

Portraits of Women *in the* American West

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Fig. 8.1 "The Woman Homesteader" by N. C. Wyeth, from *Letters of a woman Homesteader* by Elinore Pruitt Stewart (1913). Courtesy, Houghton Mifflin Publishers, Boston.

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THE CURATIVE SPACE OF THE AMERICAN WEST IN THE LIFE AND LETTERS OF ELINORE PRUITT STEWART

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In 1913, four years after she had settled on her Wyoming homestead, Elinore Pruitt Stewart wrote of wanting

to bring the West and its people to others who could not otherwise enjoy them. If I could only take them from whatever is worrying them and give them this bracing mountain air, glimpses of the scenery, a smell of the pines and the sage, ... I am sure their worries would diminish and my happiness would be complete.¹

She had moved to the rural West in late March 1909 to remedy her own despair. Uneducated, orphaned early in life, and a single mother, Stewart had supported herself and her daughter Jerrine in Denver working as a furnace tender, housekeeper, and laundress. But the work did not satisfy and did nothing to improve her lot. By the time she was in her mid-thirties, she felt a baffling combination of captivity and homelessness. Homesteading in Wyoming offered her the alternative of a home of her own, adequate food, and as she said, the "blue veil of distance." To that end, she hired herself out to housekeep for Clyde Stewart, a Scottish widower who owned a ranch near Burnt Fork, Wyoming.

When she arrived, she filed her homestead claim on land that adjoined Mr. Stewart's quarter section, and they married shortly thereafter.

Elinore Pruitt Stewart's vision of the West drew its power from the agrarian myth of previous generations of immigrants to America's frontier. In a region still culturally endowed with the ability to renew those who ventured into its ample spaces, Stewart redefined her domestic space by including the physical space of the West within the borders of what she considered her home. Stewart's letters to her former employer Mrs. Juliet Coney depicted both her ranch work and the West's "blue veil of distance" as key elements of her own renewal. The letters also conveyed stories of female empowerment at a time when conventional gender roles were being modified and reconfigured. Like the New Woman in more urban areas back east, Stewart desired autonomy outside the requirements of Victorian womanhood. She found such autonomy by homesteading in the open spaces of Wyoming, and in her writing joined the nineteenth-century promise of a curative American West to the early twentieth-century promise of New Womanhood for herself and for her female readers.

Most of what is known about Elinore Pruitt Stewart comes from her own published correspondence. Mrs. Coney, her correspondent in the published letters, had arranged through her Boston connections for sixteen letters to be printed serially by the *Atlantic Monthly* during the fall and early winter of 1913. The following year, Houghton Mifflin published the series, with illustrations by N.C. Wyeth, as *Letters of a Woman Homesteader*, and they commissioned another collection the next year that was entitled *Letters on an Elk Hunt*.² What is known outside of these publications has been gleaned from county records and family interviews by Susanne K. George in her 1992 biography, *The Adventures of the Woman Homesteader: The Life and Letters of Elinore Pruitt Stewart*.

Elinore Pruitt was born on June 3, 1876 in the Chickasaw Nation, Indian Territory in what is now south-central Oklahoma.³ The Chickasaw Nation census, according to George, indicates that Elinore's maternal grandmother, Mary Ann Courtney, may have been one-half Chickasaw. Elinore's father was killed while serving in the military on the Mexican border, and her mother, Josephine, married her husband's brother, Thomas Isaac Pruitt, a millwright with whom she bore eight more children.⁴

The family was poor, and Elinore taught herself to read and write after a brief schooling. Her mother, Josephine, died in childbirth when Elinore was seventeen and her stepfather died the next year in a work accident, leaving her, the oldest, to shift both for herself and her siblings. In an early letter to Mrs. Coney, Elinore confided that her relatives

"offered to take one here and there among them until we should all have a place, but we refused to be raised on the halves and so arranged to stay at Grandmother's and keep together" (15–16). Instead, she worked at a variety of jobs, including laundering for railroad crews. At twenty-six, she married Harry Cramer Rupert, a man twenty-two years her senior. Together, they filed a homestead claim in Grand, Oklahoma, and four years later Elinore gave birth to her daughter Jerrine.⁵ Details about their marriage remain obscure, though her biographer postulates a divorce because Harry Rupert eventually did remarry, as did Elinore.⁶

After separating from Harry Rupert, Elinore lived in Oklahoma City, then eventually moved to Denver to find work in early 1907. Her poverty, lack of education or parental support, as well as her status as a single mother conspired to make her feel both trapped and unsettled. She had few options for employment except manual work: "cooking, cleaning, ironing, scrubbing floors, and stoking coal furnaces."⁷ Eventually, Elinore found work with Mrs. Coney, where she was nurse and housekeeper for the weekly wage of two dollars. Disheartened and worn-out, Elinore remained far from the dreams she had for herself. Many years later, she confessed her adventurousness to Mrs. Coney, acknowledging that she

had planned to see the old missions and to go to Alaska; to hunt in Canada. I even dreamed of Honolulu. Life stretched out before me one long, happy jaunt. I aimed to see all the world I could, but to travel unknown bypaths to do it (188).

Elinore concluded the above list of ambitions with this caveat: "But first I wanted to try homesteading." The Homestead Act of 1862 offered a solution to economic problems, promising land ownership, self-employment, and agrarian subsistence. In addition, the law allowed women to apply, requiring only that they be "twenty-one years old, single, widowed, divorced, or head of a household."⁸ The Expanded Homestead Act of 1909 extended the amount of land for each filing to 320 acres.⁹ Promising both independence and freedom from want, the West was thus attractive for unmarried white women otherwise held back by more emotionally and economically claustrophobic jobs in urban areas. Sherry L. Smith cites a study revealing that "nearly twelve percent of homestead patents issued in five Wyoming counties between 1888 and 1943 went to women."¹⁰

To that end, when Elinore read an ad in the *Denver Post* in the early winter of 1909 announcing that a Wyoming rancher wanted a housekeeper, she had little difficulty deciding what to do.¹¹ Clyde Stewart had placed the ad two years after his wife, Cynthia Hurst, had died of cancer

in 1907. An immigrant from Scotland, Stewart and his first wife had no children, and at forty-one he found himself alone on his 260-acre homestead. That winter Elinore had been studying for the civil service exam, but afflicted with the grippe, she was “in pain” and desperately “blue” (226). The Reverend Father Corrigan, a Catholic priest and her tutor for the civil service exam, recommended that she look for a position as housekeeper for a rancher who might advise her on how to homestead.¹²

Elinore answered Clyde’s ad, and by the end of April 1909, Elinore and Jerrine met up with Clyde in Boulder, Colorado where his mother lived, and the three took a train from Boulder to Carter, Wyoming. From there, they traveled on a spring wagon to Burnt Fork, a small settlement fifty miles southwest of Rock Springs. They arrived at Clyde’s ranch a few miles southeast of Burnt Fork during early March. Elinore filed her homestead claim five weeks later, and shortly after that she married Clyde Stewart. However, in her published letters she would hide her marriage for more than a year, recognizing that the fact of her marriage might conflict with or discredit her claims of adventure and independence in the West. She did not want to highlight romance in her narrative, but rather, emphasize the space of the West as a cure for women who suffered from anomie or bleak prospects.

The Stewart ranch is located in southwestern Wyoming, a windy stretch of open plateaus and buttes. The elevation is high plains desert, over 6,000 feet above sea level. Vegetation is primarily “sage, greasewood, prickly pear, and alkali spike grass.”¹³ At the turn of the century, “there were an estimated 861,000 head of cattle in the state and 6,091,000 sheep,”¹⁴ and supporting cattle on such land required vastly more acreage than in the more lush regions at lower elevations with higher rainfalls. When the 1914 census declared that a population density of two people per square mile gave a region the status of “frontier,” southwestern Wyoming still qualified.¹⁵

The Stewart homestead itself is still standing, though parts of the roof are missing and the central stone chimney is partially broken (see Figure 8.2). Built of rough-hewn logs with double-square notching, the structure is located near the center of Burnt Fork valley, on a sloping hillside facing east. The Uinta Mountains lie to the south, Cedar Mountain to the northwest, and Burnt Fork Creek to the west. The house itself is relatively large, with a high-gabled center cabin built by Clyde Stewart in 1898, which is flanked by smaller additions to the north and south built by Elinore and Clyde in 1909. Elinore considered the south wing with its two 15-by-15 foot rooms her “really room,” a place of her own with space enough for all her “treasures” (137).

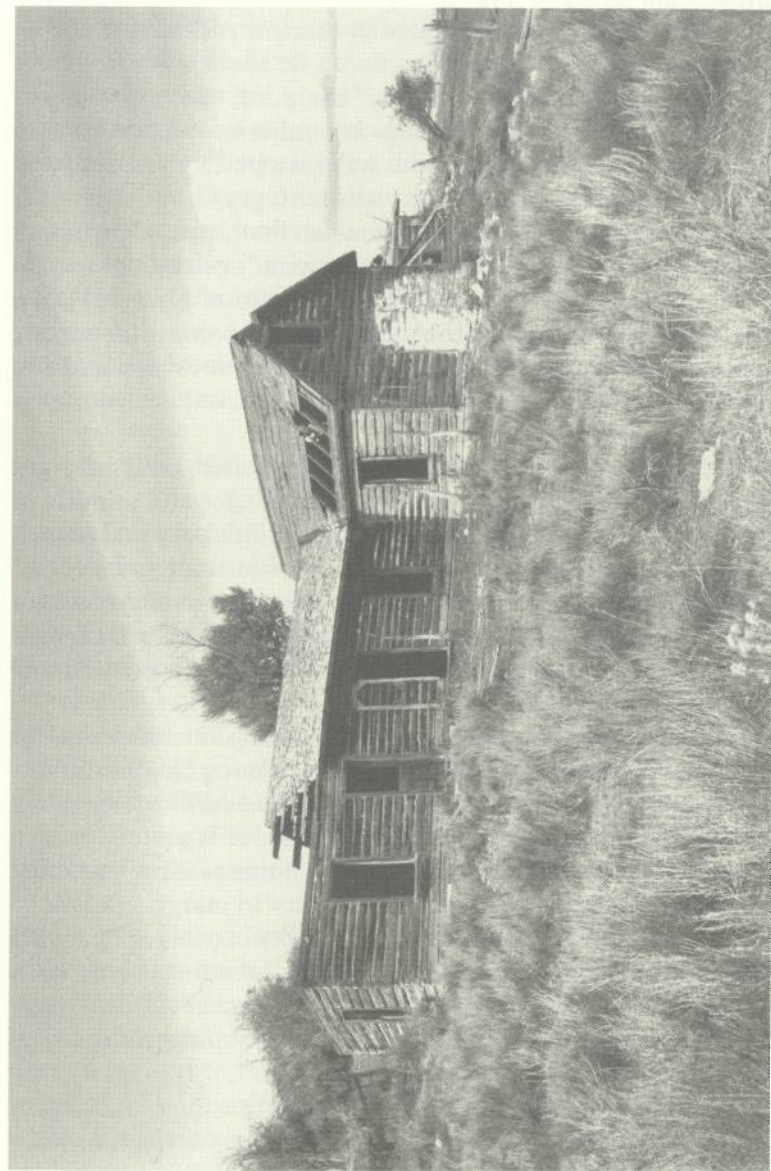


Fig. 8.2 The Stewart homestead in Burnt Fork, Wyoming. Reprinted by permission of Richard Collier, Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office, Cheyenne, Wyoming.

Elinore was deeply proud of the home she established for herself and her daughter Jerrine, as is evident in a letter dated early December 1911, inviting Mrs. Coney over for an imaginary visit: "I feel just like visiting to-night, so I am going to 'play like' you have come. It is so good to have you to chat with. Please be seated in this low rocker." (137). She proceeds to paint a word picture of her home, detailing how it was built and how she has decorated the rooms. "Every log in my house is as straight as a pine can grow. ... The logs are unhewed outside because I like the rough finish, but inside the walls are perfectly square and smooth" (138). Elinore covered the walls with gray building paper, stained the woodwork, oil-finished the wooden floor, and arranged two goatskins for the rug. In her cabinet bookcase were "my few books, some odds and ends of china, all gifts, and a few fossil curios" (140–141). She includes in her descriptive tour the many gifts she received, "showing off" the teapot Mrs. Coney had once given to her: "Now I feel that you have a fairly good idea of what my house looks like, on the inside anyway" (142).

Elinore joined her cabin to Clyde's, "though at first I did not want it that way" (77). She felt conflicted about marrying again, mindful of lost opportunities: "Jerrine was always such a dear little pal, and I wanted to just knock about foot-loose and free to see life as a gypsy sees it" (188).¹⁶ Because her own ambivalence about marriage combined with a fear of appearing inconsistent, she sidelined Clyde in her letters, still signing a letter as late as December 1911 with "Your sincere friend, Elinore Rupert" (142).¹⁷

Yet if marriage posed a potential conflict with her declared desires for economic self-sufficiency and emotional independence, Elinore also recognized the real advantages of marrying Clyde. It was difficult to sustain a homestead with just 160 acres in the dry climate of Wyoming. In fact, despite all rhetoric to the contrary, failure at homesteading was more common than success.¹⁸ Elinore saw her chance in marrying Clyde to have both a "home of her own" and the possibility of proving up on her homestead claim. To be sure, she was not homesteading on her own, as she would have her readers believe. Yet to understand her marriage as any kind of defeat is too simplistic, implying that independence was possible for women *only* outside of marriage.

Instead, Elinore seems to have enjoyed a large measure of independence within the context of her relatively egalitarian marriage, as when she declares: "I am at liberty to go where I please." (66). What started out as an obvious marriage of convenience, by all accounts, turned into a loving relationship. The tenor of their bond is captured in a photograph showing Clyde standing in front, with Elinore leaning and peaking

around him, her face at his elbow. Both are laughing at a shared joke: Clyde had bet Elinore he could find a weed in her one-acre garden, then tried to produce the weed he was keeping in his pocket but Elinore beat her "mon" to it.¹⁹

Elinore and Clyde would raise three boys together, all born between 1911 and 1913: Clyde Jr., Calvin, and Robert. They already had buried two children in 1910, their first-born son James who had lived ten months and died of erysipelas, and a daughter born prematurely, probably earlier that fall. On nearing the second anniversary of Jamie's death, Elinore wrote to Mrs. Coney, assuring her that grief had not capsized her in part because of her relationship with Clyde. Describing the funeral service of their son in which Clyde made the coffin and she said the homily to a gathered group of neighbors, Elinore wrote, "So you see, our union is sealed by love and welded by a great sorrow" (191).

In this same letter, dated December 2, 1912, Stewart summarized the key elements of her domestic scene:

When you think of me, you must think of me as one who is truly happy. It is true, I want a great many things I haven't got, but I don't want them enough to be discontented and not enjoy the blessings that are mine. I have my home among the blue mountains, my healthy, well-formed children, my clean honest husband, my kind, gentle milk cows, my garden which I make myself. I have loads and loads of flowers which I tend myself. There are chickens, turkeys, and pigs which are my own special care. I have some slow old gentle horses and an old wagon. I can load up the kiddies and go where I please any time. I have the best, kindest neighbors and I have my dear absent friends. Do you wonder I am so happy? When I think of it all, I wonder how I can crowd all my joy into one short life (192).

Clyde, her children, her neighbors, and her distant friends give Stewart a place within which to locate herself. Balanced against these relationships is work that is deeply connected to home, but work that she nonetheless performs on her own and outside the home's parameters where she can see out to that inviting "blue distance." She has her garden which "I make myself," the flowers which "I tend myself," the animals which are "my own special care." She expresses not a simple inversion of confinement into freedom, but rather a complex accommodation that allows her to affirm her home even as she modifies its expectations by way of work that connects her to the wide-open spaces of the Wyoming landscape.

When the editors of the *Atlantic Monthly* announced the publication of Stewart's letters in the back section of the magazine, they highlighted Stewart's abundant humor, even now the most noted quality of the letters: "These letters fall naturally into a series of complete stories, humorous, touching and exciting." The *Atlantic* ad, however, ignores a central theme of her letters: the work of the ranch. Instead they presented her opportunity in a frontier West as a respite from her wage-work in Denver: "The contrast they [the letters] present between the freedom of glorious opportunity and days of sweated labor in Denver give the reader an exhilarated sense of holiday."²⁰ In her editors' view, Stewart could not be working because she represented a western escape from urban work.

But such a tactic obscures the intent of the letters even as it tries to sell them. Unlike what the *Atlantic Monthly* would have had its readers believe, Stewart did not picture herself as escaping work. Instead, homesteading delivered Stewart simultaneously from the fate of urban wage work and from the pejorative stereotype of a frivolous woman. She escaped not *from work* itself but from the containment of conventional domestic codes *through the work* she performed.

Elinore's pleasure in her work, so evident in the passage cited above, is present in the letters from her first summer on the ranch. Homesteading for Elinore is a verb. Cooking for Clyde and the ranch hands, milking seven cows twice a day, cutting all the hay: she recites this list of chores with a breezy tone, declaring that "[t]his has been for me the busiest, happiest summer I can remember. I have worked very hard, but it has been work that I really enjoy" (15). Homesteading required many skills Elinore had acquired after her parents' deaths that other women, more fortunately situated, would never have had to learn. When recalling the outside work at her grandmother's home in Oklahoma, where there had been no money to hire men to do it, Stewart remembers running the mowing machine and how "my hands were hard, rough, and stained with machine oil, and I used to wonder how any Prince Charming could overlook all that in any girl he came to" (16). Such outside work traversed conventional gender codes for women, leaving a record literally on the body: "my hands were hard, rough, and stained with machine oil."

Yet the blurring of gender roles for ranch women was more the rule than exception, where "the world of work bounded women's everyday lives."²¹ Homesteading often required that women plant crops, mow hay, fix fences, butcher and cure meat, and take care of chickens and other livestock. The work was conducted outside, crossing over into the physical arena of men's work. Elizabeth Jameson concludes: "the spheres,

if separate, were permeable," allowing women to recast their domestic role.²²

Ranch women themselves understood their work by distinguishing between two kinds of labor.²³ Washing, housecleaning, and cooking were considered maintenance work, which women, like Elinore, rarely mentioned in their letters and diaries except as a source of frustration. In contrast, sustenance work, or work that produced consumable goods, was often a source of enormous pride, as when Elinore declares to Mrs. Coney that "I milked ten cows twice a day all summer; have sold enough butter to pay for a year's supply of flour and gasoline" (281). Such productive work proved a source of pleasure and personal esteem, giving women control over resources and extending the scope of their decision making and responsibility.²⁴

Of course, not all women found ranch work either pleasurable or an increase of their power, and there is much in the written evidence to indicate that women on the frontier were limited precisely because of the amount of work that needed to be done.²⁵ Even so, homestead laws promised women the possibility of financial and personal independence by granting them the legal right to own their own land and the liberty to manage their claims however they wished prior to ownership.²⁶ Such benefits inspired Stewart to want to share her good fortune with other women, particularly as a shield from the risks and degradations of urban wage labor:

I am very enthusiastic about women homesteading. It really requires less strength and labor to raise plenty to satisfy a large family than it does to go out to wash, with the added satisfaction of knowing that their job will not be lost to them if they care to keep it (214).

In Stewart's vision, the work required to succeed at homesteading would not defeat the spirit, as did the drudgery of wage labor. Instead, such work could sustain and satisfy women.

I am only thinking of the troops of *tired*, worried women, sometimes even cold and hungry, scared to death of losing their places to work, who could have plenty to eat, who could have good fires by gathering the wood, and comfortable homes of their own, if they but had the courage and determination to get them (216–217).

In a letter entitled "How It Happened" and dated June 12, 1913, Elinore recounts to Mrs. Coney how she first decided to homestead in Wyoming, remembering that she was "so blue" that she could "hardly speak without weeping." She was tired of her life in Denver, wearied by "the rattle and bang, of the glare and the soot, the smells and the hurry" of city life. Instead, what she "longed for was the sweet, free open" that homesteading promised (226). Indeed, she would construct the outdoor West as a curative space for women.

Following her move from Denver to southwest Wyoming, Stewart celebrated the solace and inspiration she discovered in the expanse of the high plains.²⁷ A praise of nature in the letters often follows a change in her domestic routine. On October 8, 1913, she writes that she finally found a woman to help her with her work, and regales her reader with the trip she took to fetch her employee. "The mountains were so majestic ... the larks were trying to outdo each other and the robins were so saucy ... while the purple asters and great pink thistles lent their charm" (231). Her description of western space sometimes possessed a human face, as when she describes a chain of buttes "looking like old men of the mountains,—so old they had lost all their hair, beard, and teeth" (58). She also considered the beauties found in the West as compensation for discomfort and pain. Taking a wagon trip to a more distant neighbor for a Christmas dinner, Stewart and her traveling companions struggled to make it over a large rise. She regretted the trip, fearing that her youngest son would not keep warm. When reassured that he "kept warm as toast," Stewart exclaimed: "The day was beautiful, and the views many times repaid us for any hardship we had suffered" (196).

Stewart's emphasis on what she saw, the views in the West, is not surprising, given the visual intensity of western landscapes. John Dorst observes that the American West is "conceived precisely in visual terms. Both literally and metaphorically the open vistas and lucid, magnifying air of this West have made the act of looking a defining feature of how we experience it as an actual place."²⁸ When Stewart recounts a day-trip to a neighbor's ranch, she lists all that is within her view:

the warm red sand of the desert; the Wind River Mountains wrapped in the blue veil of distance; the sparse gray-green sage, ugly in itself but making complete a beautiful picture; the occasional glimpse we had of shy, beautiful wild creatures. So much happiness can be crowded into so short a time" (123).

Here Stewart joins the visual expanse of Wyoming to a sense of personal abundance. It is as if the West's expanse—its physical wideness—enables Stewart to reimagine horizons within which she might thrive.²⁹ Susan

Stewart (no relation), in her investigation of how we visualize and experience our world in relation to the miniature and the gigantic, contends that the gigantic resists our attempts to know it in its entirety.

Our most fundamental relation to the gigantic is articulated in our relation to the landscape, our immediate and lived relation to nature as it "surrounds" us. ... [W]e are enveloped by the gigantic, surrounded by it, enclosed within its shadow. ... [B]oth the miniature and the gigantic may be described through metaphors of containment—the miniature as contained, the gigantic as container.³⁰

The landscape thus allows perspective on what might be made smaller by comparison. In Elinore's case, the Wyoming landscape miniaturizes the home against a far larger canvas, sapping the power of traditional domestic borders to define and contain her.

While Stewart envisioned the West as a space that freed women from drudgery, poverty, and illness, she was not the first to ascribe such rejuvenating power to the spaces of the West. She drew on a long-standing tradition that began as early as the 1840s, when health seekers had moved to the mountains and deserts in the West to cure their ailments. For consumptive patients after the Civil War, the West became such a popular destination that, according to Sheila Rothman, "the biographies of health seekers are integral to the history of the westward movement."³¹ Likewise, when Dr. S. Weir Mitchell advocated that women take his rest cure, he also prescribed that neurasthenic men "go West."³² While contending that radically decreased physical and mental activity in the sickroom would protect women's overtaxed nervous systems and restore their equilibrium, Mitchell believed that the fresh air and increased physical activity in the vast spaces of West would heal men's jangled nerves. In this way, the West was figured literally as a cure.³³

In her article, "The Nervous Origins of the American Western," Barbara Will details the complex relationship between nervous ailments and narratives of the West in her examination of Owen Wister's best-selling western, *The Virginian* (1902). Wister, originally from Philadelphia, had been diagnosed by Mitchell himself after complaining of "nervousness." Mitchell's immediate advice was to "head West *and write* about the experience" [my emphasis] because such writing functioned "as part of a cure for neurasthenia."³⁴ Owen Wister eagerly followed both aspects of the West cure, traveling to Wyoming in the summer of 1885 and then writing about his western adventures in his journals and later in his fiction.³⁵

By contrast, Mitchell's rest cure strictly prohibited women from travel, reading, or writing. Within the web of seclusion provided by the rest cure, some patients recovered. Others, of course, did not. Charlotte Perkins Gilman famously worsened, emerging from the shadows of neurasthenia only after defying Mitchell's cure. Her short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" protested the infantilizing regime of the female sickroom.³⁶ Instead of staying in the sickroom, Gilman challenged the male bias of the West cure not only through her prodigious writing career, but also through her move to California, where she found the "health, freedom, and independence that [she] had been unable to find in the East."³⁷

Like Gilman, Stewart crossed the gender divide and took up the male-identified West cure as her own. Not only did she move to the West, but she wrote of it as well, thereby recuperating and redefining the West as a remedy for ailing female readers. Mrs. Juliet Coney was, of course, Stewart's initial reader. A widowed and wealthy former schoolteacher originally from Boston, Mrs. Coney had become, by the time of her acquaintance with Stewart, a housebound invalid. Her correspondence with Stewart provided an outdoors to her otherwise inert indoor life, as when Stewart declares to Mrs. Coney that she is "so glad when I can bring a little of this big, clean, beautiful outdoors into your apartment for you to enjoy" (220). In the same letter, Stewart announces that she planned a "set of indoor outings for your invalid [friends]," women who had been enjoying the letters along with Mrs. Coney. Stewart thus extended the West's curative possibilities to her women readers by making the indoors (a place) into outings (an activity), in effect transposing the invalid's confined immobility into a shared and active liberty. Moreover, just as Stewart's productive labor transformed her homestead from a place into an activity that healed her, so Stewart intended her writing to connect her female readers to healing western landscapes.

The serial publication of the letters in the *Atlantic Monthly* expanded this initial circle of readers, bringing Stewart renown and appreciation.³⁸ She wrote to her editors at the conclusion of the series, expressing both her astonishment and pride at the response of readers, exclaiming that "you are right about my getting letters and cards from many people on account of my *Atlantic* articles." She goes on to relate how one "old lady eighty-four years old wrote me that she had always wanted to live the life I am living, but could not. . . . She said she had only to shut her eyes to see it all, to smell the pines and the sage."³⁹

The book versions of the letters only increased Stewart's success. The fact that the first edition of *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* was graced with seven original N.C. Wyeth illustrations indicates Houghton Mifflin's investment in her manuscript because Wyeth, after the publication of

Charles Scribner's Sons' 1911 illustrated edition of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, had "established himself as the foremost book illustrator of his day."⁴⁰ Elinore received \$500.00 up front for the collection of sixteen letters, and ten percent of all subsequent profits, terms typical for contracts with first-time authors. The book sold for \$1.25 and sold 1,331 copies the first year and 650 the second year on the market. From 1915 to 1923 Stewart earned a total of \$359.25 in royalties.⁴¹

Though the content of Stewart's letters was undoubtedly western in character, she was popular among the same readership that had made Owen Wister's *The Virginian* a national bestseller in 1902. Homesteading had by that time, as Dee Garceau notes, "functioned as an economic opportunity in the West alone, but as a social metaphor nationwide."⁴² In turn-of-the-century America, there was an intense appetite for stories of life on an earlier, now mythologized frontier. Zane Grey, the writer of over fifty westerns, "made the best-seller list nine times between 1914 and 1928, a figure not matched by any other writer in the first half of the twentieth century."⁴³ Henry Nash Smith explains that the appeal of such stories resided in how they depicted the West as a safety valve, providing alternatives for those unable to thrive in an urban, industrialized economy.⁴⁴ Given the potency of this vision of the West, with its attendant hopes of regeneration and rescue, stories of success in the West appealed to largely white middle-class readers who were also, not incidentally, Stewart's readers.⁴⁵

Tales of homesteading were also stories of female empowerment at a time when traditional notions of domesticity were giving way to a reconfiguration of female identity: New Womanhood. Many of these daughters of the late nineteenth century were urban, middle- to upper-middle-class women, often college educated and often single. Typically, the urban New Woman was engaged in work outside the home, whether in the professions of nursing, teaching or work in settlement houses, trade union associations, or suffrage organizations.⁴⁶ New Women had begun to imagine possibilities that Stewart was already enacting in her letters, an identity that did not deny the need for a home yet escaped the confinements of earlier generations. Hers was a distinctively western version of New Womanhood that remedied domestic drudgery with productive work outdoors, and that expanded the home to include the boundless spaces of the Wyoming landscape.⁴⁷

Elinore Pruitt Stewart would spend the rest of her life on her Wyoming ranch. She and Clyde would enjoy the company of their four children and their many friends who would come for a visit and stay for weeks or even months at a time.⁴⁸ Clyde and her children would outlive her. During her last summer in 1933, she camped in the nearby mountains,

tenting and hauling in a stove, trying to recover from persistent ailments that had afflicted her for several years. Even at the end of her life, Stewart was prescribing for herself the cure of the outdoor West. Her last letter is dated June 26, 1933, and it expresses well her lifelong love of the Wyoming landscape as well as her desire to give something of its healing power to her readers. She wishes that her correspondent, her long-time friend Josephine Harrison, was with her looking out the window at her “beloved flowers.”

You could see the mountains and you would know that on their cool slopes columbines are nodding, that higher up, under the edge of the snow, anemones are still blooming. You would like the friendly little robins that are out in my garden pulling worms out of the wet soil. I have been camping up in the juniper hills where it is so high and dry that this irrigated spot looks beautiful to me.⁴⁹

Stewart died on October 8, 1933 from a blood clot following a gallbladder operation in Rock Springs hospital. She was fifty-seven.

Stewart's letters do not always match up with her biography. She believed the promises inherent in the idealized vision of the curative West, and she offered herself up as proof, distorting some of the facts of her experience to protect the cultural fantasy. In addition to presenting herself as a widow and then hiding her subsequent marriage to Clyde, Stewart also deeded over the title to her homestead claim to her mother-in-law, Ruth Stewart, in June 1912. According to homestead law, a husband and wife could not “maintain contemporaneous residences upon different tracts under the homestead law.”⁵⁰ So even the basic fact of landownership was not as simple as Stewart would have her readers believe. While such discrepancies make the retelling of her story more complicated, they do not invalidate her self-representation. Instead, they add layers of complication and richness to her narrative. Though Stewart may not have technically homesteaded on her own, she presented herself in accord with an image that nonetheless suited her and was consistent with the autonomy she felt on the ranch—that of an independent woman homesteader.

Moreover, the fact that Stewart found ranch work and the literal space of the West liberating does not mean she completely dismantled conventional gender ideology.⁵¹ Instead, Stewart repeatedly extended domestic space into western outdoor space on her “many enjoyable outings,” always returning to “a household that does not hold her bound.”⁵² She was an independent figure who moved between two cherished spaces, in the process redefining the meaning and content of each respective

space. N. C. Wyeth's cover illustration for the Houghton Mifflin first edition of the letters captures precisely how Stewart stood neither completely within nor completely outside of domestic ideology.⁵³ In his black-and-white watercolor wash, Stewart is standing in the doorway, half in and half out, her toes hanging over the ledge of the stoop. Her daughter, Jerrine, is standing to her left, cradling a doll in her own left arm. To the right are geraniums in a pot, and chickens pluck at the ground near Elinore's feet. A washtub and rag hang on the outside wall near the door and to her left. And yet behind the open door is darkness; the interior of the home is thus occluded from view. Against this backdrop, Stewart faces out, looking straight ahead to an imagined scene in front of her. Her right hand is lifted over her eyes to provide shade as if to help her see more easily into some far distance. Stewart stands, then, both pictorially and narratively in an in-between space, a position that combines the strengths and advantages of both the home and the western landscape beyond.

In an early letter dated September 28, 1909, Stewart tells of a trip she took with her daughter on horseback through the countryside during a week Clyde was away. Camping overnight on a tableland, Stewart felt jubilant about her surroundings: “The sun was just gilding the hilltops when we arose. Everything, even the barrenness, was beautiful” (28). The day of travel was made more difficult because of the thick forest, but again she ends with the refrain that the sights were worth it: “it was quite dusky among the trees long before night, but it was all so grand and awe-inspiring” (29). The trip intensified as the day proceeded. Stewart found herself both dwarfed by and contained within the views of sky and snowy peaks, and the account escalates to a reckoning where she sees her everyday life in a spatial relation to the infinite—a relation that was, admittedly, not entirely comfortable.

Occasionally there was an opening through which we could see the snowy peaks seemingly just beyond us, toward which we were headed. But when you get among such grandeur you get to feel how little you are and how foolish is human endeavor, except that which reunites us with the mighty force called God. I was plumb uncomfortable, because all my own efforts have always been just to make the best of everything and to take things as they come (30).

The grandeur overwhelmed her, made her feel small. At the same time, this was exactly the effect she found so liberating. That same evening, Elinore and Jerrine made camp against a crevice of rock, near to a stand of “immense trees.” She lit a fire, letting the heat “into as snug

a bedroom as any one could wish" [my emphasis]. It is as if the immensity of the trees and the surrounding view allowed her to experience connectedness even more intensely, as if the two kinds of spaces, that of cozy domesticity and that of the vast outdoors, momentarily merge into one. In addition, such accommodations equalized Stewart's status in comparison to other women. Her next sentence reads: "The pine needles made as soft a carpet as the wealthiest could afford." It is as if all categories of value momentarily dissolve. Not surprisingly, that same night she kept thinking

how superior I was since I dared to take such an outing when so many poor women down in Denver were bent on making their twenty cents per hour in order that they could spare a quarter to go to the "show." I went to sleep with a powerfully self-satisfied feeling (32).

The perspective afforded by her engagement with the space of the West allowed Stewart to claim equality in a home she enjoyed herself and that she extended to other women by way of her letters. In other words, through the productive work of the ranch and by joining western space to domestic space, Stewart took ownership of the West cure for herself and for her female readers. Her desire to escape poverty and to establish a life of her own, her new womanhood, was at last realized. Her home was indeed as comforting and capacious as the western sky itself.

NOTES

1. I first read Stewart's *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* in the weeks following my own move to Wyoming in the spring of 1989. I want to thank my mom, Harriett Dykstra, for her prescient gift of Stewart's book. I also want to thank the many readers who contributed their insight to this essay: Ann Schofield, Barry Shank, Dee Garceau-Hagen, Cotten Seiler, Uta Walter, Nadine Requardt, Helen Sheumaker, Leslie Tuttle, and Jeanne Petit. Thanks to Richard Collier for his beautiful photograph of the Stewart ranch. And finally, to Eric Sandeen, who first encouraged me to write about what I most read: American autobiography.
This letter is dated May 5, 1913. Elinore Pruitt Stewart, *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Co., 1913–1914; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914; reprinted 1988), 220–221. This reprint of the original edition also reproduces the illustrations by N. C. Wyeth. All subsequent citations of *Letters* will be designated by the page number in the text.
2. Houghton Mifflin published a second collection of Stewart's letters in 1915, entitled *Letters on an Elk Hunt*. This collection had been commissioned by the *Atlantic Monthly*, which published them in 1915 in the February through May issues. The letters were based on an elk hunt Elinore undertook with Clyde Stewart, Jerrine, and Clyde and Elinore's sons, Calvin and Robert, as well as another hunting party. This second collection does not enter directly into my discussion here, but the fact of their commission registers the popularity of the initial volume of letters. *Letters on an Elk Hunt* by

a Woman Homesteader (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, originally published in 1915; republished in 1979).

3. This biographical information comes from Susanne K. George's biography, *The Adventures of The Woman Homesteader: The Life and Letters of Elinore Pruitt Stewart* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992). Sherry L. Smith gives both a different birthplace and maternal name than George, stating that Elinore was "born in Fort Smith, Arkansas, to Elizabeth Courtney Pruitt." Smith, "Single Women Homesteaders: The Perplexing Case of Elinore Pruitt Stewart," *The Western Historical Quarterly* (May 1991): 166.
4. What has proved difficult to measure or understand is how Stewart's sense of herself may have been shaped by a possible Indian cultural and/or familial heritage. She nowhere indicates a self-consciousness of this cultural position, especially in relation to the West. She seems to have obscured this part of her history even in her own prodigious self-knowledge, ascribing her financial worries to both her gender and her class. This occlusion is also in the historiography—there is no mention of how her youth on the Oklahoma reservation may have shaped her understanding of either her life circumstances or the West. This study follows suit, with the unhappy result that the space of the West appears without reference to race. Indeed, the West is the space wherein America's racism found another bloody stage. Moreover, it was on this very stage that "whiteness" and masculinity were restaged again and again to recover their conquering vitality. See especially, Gail Bederman's introduction, "Remaking Manhood," in her *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 1–44; Jennifer S. Tuttle, introduction to *The Crux: A Novel* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002; originally published in 1911), 36–42.
5. Sherry L. Smith, "Single Women Homesteaders," 166.
6. George, *The Adventures*, 5–6. This personal history is further complicated because Stewart portrays herself in her letters as a widow. She may have been embarrassed by the failure of her first marriage or was protecting Jerrine. Perhaps she did not feel her first marriage legitimate in any case. But even Ellery Sedgewick, her editor at the *Atlantic Monthly*, thought she was a widow, writing in his autobiography that Stewart's "husband had been killed in a train wreck and she was left with a two-year-old." Ellery Sedgewick, *The Happy Profession* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1946), 198.
7. George, *The Adventures*, 6. Thomas Dublin states that "wage labor, which appeared to increase women's independence in the first half of the nineteenth century, became a major constitutive element in the dependence of women ... by century's end." Dublin, *Transforming Women's Work: New England Lives in the Industrial Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 27. Alice Kessler-Harris documents how, by the late nineteenth century, "[u]nskilled, largely unorganized, and crowded into few occupations, women found themselves subject to some of the worst conditions of any wage workers." *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 142. See also Ann Schofield, "To do & to be": *Portraits of Four Women Activists, 1893–1986* (Boston: Northeastern Press, 1997).
8. Smith, "Single Women Homesteaders," 163.
9. Acreage was restricted to "non-irrigable, non-mineral lands having no merchantable timber which were within the states of Colorado, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming, and the territories of Arizona and New Mexico." In 1912 the act was amended to reduce the amount of years of residency from five to three years. For an expanded discussion, see Stanford J. Layton, *To No Privileged Class: The Rationalization of Homesteading and Rural Life in the Early Twentieth-Century American West* (Salt Lake City, UT: Brigham Young University, 1988), 21–35.
10. Smith, "Single Women Homesteaders," 164. Proving up on homestead claims posed challenges to even the most experienced, and "[s]tatistically, only one in three women

- managed to remain long enough to get deeds to their farms." Paula Bauman, "Single Women Homesteaders in Wyoming, 1880–1930," *Annals of Wyoming*, 58 (1986): 42.
11. Although Elinore claims in the *Letters* that she herself had placed the want ad in the newspaper (227), her biographer states that it was Clyde who placed the ad in the *Denver Post*. George, *The Adventures*, 11–12.
 12. Stewart had, of course, experience homesteading with her first husband in Oklahoma, but little is known about this time of her life, and more importantly, there is no way to determine if Father Corrigan knew of her earlier history of homesteading when he suggested that she make such inquiries.
 13. Dee Garceau, *The Important Things in Life: Women, Work, and Family in Sweetwater Country, Wyoming, 1880–1929* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 16. Garceau's study is an excellent source for details about the landscape of southwestern Wyoming. See especially pp. 15–38.
 14. Gretel Erlich, forward to Elinore Pruitt Stewart, *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), xiii.
 15. Garceau, *The Important Things*, 35.
 16. The local justice of the peace came to the Stewart ranch to perform the ceremony. The morning of the wedding, Elinore was "hustling" to get the house in order and to make dinner for the guests. In her hurry, she neglected to change clothes for the ceremony, forgetting "all about the old shoes and the apron I wore" (187).
 17. Sherry L. Smith rightly notes that Stewart "seems to set individualism at odds with marriage and family ... [even as] she blended them quite effectively into her own life." Smith understands such an apparent contradiction in a larger historical frame, arguing that Stewart keeps with western women of the time who promoted a "proto-feminist" viewpoint though they "operated on a daily basis in the cultural context of domestic ideology." Smith, "Single Women Homesteaders," 181.
 18. Families often had qualified members file on adjoining lands to increase total acreage. A homesteader would have to pay filing and surveyor fees, buy livestock, building supplies, and seed as well as equipment for digging a well, laying fence, and building an irrigation system—expenses that often proved too much for a single person, according to Garceau (*The Important Things*, 118). In her study of homesteading in the high desert region east of the Cascades in Oregon, Barbara Allen concludes that homesteading "was, in fact, a dismal failure, for only about half of the homesteaders stayed long enough to gain title to the lands they had claimed and fewer still managed to make a living from them afterwards." Allen, *Homesteading the High Desert* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1987), xviii. For a powerful account of the generational legacy of homesteading failures, see Jonathon Raban's *Bad Land: An American Romance* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996.)
 19. Suzanne K. George reproduces the photograph with the accompanying story that I relate here. But nowhere does she cite either where in the uncollected letters this remembrance appears or who might have this photograph. George, *The Adventures*, illustration section following p. 88.
 20. "The Atlantic Monthly Advertiser," *The Atlantic Monthly*, June 1913, 97. The feature of Stewart's prose often noted has been her repeated flights of fancy and good humor. In a tone not unlike Mark Twain, Stewart is the raconteur, quick with a pungent line of description: "he grasped my hand and wrung it as if it were a chicken's neck" (244). Stewart was particularly apt to adopt a satiric tone when describing her domestic dilemmas. Nancy Walker suggests that such humor shares common elements: "[A] female persona or first-person narrator recounts, with some degree of self-deprecation, her chaotic attempts to achieve a level of ideality as a homemaker that is dictated by the culture. ... While offering no solution to the problems of the homemaker, they have served as a relatively safe means of protest about those problems." Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988), 52. Sherry L. Smith convincingly argues, however, that "the cheery tone ... does not completely mask the harsh realities," Smith, "Single Women Homesteaders," 176.
 21. Garceau, *The Important Things*, 88.
 22. Elizabeth Jameson, "Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers: True Womanhood in the American West" in *The Women's West* edited with introductions by Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 150. Joan Jensen, in her landmark study of mid-Atlantic farm women in the antebellum period describes how farm women transported their product to the marketplace to trade for supplies and labor. Through such production, Jensen argues, women "loosened the bonds" of their domestic role. Joan Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1750–1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), see especially 79–113. Dee Garceau makes clear, however, that for ranch women "the meaning of 'outside work' is best understood in terms of their identity as contributors to a successful ranch," rather than "an individual accomplishment" that increased their power in relation to men. Instead, "even as their daily lives increasingly required crossing over into men's work, women minimized the import of such crossover by describing it as service to family—a familiar touchstone of female gender identity." Garceau, *The Important Things*, 101, 89.
 23. Garceau, *The Important Things*, 94.
 24. Garceau, *The Important Things*, 94–99. Garceau acknowledges Susan Armitage's earlier study of household work on Colorado homesteads, which first articulated the difference between maintenance and sustenance work. See Armitage, "Household Work and Childrearing on the Frontier," *Sociology and Social Research* 63 (April 1979): 467–74.
 25. Lillian Schlissel maintains that "women did not greet the idea of going West with enthusiasm" because of the inordinate demands such an extended dislocation would impose. "The West to them meant the challenge of rearing a family and maintaining domestic order against the disordered life on the frontier." Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 155. For an excellent examination of this debate in the historiography, see Katherine Harris, *Long Vistas: Women and Families on Colorado Homesteads*, (Niwtot: University Press of Colorado, 1993), 1–24.
 26. Robert Cousins argues that "[b]y keeping her homesteading efforts constantly before us ... Stewart strongly suggests that her remarkable freedom is a result of her status as an independent property owner" [author's emphasis]. Cousins, "Citizenship and Selfhood: Negotiating Narratives of National and Personal Identity, 1900–1920" (Ph.D. diss., Purdue University, 1997), 90.
 27. What I want to denote is the physical distance and expanse of the western space, as compared to the spaces of more urban areas. I do not want to imply that the wide-openness of the Wyoming landscape means that the space was uninhabited. The West was not "virgin land," as Henry Nash Smith implies in his 1950 masterwork of the same title. Indeed, Nash Smith concedes in his 1986 essay that he had not accounted for "the tragic dimensions of the Westward Movement." Nash Smith, "Symbol and Idea in *Virgin Land*," *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 21–35. For a discussion of how the West denoted freedom through its putative emptiness, see Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 50–52. In *The Legacy of Conquest*, Patricia Nelson Limerick argues, "the history of the West is a study of a place undergoing conquest and never fully escaping its consequences." Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), 26. For a historiography of the promise and brutality accompanying western expansion as articulated in women's writing, see Brigitte Georgi-Findlay, *The Frontiers of*

- Women's Writing: Women's Narratives and the Rhetoric of Westward Expansion* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996), 1–18.
28. John Dorst, *Looking West* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 9. Wallace Stegner links western space with vision in this memorable formulation: "Distance, space, affects people as surely as it has bred keen eyesight into pronghorn antelope." Stegner, *The American West as Living Space* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987), 27.
 29. Women responded to open landscapes in richly various ways, from delight to revulsion and fear. Carol Fairbanks divides the response to the prairie landscape in fiction into four categories: prairie as garden, as wilderness, as real estate, and as wasteland. See Fairbanks, *Prairie Women: Images in American and Canadian Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 68–75. Some historians have argued that the potential erasure of the defining borders of the home inspired frontier women to adhere more rigorously to domestic ideals to protect their status within the home. See, for instance, Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840–1880* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979).
 30. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 71.
 31. Sheila M. Rothman, *Living in the Shadow of Death: Tuberculosis and the Social Experience of Illness in American History* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 132.
 32. Neurasthenia confounded the afflicted individuals and their families, clergy, and doctors as to its exact causes or a sure-fire cure. Diagnosis was further complicated by the wide range of symptoms that sometimes mimicked those of older disease categories such as hysteria and hypochondriasis. Barbara Sicherman, "The Uses of a Diagnosis: Doctors, Patients, and Neurasthenia," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 32, no.2 (January 1977). By 1910, however, neurasthenia had fallen out of diagnostic fashion not only because a pathological basis for the disease had not been discovered, but also because the diagnosis could no longer interpret symptoms subsequent to the work of Freud. That is, the medical category was replaced by more satisfying and rigorous psychodynamic and psychoanalytical explanations for listlessness, weakness, tremors, fits, and other psychosomatic ailments once listed under the rubric of neurasthenia. See F. G. Gosling, *Before Freud: Neurasthenia and the American Medical Community, 1870–1910* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1987). For a discussion of the dynamics of male neurasthenia and its connection to work and vocation, see Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 84–92. For an explanation of how neurasthenia was construed as a form of woman's work, see Natalie A. Dykstra, "'Trying to Idle': Work and Illness in *The Diary of Alice James*" in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, ed. Paul Longmore and Laurie Umanski (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 107–130.
 33. According to Jennifer Tuttle, "the rest cure and the West Cure were complementary parts of one process through which normative gender identities were constructed and reinforced." Tuttle, introduction to *The Crux: A Novel*, 45.
 34. Barbara Will, "The Nervous Origins of the American Western," *American Literature* 70, no. 2 (June 1998): 303–304.
 35. While traveling across the plains of Nebraska in 1885, Wister mused: "I don't wonder a man never comes back after he has once been here for a few years." Owen Wister Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, Typescript of Diary, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY.
 36. The scholarship on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* is far-reaching and diverse, but critics agree that Gilman's fictive representation of one woman's experience in the sickroom was an indictment of nineteenth-century domesticity. See especially,

- Diane Price Herndl, *Invalid Women: Figuring Feminine Illness in American Fiction and Culture, 1840–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 129–133; Gillian Brown, *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 121–169. For a discussion of the rest cure, see Ellen L. Bassuk, "The Rest Cure: Repetition or Resolution of Victorian Women's Conflicts?" in *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 141–142. Nancy Theriot, "Women's Voices in Nineteenth-Century Medical Discourse: A Step toward Deconstructing Science," *Signs* 19, no. 1 (autumn 1993): 8; Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990; originally published in 1935), 100.
37. Tuttle, introduction to *The Crux: A Novel*, 42.
 38. The *Atlantic Monthly* would publish Stewart's letters twice more: "The Return of the Woman Homesteader," *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1919, 590–96; and "Snow: An Adventure of the Woman Homesteader," *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1923, 780–785.
 39. Elinore Pruitt Stewart, *Atlantic Monthly* April 1914, 532.
 40. Unfortunately, the correspondence between N. C. Wyeth and Houghton Mifflin, now held at the Houghton Library, began in November 1918, several years after the publication of Stewart's book. I could find no reference to Stewart in Wyeth's letters to the publishers, nor does David Michaelis, his most recent biographer, mention her. David Michaelis, *N.C. Wyeth: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 211.
 41. These calculations were made on the basis of account books held in the Houghton Mifflin Papers. As late as 1930, a patron of the Atlantic Book Company bookstore inquired of Stewart's whereabouts: "Will you please write the address of Elinore P. Stewart, author of the Letters of a Woman Homesteader to the name on the front of the enclosed postcard. We have had this request from a customer of ours who evidently wishes to correspond with the author." Business correspondence between Atlantic Book Company and Houghton Mifflin, 27 February 1930, Houghton Mifflin Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
 42. Garceau, *The Important Things*, 127.
 43. Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 164. More broadly, Roderick Nash notes that readers "seemed to have an insatiable appetite for nature novels in the first three decades of the twentieth century." Nash, *The Nervous Generation: American Thought, 1917–1930* (Chicago, IL: Rand McNally & Co., 1970), 141. Interestingly enough, however, Nash only implicitly connects this craving for representations of nature to any "neurasthenic world-view," even in a study entitled *The Nervous Generation*.
 44. Nash Smith states that "[t]he doctrine of the safety valve was an imaginative construction which masked poverty and industrial strife with the pleasing suggestion that a beneficent nature stronger than any human agency, the ancient resource of Americans, the power that had made the country rich and great, would solve the new problems of industrialism." Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), 206.
 45. Smith, "Single Women Homesteaders," 177. This proclivity on the part of eastern readers no doubt in part accounts for Mrs. Coney's success in finding a publisher for the letters. As Smith says, "The publisher of *Atlantic Monthly* recognized her talent for expressing the perceptions, hopes, and aspirations of an American type: a woman homesteader. So, they published her letters" 180. Brigitte Georgi-Findlay, following J. Jackson Lears, argues that the popularity of western narratives of hardship with eastern readers at the turn of the century occurred "at a time when people ... felt that their

lives had become too soft, too civilized." Georgi-Findlay, *The Frontiers of Women's Writing*, 118.

46. For a fuller discussion of this complicated transition among middle-class white women between "true womanhood" and the "new womanhood" of the Progressive era, especially regarding issues of work, see Ann Schofield, "To do & to be," 3–19; Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*, 142–179; Carroll Smith Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 244–296; Angel Kwolek-Folland, *Engendering Business: Men and Women in the Corporate Office, 1870–1930* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press), 41–69; Anne Ruggles Gere, *Intimate Practices: Literacy and Cultural Work in U.S. Women's Clubs, 1880–1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 134–170.
47. Ironically, Stewart was living a daily life more in keeping with women homesteaders in the 1870s and 1880s. Rural Wyoming women in the opening decades of the twentieth century kept house like the generation before them, despite some household modernizations, such as manual washing machines. Garceau, *The Important Things*, 92.
48. In a letter dated February 19, 1925, Stewart aptly expresses her love for her many friends: "My only quarrel with life is that it will not be long enough for me to get my loving done up. I just love people, I just love to love them." George, *The Adventures*, 86–87.
49. George, *The Adventures*, 194.
50. Language from court decisions is quoted by Smith in "Single Women Homesteaders," 172.
51. To modify or dilute the power of a particular ideology to shape choices and behavior does not mean absolute or unilateral opposition to that same ideology. Lora Romero elegantly argues this point in her investigation of antebellum American literature, *Home Fronts: Domesticity and Its Critics in the Antebellum United States*. Domesticity, in her reading, was a popular and powerful ideology of gender, politics, and cultural production because it gave "people an expansive logic, a meaningful vocabulary, and rich symbols through which to think about their world." Domesticity, then, was not a uniform or static system. Likewise, resistance to domestic codes was not complete or unitary. For "[i]f one cannot stand entirely 'outside' of ideology, then one cannot stand entirely 'inside' of it either." Lora Romero, *Home Fronts: Domesticity and its Critics in the Antebellum United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 19, 6. Gail Bederman contends that gender ideology hides the ways in which it is a historical process by appearing to be uniform. "Part of how gender functions is to hide these contradictions and to camouflage the fact that gender is dynamic and always changing." Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 7.
52. Robert Cousins, "Citizenship and Selfhood," 88.
53. Wyeth himself had spent a sojourn in the West. In the summer of 1904, according to his recent biographer, David Michaelis, Wyeth found himself at a crossroads in his relationship with Carolyn Bockius, his future wife. An easterner, he went west. "Lighting out for the Territories, N.C. Wyeth donned the disguise that his heroes—Roosevelt, Wister, Remington—had adopted at moments of personal crisis. He became a cowboy." That October, from the eastern high plains of Colorado, Wyeth wrote to Carolyn: "Out of the north window, plains; out of the south window, plains; out of the east window, plains; out of the west window, plains." But, according to Michaelis, "[t]he exaggerated size and scale of the land suited him." David Michaelis, *N.C. Wyeth: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 116, 117, and 121. For a discussion of how western women in the early twentieth century compare to earlier images of pioneer women, see Annette Stott, "Prairie Madonnas and Pioneer Women: Images of Emigrant Women in the Art of the Old West," *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies* 21 (1996): 299–325.