospital, or didn't know how to put up a shelf, you learned they were there for you, offering food, liquor, a hand, but never unsolicited advice.

It wasn't until I lived in Montana that I learned that the state was late to give women the vote. Late for the West, that is. Wyoming went first, in 1869, followed by Colorado in 1893, and then a host of mostly Western states fell in. Montana was eleventh in 1914. The Nineteenth Amendment wasn't ratified until 1920.

As every Montana child knows, Jeannette Rankin was elected to the US Congress in 1916. Four days into her term, the House voted on a resolution to enter the First World War. Rankin voted No. She wasn't elected for a second consecutive term, but in 1940, she ran again, on an antiwar platform and won. She voted against entry into the Second World War, the only member of Congress to have voted No on both conflicts.

Digging around in the archives of the University of Montana I found traces of Belle Fligelman Winestone, a tiny young Helena woman who had gone with Rankin to DC, and then, later, had run for state senate herself, with the campaign slogan, "Better and Smaller Senators." Her sister, Frieda, was the first woman admitted to the PhD program in Political Science at Columbia University. She studied with Franz Boas before Margaret Mead did. She was interested in language not as the study of meaning and form, but as a product of a particular environment, arising from a particular group. The Jewish woman from Montana worked on African languages, demonstrating their depth and richness through academic study. Her work pre-dated and anticipated the field of socio-linguistics.

But primacy can have consequences. The presiding powers at Columbia failed to recognize Frieda Fligelman's work and, in 1917, refused to award her a doctorate. Frieda never stopped trying to elbow her way into the academic world, but she languished in the marginal role of the "independent scholar," going to conferences and submitting journal articles without benefit of a university affiliation. She referred to her apartment in Helena as the "Institute of Social Logic."

In the archives I read correspondence between Frieda and Dorothy Johnson, a University of Montana journalism professor who wrote stories on which canonical Westerns were based. I remember seeing *A Man Called Horse* when I was a child, the Sun Dance ceremony sequence an indelible image in my mind. Reading Johnson's work, I enjoyed seeing her trying to demythify the West, to work against stereotypes and give women and Indians a fuller portrayal than what generally made it to the screen.

Western women who were my contemporaries and became my friends taught me about this place. They seemed different, these women: tougher than my Manhattan friends, more capable in the physical, natural world. Or is it that I saw only what I sought? A literature has been produced by people like me, easterners with fancy educations and cowboy-lust who come across the country wanting, needing, a place, unfamiliar and rough, a geography from which to forge an identity.

How much of what I saw, when I first moved to Montana, was informed by the narratives and fictions of other pilgrims looking for the solace of open spaces onto which to project celluloid versions of what they wanted their lives to be? How silly I must have looked to those who were long-settled and accustomed to being warped by and woven into popular culture. The wildflowers I put in a vase in my apartment turned out to be noxious knapweed. Did I let out a gasp of disappointment when I saw working ranches that looked nothing like the version of my dreams and more like trailer parks? Perhaps what I experienced as Western was simply rural, not much different from the cow-rich landscape of the pastoral New York state of my childhood. I wonder now if I—the child of professors—in Turner-like fashion looked right past the kids from my high school whose families canned vegetables and hunted and mended fence.

But the rural West is not like rural upstate New York. Missoula, the second most populous city in Montana, has a little more than 65,000 people. The gigantic state hosts less than a million inhabitants. If you spread them all out, there would be fewer than seven humans per square mile. They're not that spread out, though, and so vast unoccupied spaces remain. Moving from a city of more than 8 million, having spent hours on subways, someone's elbow always poking into your side, where negotiating the crowded aisles of the grocery store required strength and agility, and renewing a driver's license at the DMV could require a whole day of waiting in line and a handful of Ativan, it seemed nearly uninhabited.

Perhaps space allows for difference to be less threatening. Perhaps relative newness fosters forbearing. The West lacks the entrenched history of the East, and well-worn class battle lines have never been drawn here. I met an older woman, a former educator, who said yes when I asked if she thought Montana was more tolerant of diversity, who said she thought it had to do with the Civil War. The war between the states made Montana, she said; it was peopled in part by southerners who came west to start over. Californians took sides in the war, but out here, she said, folks never asked about one's background because you didn't know, didn't want to know, which side they were on. It was a way of allowing for self-reinvention.

My romantic interest is not exceptional. Western history has been an easy sell in the publishing world. Not quite as lucrative as, say, the Civil War, but, to be sure, it's a region that arouses curiosity. It has buffs, who both read and write. Its representations continue to abound—in painting, sculpture, movies, novels. The traditional picture has been mostly grand, heroic. Turner's thesis responded to and has been bolstered by the work of Albert Bierstadt, George Catlin, Frederic Remington, Howard Hawks, John Ford, Owen Wister, Zane Grey, Louis L'Amour, and Jack Schaefer. Current representations are not so heroic.

Partly because a new generation of historians started asking harder questions. Picking up on an earlier critique by Walter Prescott Webb that argued that the frontier was not a process but in fact a place, a particular dry and dusty place, historians began to probe the definitions. Is the frontier place or process? Where is the West? What

are the issues that define it—geography? The lack of water? A hardiness of souls? And how did it come to be “The West?”

The “New Western history,” as articulated by Patricia Nelson Limerick in her 1987 book, *Legacy of Conquest*, shows the West as a place of confrontation in a struggle over resources. Rather than valiant, the story she tells is in many ways shameful, and points out how earlier versions had long omitted and silenced different groups and peoples.

With incisive brutality, the New Western historians smashed cherished myths. They showed the racial and ethnic diversity of the nineteenth-century West. At times, thirty percent of the non-native population was not white. They reminded us that most people in the West lived in cities, not on the ranches of the celluloid range; that most men labored in the extractive industries, not in John Wayne-ing activities; that the place was not a pristine wilderness waiting for civilizing Easterners to come and tame it, but had, well before Columbus arrived, a long history of civilization and population. And they reminded us that there were lots of women in West.

Building on Turner’s thesis presented a tempting—perhaps irresistible—proposition: the West offered an opportunity for a new breed of woman to arise. The experience on the overland trail could have been a crucible for new ideas about gender identity. Women were forced to take on new roles, just as, on the journey west, men did tasks like washing, cooking, and caring for children. How lovely to believe that when they settled, this new gender blurring would remain and create a different kind of society.

The women of the West were exceptional creatures, Dee Brown argued in his 1958 book, *The Gentle Tamers*, a work that first paid tribute to and tried to define the distaff side of Westering. If the frontier was closed, if the wilds were civilized, Brown argued, it was due to the influence of those who trailed behind the brave pioneers: “Women truly are the most conservative of creatures, hating with a passion those three concomitants of the western frontier—poverty, physical hardship, and danger. And to destroy those traditional testers of human endurance was to destroy something male in the race.” Women were personal saviors of their men, and annihilators of the frontier spirit.

A couple of decades later, in 1979, Julie Roy Jeffrey argued in her book, *Frontier Women*, that along with the civilizing trinkets of culture, pioneer women toted with them Eastern values about home and place into the new landscape. While the journey west may have toughened and challenged them, Jeffrey argues that the Eastern values of the cult of domesticity remained firmly in place. In their new arid space, pioneer women cared for their homes, planted flowers, made lace doilies, and transplanted notions of gentility onto the western soil.

A year later, Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, wrote an article for the *Pacific Historical Review* titled “The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West.” Giving credit to Brown for at least realizing what Turner seemed not to—that there were in fact women in the West—their goal was to place the notion of “gentle tamers” in historiographical context and called for new ways to look at women. They asked for a broader, more inclusive scope that would, they said, “necessitate the rewriting of western history.”

In their survey of the literature, Jensen and Miller point out the ways women were rare, invisible or incidental, or, on the other hand, romanticized and sentimentalized. In the few instances where historians treated women as a component of the study of the frontier, they did so in neatly categorical, stereotyped ways: prior historians gave us ladies who came west as “gentle tamers” of the wilds; the help-mates, those women who could pull a calf and then go inside and cook dinner. “Wild women” were not common, they say, but they were compelling: they could out-man the men, could ride, shoot, drink, and curse. And then there were the bad girls, the working girls, the hookers with clichéd hearts of gold. The task of western women’s history, Jensen and Miller argued, then, should be about debunking these limiting images. The scholarly gaze, they said, should shift away from white women and pull back to include Hispanics, Asians, and Black women.

The essay proved foundational. Three years later, in Sun Valley, Idaho, a group of historians came together for the first Women's West Conference, out of which emerged a permanent organization, the Coalition for Western Women's History. The book that grew out of the conference, *The Women's West*, edited by Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, argued against the search for exceptional women. The task at hand, they claimed, was to fill in gaps, correct omissions, complicate the picture. Instead of looking at exceptional women, they were interested in the ordinary; while we might see these pioneer women as heroic, they saw themselves as simply doing what needed to be done. In her introduction, Susan Armitage, a transplanted Brit, wrote: "The frontier process strikes a responsive chord in almost all of us, perhaps especially in those of us who are not native westerners. When we moved west we felt like different people, and we want to know if the pioneers felt the same."

The last word—at the both conference and in the book—came from a Native American, Suzan Shown Harjo, who testified to her tribal heritage, and said she spoke as a poet and activist: "The challenge for the future of western women's history," Harjo argues, "is that, in attempting to uncover the truth of the past, we do not miss the essence of what is happening today and how it is happening." She puts to the women historians, the historians of women, a litany of questions: "What are my personal and altruistic reasons for pursuing this research—that is, education, job, money, security, prestige, perhaps to change existing inequities, perhaps to preserve the present system? Do my motivations influence my methodology? Is my research related to living and evolving history? If not, why not? If so, why? How integrated is my perspective? How much do I compartmentalize the subjects of my research? What are my own biases and how do they manifest themselves in my work? What is my ethical standard? Are my eyes open to the exciting changes that are taking place in the world around me?"

These are good questions, important questions, and as relevant today as they were when Western women's history was in its infancy as a field of academic study. They are also the questions I need to ask myself. My interest in those who lived in and wrote—and write—about the West, is a personal quest. I have been seeking something rooted in a place, but not, perhaps, entirely about that place.

For two years I lived in Montana, and then I moved farther west, to Spokane, Washington, and further away from the West, but I go back often. I go back, and often end up at a tidy house in a modest neighborhood. I arrive hungry, because I know I will be fed, and know, too, that I will leave laden with jars of jam, plastic containers of leftovers that will last me many meals. Judy Blunt and I will sit outside on the deck she built, surrounded by flowers she planted, and we will gossip, and she will shift in her chair, trying to get comfortable in a body that has been battered by falls from horses, years of scarring physical labor, and we will talk about academic politics and writers we know, some of whom we admire, and we will laugh when she cracks black-humored jokes. I may feel small and twitchy in contrast, and I will see her as she is: a fully grown, complex, less self-righteous and more capable version of what I wanted from Mattie Ross: a demythologized incarnation of true grit, a real woman from a real place.

Rachel Toor is the author of four works of nonfiction and one novel. Her most recent book is *Misunderstood: Why The Humble Rat May Be Your Best Pet Ever* (FSG 2016). She is a professor in the graduate creative writing program at Eastern Washington University. Her work has been published in a wide variety of places, including *The New York Times*, *The LA Times*, *Ploughshares*, *SB Nation*, *Glamour*, *Reader's Digest*, *Runner's World* and *JAMA*, the journal of the American Medical Association, and she writes a monthly for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Her next book, which will be published by the University of Chicago Press in Fall 2017, is for high school students on writing the college application essay. She graduated from Yale University and received an MFA from the University of Montana.



