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Fighting for recovery: foremothers and feminism in the 1970s

This article is concerned with feminism and the recovery of foremothers during the 1970s: its constraints, evasions and outcomes. The process of recovering figures from the past and attributing meaning to them is of course fundamental to traditions in historical research and writing. It is always a charged project intellectually and ideologically, and not infrequently freighted with personal meaning as well. However, the recovery by second-wave feminists of a history 'of our own' has always been acknowledged – and was recognised from the start – to be deeply significant for the feminist movement itself. In the US, it was a project looking to affirm the centrality of women to national culture, through rediscovering women of national influence and inserting them within key historical narratives. Just as important was the possibility of finding and developing a back-story – bright or baleful – to inform and historicise contemporary feminists' understanding of their own experience, thought and aspiration. This was work that could power changes in consciousness as well as inspiring activism. Indeed, the writing of history generally was experienced by some feminists as a strand of activism: Judith Bennett has described the 'clarity of that 1970s ideal of a seamless union of history and feminism' in a 'heady mixture of activism and writing.'¹

This work of feminist recovery in the US during the 1970s has been narrated in a number of ways: as an arc of triumph at the outset of second-wave historiography, as interrupted or problematized by other feminist projects, and, especially, as undercut by the growing awareness on the part of dominant groups in US feminism of the significance of difference, particularly in terms of

‘race’ but also in relation to class.² Here I want to track the recovery of a particular women during the 1970s in order to look at how this historical work, even at its most blithely Anglo-American in focus, its most untroubled by difference, its most evidently mainstream, operated as a focus for argument about feminism.

By the mid-1970s, the work of ‘making the invisible woman visible’ – the invisible white woman that is – had reached a high point in academe, whether such activity involved bringing historical figures’ roles in public life and the professions back into mainstream history, or proposing root and branch change in the categories that structured conventional historical research (for example to include the quotidian life of the domestic space). These activities operated in parallel with one another, in some cases oblivious of their differences, in others deeply engaged in debate. But, of course, the project of recovery of foremothers was scarcely confined to universities. Patrice McDermott has described ‘a chasm’ opening up between feminist scholarship and a broader feminist community of activists outside the academy.³ Perhaps so, but many amateur and local historians shared their scholarly sisters’ commitment to recovery projects (and their ideological diversity). In the introduction of a volume of pioneer reminiscence that first appeared in 1976, published by the Women’s Press, the editors wrote of their excitement in finding ‘heroines we could call our own – magnificent women of whom we’d never before heard a word’ and the sense that theirs ‘was not the first generation to be humiliated by women’s traditional role ... to dare to question.’⁴⁴ Further, recoveries of women from the past were taking place across the broader arena of mainstream American debates about women and feminism in the 1970s, a

cultural space in which certain historical types and figures had long been resonant. It is this complex terrain of recovery, in which recoveries collided with one another within and beyond the movement, that I want to open up here.

In using 'fighting for recovery' in my title, I want to foreground how energetically those involved strove to make their different understandings of historical figures stick; but also to convey some sense of the compressed interpretative spaces within which protagonists struggled over the recovered subject. I hope also to draw attention to the particular difficulties around recovering the sexual life of a historical figure. Women's bodies, sexuality and the sexual politics of male/female relationships lay alongside equality of rights and opportunity at the heart of 1970s feminism. However, recovering the sexual world of foremothers proved an altogether more problematic task than charting their achievements in the spheres of social, political and economic life.

I want to start with a novelist's struggle to recover a woman who had lived much of her life in that most culturally resonant zone in American national culture: the nineteenth-century American west. The novel concerned, Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose*, was published in 1971 to some acclaim (it won the Pulitzer prize), and it was specifically concerned with the process of recovery.⁶ Stegner, a western American writer, cultural historian, conservationist and teacher at Stanford, and someone who had positioned himself as saturated with the culture and traditions of the American west, made extensive and unattributed use of the unpublished letters and memoirs of Mary Hallock Foote, a writer and illustrator of some reputation in the late nineteenth century who had migrated to the Far-west in 1876. The novel included transcriptions of Foote's letters, sometimes at

great length, as well as quotation from her (at the time) unpublished reminiscences. That Stegner did not attribute Foote's words to her stemmed from an agreement that he had made with one of Foote's grandchildren to change the names of the key figures in order to maintain the family's privacy. The family had been pleased that a well-known writer wanted to recover their grandmother's experiences in a novel, but they did not wish to become the object of public attention. Accordingly, Stegner changed Foote's name to Susan Burling Ward, along with the names of other central figures.

Subsequently, however, when *Angle of Repose* appeared, some members of the family were surprised and irritated to see the sheer quantity of Foote's writing reproduced in the novel, writing that readers of the novel would naturally assume to be Stegner's invention. So, for example, Stegner had been praised in reviews for his sense of place, yet his perceptions had derived – in some cases had actually been lifted – from Foote's writing. Foote's granddaughter wrote: 'I resent the fact that he got the Pulitzer Prize for his sense of place, when most of the things that established the sense of place are direct quotes of what my grandmother wrote.'⁷

The difficult and apparently, in 1971, already sensitive question of recovery as appropriative (and appropriative in the interests of the famous man recovering a woman belonging to her family, rather than for the sake of enhancing the memory of a loved relative) was not the only problem, however. What proved much more contentious for the family (and subsequently others) was Stegner's belief that, given that he had decided to write a novel, he had the right to manipulate the material he had at hand. Actually, it had not been Stegner's original intention to write a novel based on Foote's experiences. Faced

with her papers he considered whether to write a biography before turning to fiction, on the grounds that there was not enough material of interest for a full volume. However, having decided to generate a fiction from Foote's papers, Stegner struggled with the task: 'The novel got very complex on me before it was done. It gave me trouble: I had too many papers, recorded reality tied my hands...'⁸ Foote's writing, in other words, proved insufficient to the themes he wanted to use her life to explore, themes that he was finding difficult to manage. As a result (and this was the move that was to cause most outrage) Stegner decided to 'warp' Foote's life – to use his term – and to plot a sexual intrigue within a narrative that otherwise followed Foote's life quite closely. He added an unconsummated affair between Foote and one of her husband's employees: an absorbing distraction that results in the drowning of her little daughter as well as the ruin of her relationship with her husband.⁹

Finally, appropriation and fictional warping aside, *Angle of Repose* drew attention to elements in Foote's correspondence that had not been known or acknowledged by the family (who had not read the papers themselves). Firstly, finding in the letters indications of the emotionally charged relationship between Foote and her friend Helena Gilder, Stegner raised the issue of whether theirs was a lesbian love. Secondly, reading hints in Foote's letters as to her husband's problems with drinking, Stegner gave this issue a determining role in the plot. Put in simple terms, he portrays a prudish coldness in his Foote figure that plays a part in driving her husband to the drinking binges that, in turn, cause her to look elsewhere for emotional fulfilment.

Here, then, was the source of an ensuing argument over what might be made – what should and what 'needed' to be made – of a particular woman's life.

What makes the case especially interesting, though, is that Stegner was himself evidently highly sensitive to these problems of appropriation, distortion and exposure, to the point of attempting to address them in a second sketchily-written plot in which a retired academic, Lyman Ward, becomes absorbed in his grandmother's papers and forms a narrative of her life; a position closely comparable, of course, to Stegner's. Lyman Ward assumes his grandmother to be easily recovered by reference to broadly held beliefs about genteel Victorian women; but we witness him finding her breaking free from his assumptions about what he believes her to have been capable of knowing, feeling and doing. In sum, Stegner's 'trouble' with recovery is projected onto his surrogate's developing relationship with a female ancestor.

This second plot shows – rather presciently – two protagonists fighting over the recovery of Foote and, particularly interesting here, one of them is a feminist. On one side, Stegner has his surrogate, Lyman Ward, a wounded and very vulnerable figure, engaged in recovery of a grandmother he loved and knew well; that is, a woman whom he has some right to recover and memorialise (as Stegner had been given the right by Foote's family to use her papers). On the other, the recovery of this Foote figure cannot be committed to print by the exhausted and disabled Ward, but by a young feminist, Shelly, a 'card carrying member of this liberated generation', who questions Ward's pained vision of his grandmother's life. Shelly may have none of Ward's historical understanding, but she undoubtedly has a direct and urgent interest in understanding and interpreting a foremother.¹¹

Thus Stegner's address to the problems around recovery is not only positioned within an argument about feminist recovery, it is also closely linked

with questions around women's sexual autonomy. As Deborah Paes de Barross points out, it was in imagining Foote's sexual life, her sexual repression and then her passion for a man who was not her husband, that Stegner was most evidently inventive: 'Stegner – who changes so few facts about Foote's life – dramatically changes those facts that have to do with Foote's sexuality.'¹⁵ Shelly's particular interest is in Susan Burling Ward's sexual life. She offers her own views on it, while giving the horrified Ward (who has been abandoned by his wife in favour of another man) chapter and verse on her own sexual adventures and counter-cultural aspirations for male-female relationships.¹⁰ Ward himself is tortured by questions around women's sexual autonomy and the lack of sexual fulfilment in marriage: why does 'Susan Burling Ward' desire her husband's employee and not her husband, and why has his own wife, apparently content, changed sexual partners? Why does Shelly set such store by sexual freedom?

Angle of Repose, then, was not simply a work of recovery on the part of the author, a project striated with contradiction and anxiety, arguably even hysteria, it was also a novel about recovery. Stegner was evidently hostile to feminism, but he plainly recognises recovery to be seminal to the feminist project and indeed engages the possibility that it should be women (rather than men) who set down the writing and experience of their foremothers. Equally, Stegner clearly believed marriage to be a critically important institution, but he sets questions of sexual autonomy and sexuality at the heart of the work of recovery leaves them unresolved. If this is the point that Stegner had reached in 1971, what was the feminist recovery of Foote looking like by comparison? In addressing this question, I want to turn now to the historical settings to which

Foote was most obviously recoverable by feminists in the 1970s: first, to privatised, white, middle-class domesticity, and then to the landscape of the American west.

In 1975 as the vanguard of feminist history saw a turn to the 'celebration of an at least semi-autonomous separate cultural realm' for women 'with distinctive values and institutions,' Foote was mobilised, albeit briefly, in one of the most significant essays in the feminist historical field of the late twentieth century: Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's 'The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America.'¹⁸ This time Foote proved more than sufficient to Smith-Rosenberg's argument about the past and, implicitly, the past's links with the present. Smith-Rosenberg had found a route out of the conventional cultural practice of portraying nineteenth-century women as repressed and profoundly limited in a patriarchal society. She drew instead a picture of a richly emotional intimacy enjoyed between women within and across their homes: 'a secure, empathetic world' in which 'women could share sorrows, anxieties, and joys, confident that the other had experienced similar emotions.'¹⁹ Of Smith-Rosenberg's two key examples of 'intense, loving' and life-long friendships between women, one was the relationship between Mary Hallock Foote and Helena Gilder to which Stegner had attached the term **lesbian** in *Angle of Repose*. Smith-Rosenberg's analysis rested, of course, on the same correspondence to which Stegner had gained access through Foote's descendants and that had subsequently been lodged in the Green Library at Stanford.

Three issues come to the fore when one sets Stegner's recovery of Foote beside Smith-Rosenberg's: the use of the letters, the reflection on their interpretation, and the representation of the life. Where Stegner had edited (and in some cases altered) lengthy sections of the letters to trace the contours – and the limitations – of the genteel Victorianism he was exploring through 'Susan Burling Ward', Smith-Rosenberg, by contrast, uses much briefer sections to emphasize the high emotional pitch of Foote's and Gilder's relationship.

Elements of the letters that, for example, made evident the sense of distance that Foote felt from Gilder or showed the importance of cultural capital to both, were not used to complicate the argument.

Further, and perhaps more surprisingly, Smith-Rosenberg, showed a distinct unease in examining questions of recovering nineteenth-century foremothers' sexuality. Like Stegner, she reproduced the following passage from one of Foote's letters only to problematize her response to it:

I wanted so to put my arms round my girl of all the girls in the world and tell her . . . I love her as wives do love their husbands, as friends who have taken each other for life-and believe in her as I believe in my God. . . . If I didn't love you do you suppose I'd care about anything or have ridiculous notions and panics and behave like an old fool who ought to know better. I'm going to hang on to your skirts. . . . You can't get away from [my] love.

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Stegner's wounded surrogate, Lyman Ward, comments that reading 'that one makes me feel like a Peeping Tom'. Smith-Rosenberg, while making the point that 'Molly and Helena were lovers – emotionally if not physically,' situates herself at 'a distance of a hundred years and from a post-Freudian cultural

perspective', averring that 'It is clearly difficult ... to decipher the complexities of Molly and Helena's relationship.'²¹ Stegner's anxiety was expressed through his narrator's reference to the limited perspectives and compromising nature of a man looking at a woman's private expression. Smith-Rosenberg's was a different point of departure, clearly, but also an equivocal one: Foote's writing was too distant, too different, and too difficult to read to really drive her conclusions home.

Finally, focused on the private letters they found so compelling, Stegner and Smith-Rosenberg both sealed their subjects within the private sphere. Both remove Foote's (and Gilder's) public career and ambitions from the discussion. Neither acknowledges Gilder's role in launching and sustaining Foote's career. ('Helena' is glossed in a footnote as 'a New York friend' in Smith-Rosenberg's article.) Nor did the 'female world of love and ritual' engage the complex interplay of private and working lives played out in Foote's and others' homes with any more enthusiasm than Stegner in his representation of an emotionally strangled Victorian household.²² Thus the questions about women's intimate lives that Foote raised for these ideologically opposed workers in the fields of recovery remained – kept under the historian's microscope, as it were – behind closed doors.

Nothing can detract from the magisterial significance of Smith-Rosenberg's article. The idea of a 'female world' was not only powerful ideologically and responsive to important strands of contemporary feminism, it also generated a wealth of subsequent scholarly recovery. What I want to notice here, however, is that Smith-Rosenberg keeps a tight hold, as it were, on what

Foote's writing is allowed to express. There is a tentative quality to her suggestions about same-sex intimacy. There are limits on this recovery.

Smith-Rosenberg chose not to give special significance to Foote's migration westwards, the defining event of her adult life. Her central argument was, after all, that the intimacies of the 'female world' survived regardless of separation through marriage and movement. Nonetheless, the figure of the 'pioneer woman' or the 'frontier' or 'westerling' woman was a profoundly important one culturally and a useful subject for feminist recovery. The pioneering west of popular imagination had always been gendered (and white) and women had always been visible: North American cities were dotted with statues of doughty, muscular pioneer women, their children about their skirts. Indeed, this figure of feminine endurance and hard work had long been specifically associated with patriotic endeavour: in 1913 Willa Cather's novel of Scandinavian settlement in Nebraska, *O Pioneers*, was printed in a pocket edition for soldiers; during the Second World War, war effort posters showed pioneer women on the land.

The history of the American west had been a popular field for feminist historians from the start, not only because western history was unquestionably of national importance, but also because the figures they 'recovered', the unfettered and economically active pioneer woman, seemed to have acted out, before the fact, key second-wave feminist solutions to the frustrations of middle-class suburban domesticity. Arrival in the west had always and could still, in the 1970s, be imagined as a *tabula rasa*: a new, empty space in which to reinvent behaviour and social relations. Now it could form a setting for women to begin afresh.

The figure of Elinore Pruitt Stewart offers an interesting example of this kind of recovery, and an instructive comparison to the recovery of Foote. Pruitt Stewart, a widowed, or possibly divorced, migrant to Wyoming before World War One, wrote up her experiences of ranching and homesteading in terms recalling the popular tradition of emigrant writing as well as the literary tradition of James Fenimore Cooper. Her *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* was published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1913, and then by Houghton Mifflin in 1914, catching, inadvertently or otherwise, the same tide of patriotic interest in the frontier as *O Pioneers!* It was reprinted in the early sixties in the Bison Books imprint of the University of Nebraska Press, a press with a proud tradition of printing and reprinting the memoirs of ordinary emigrants, male and female. This edition appeared with a brief introduction by the western writer Jessamyn West. West's introduction lauded the traditional virtues of this 'homesteader with her enormous vitality, humor and tenderness': 'We marvel at her capacity for work. We admire her openness to the world and its inhabitants ...' ²⁶ Here, then, was an example of a recovered female figure ripe for mobilisation on feminism's behalf, and writing that delivered the 'reflection' on 'current concerns about women and women's roles,' that feminist historians were looking for, and a means 'to understand the historical roots of issues that especially touch women today.'²⁸

Unsurprisingly, the book was taken up by two Montana women, Beth Ferris and Annick Smith, who wrote and produced a film, *Heartland*, with a company they set up for the purpose: Wilderness Women. We watch Conchita Ferrell as Pruitt Stewart achieving some of 1970s feminism's ideal positions: leaving home, earning wages for housework, finding common ground with

women and marrying in order to file a claim rather than in the spirit of romance (or indeed desire). But if the film was explicitly feminist in intention and in content, still *Heartland* was shown at the White House and bought by the State Department 'to be shown in embassies abroad.' Whether or not it was inflected with feminism, it represented a history that conformed to mainstream values. Pruitt Stewart's descendants made no objections to the alterations to the events of her life made by the makers of the film.²⁹

The figure of the pioneer woman was more flexible even than this, for she had an opposite in the form of the migrant woman with no interest in letting go of the conventions of class and gender. This alternative to the ideal was just as useful to feminists of the 1970s, especially those at the radical end of feminist history, where Anglo-European women were shown internalising and reproducing patriarchal oppression as well as failing to see the space for self-development in the west. John Faragher and Christine Stansell, for example, publishing 'Women and their Families on the Overland Trail to California and Oregon, 1842-67' in *Feminist Studies* in 1975, began their article with an extract from a poem published the year before by the radical feminist poet Adrienne Rich, 'From an Old House in America,' which recalled the patriarchal identification of land as 'virgin', and the migration enforced on women by their husbands:

I am not a wheat field
nor the virgin forest
I never chose this place
yet I am of it now

Faragher and Stansell's subsequent discussion expresses regret tinged with exasperation with their ancestors:

The vicissitudes of the trail opened new possibilities for extended work roles for women, and in the cooperative work of the family there existed a basis for a vigorous struggle for female-male equality. But most women did not see the experience that way.³⁰

These feminist historians had approached their subjects expecting to be cheerleaders for their recovered predecessors, but ended up apologising for blinkered, perhaps wilfully blinkered, foremothers. Just as the makers of *Heartland* were able to harness their feminism to a national mythology of pioneer womanhood, so Faragher and Stansell could read the familiar figure of the reluctant pioneer in feminist terms.

When in 197X, Rodman W. Paul edited Mary Hallock Foote's unpublished reminiscences, in *A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far-West* he drew on this latter tradition to depict Foote, explaining **QUOTE**. No objection was raised to his commentary on Foote, or, for that matter, to his method of splicing two separate autobiographical texts, one written for publication and one for her family. Stegner's novel rendered Mary Hallock Foote in much the same form: as defined by a dysfunctional Eastern class and gender background, and unable to break free from its imprisoning attitudes. When in the early 1980s Foote was recovered by feminist literary critics, the same line of argument prevailed. Foote was not a 'pioneer' in any sense.

What Stegner chose to add, his material about Foote's extra-marital sexual relationship and the discussion of it, was what marked his departure from these well-recognised western subjects. Pioneer women, as they were

recovered over the twentieth century and through the 1970s into the 1980s were usually married, sometimes single and invariably heterosexual. Feminist historians discussed issues of equality in marriage, economic independence and access to contraception. They steered clear of the world of desire and sexual pleasure. *Angle of Repose*, in dwelling on both, provoked a row that enveloped feminists and their enemies alike.

Stegner's mode of recovering Foote was first given a thorough and very critical airing outside the Foote family in 1976. This took the form of an article that appeared in the middle pages of the *San Francisco Chronicle* in September (the occasion was the opening performances of Andrew Imbrie's opera of *Angle of Repose*). An in-house columnist, Blake Green, had interviewed Stegner about how he had dealt with his subject and then telephoned Foote's granddaughters, Janet Micoleau (who had been responsible for granting Stegner access to Foote's papers) and Marian Conway. The resulting article raised questions about how a woman, her life and her work could be treated and what aspects of her life might be said to be off limits.

Green tackled this agenda as a feminist issue, in the sense of reading Stegner's use of Foote as the exploitation of a woman by a man, and she imagined it as one in which Stegner had exerted sexual power over Foote. Possibly she was picking up on feminist debates about sexual harassment and rape that feminism was forcing Americans to engage in the mid-1970s.²⁶ Certainly she was interested in bringing gender inequalities to the surface. What she used was a coded language of seduction: Stegner had taken 'liberties' with Foote, she wrote, and 'the liberties themselves might not have been so bad had

he not sometimes remained quite true to her'; he had 'lived with her' but he 'did not find her interesting enough' for a biography ('she was not quite that important').²⁵ Fears of sexual experience outside marriage were mixed with concerns about male sexuality here.

Foote's granddaughter, quoted by Green, used a similar kind of expressive range, this time inflected with reference to seduction. Marian Conway was quoted as expressing the disturbing sense that Foote had been damaged by Stegner; that he 'did their grandmother wrong'; 'She can't defend herself and all her contemporaries are dead.' For Foote's family, this was not a question, as it was for Green and indeed Stegner, of thinking through new attitudes to sexual behaviour. For them, *any* detail of a woman's sexual life, even the sexual life of a woman born in 1847 who had been dead some forty years, ran the risk of making her (and those close to her) the object of commentary, as well as damaging her descendants' narrative of their ancestor's life. To go on to add new fictional material (as Stegner had) about sex and sexuality was difficult, if not impossible, to justify. Since Stegner had changed only some names and had left the details of locale unaltered, their neighbours in Nevada City and Grass Valley, California easily identified Susan Burling Ward as Mary Hallock Foote, and assumed that all the events in the novel had actually taken place: that Foote had had a lesbian relationship with her friend, had rejected her (alcoholic) husband sexually, had fallen in love and caused destruction.

When Rodman W. Paul, supported by Foote's grand-nephew, brought out *Reminiscences of a Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West*, a year after *Angle of Repose's* appearance, he also referred, with a disapproval no less pointed for being measured in its expression, to the 'sheer invention – at times *unrestrained*

invention' [my italics] of *Angle of Repose*, gesturing to a lack of scruple in Stegner's 'inferences derived from ... nothing more than a novelist's sense of what would complete his development of chapter and plot.'¹⁴ Paul was not specific about what was invention or inference. The implication of Paul's note, however, was that Stegner had 'taken liberties'.

Much of the recovery of women, feminist or otherwise, undertaken during this period was done by, or under the auspices of, family members and consequently gave descendants a measure of, if not complete, editorial power. While happiness and unhappiness in courtship and married life often formed an interesting element in recovered writings, accounts of sexual activity, sexual autonomy or any extra-marital or non-normative sexual activity did not.

Eight years after the publication of *Angle of Repose* and three years after the argument precipitated by Blake Green's article, the objection to Stegner's recovery of Foote finally erupted on explicitly feminist grounds. The views of Foote's granddaughters publicised by Blake Green's article had been picked up in the academic setting of the University of Idaho, where Richard Etulain, a friend of Stegner and himself something of a promoter of Foote's work, was working alongside Mary Ellen Williams Walsh, an associate professor in western American literature. In late 1978 Etulain invited Walsh to speak on the female figures in *Angle of Repose* at the 1979 annual conference of the Western Literature Association. Walsh, having made contact with Foote's family, delivered a conference paper that named as 'theft' the use of Foote by Stegner, and accusing him of besmirching Foote's reputation:

Finally scholars are beginning to learn exactly how little hesitation Stegner felt about warping Mary Hallock Foote's personality and the events of her life to his fictional needs. . . . Stegner has warped Foote into monstrous shapes - an Eve who destroyed her husband's western Eden, a lesbian, an adulteress, a filicide.³¹

The tone of this was very different to what had come before. It recalled the forthright anger and energy of 1960s and early 1970s feminism's aggressive attack on the status quo, and evoked too the defensive stance produced by the mainstream backlash against liberal feminism at the end of the decade.

Notwithstanding the separate and differently chronologised energies of Black, Chicana and Native feminist activism, the 'mood of the American movement' as Bouchier puts it, 'was one of disillusionment and demoralisation.'³² The very title of Walsh's paper, 'Succubi and Other Monsters: the Women in *Angle of Repose*', in referencing the succubus, a sexually aggressive demon incarnated as a woman, spoke to the rise in 1970s popular culture of misogyny directed at feminists.³³ Walsh's argument struck a much sharper note, certainly, in identifying Stegner as actively hostile to women, and in making direct reference to the discussions of sexual autonomy and marriage, feminism and sexual self-definition that saturated *Angle of Repose*. By all accounts, her paper received a hostile reception amongst her audience of twenty to twenty-five people, unsurprisingly so given that Stegner had become a canonical figure in contemporary western American literature and someone personally known to key people at the conference.³⁴

Walsh's subsequent essay, published in 1981 in a collection of essays from the conference, was by all accounts a toned down and much-edited version of

her paper. The issue that Foote's obscurity had allowed Stegner to use her as he wished was still important, as was the way in which Foote had been made literally invisible in a novel that quoted her verbatim but then gave her the false name of Susan Burling Ward. Walsh's scholarship cannot be refuted: around ten per cent of *Angle of Repose* had indeed been lifted from Foote's own writing.

Most striking here, though, was Walsh's fury that Stegner had explored Foote's sexual life, starting with her same-sex attachment to Gilder, moving through sexual reserve in marriage and finishing with a literally destructive desire:

Stegner chose to make Susan Burling Ward an adulteress, to make her responsible for the death of a child, to show her estranged from her son for ten years, and to create a terrible rift between her and her husband because of her adultery and her responsibility for the child's death. None of these negative events occurred in Mary Hallock Foote's life. ³⁶

Walsh had by now been joined in making this point by her subsequent co-editor, Barbara Cragg, who used the language of penetration and unrestrained lust to describe what Stegner had done:

Stegner struck a rich vein in Foote's memorabilia and he mined it thoroughly. Having delved into her life, work, and intimate correspondence, he fashioned a novel based less in creative imagination than in thinly disguised fact ... Stegner did not hesitate to distort the

Foote family and their friends to satisfy the fictional needs of his book. ³⁷

Stegner had violated Foote and tossed a distorted version of her private life into the public sphere.

Walsh's defence of Foote's family interests was misleading. While some family members had argued that Stegner's was not fair use and that he had exploited Foote's obscurity as a figure, others' objection was precisely that Foote was being incorporated into a feminist debate. Evelyn Gardiner (a third grand-daughter), disgusted that Foote had been 'taken up by the feminists', complained that she had become a focus of feminist interest: 'and boy, every once in a while, I run into some lesbian feminist who wants to make her out as this downtrodden woman who supported a drunken husband.'³⁹

On the other hand, Walsh seems to have attracted little support from academic colleagues. Simone Murray has argued that feminism was disappearing down the 'congenial bolt-hole in the academy' by the end of the 1970s, yet the bolthole available to Walsh scarcely operated to offer her safety or congeniality.⁴⁰ Melody Graulich, for example, an important feminist literary historian of the American west, took Walsh to task for her objections to reputational damage done to Foote:

Walsh is at pains to eradicate the possibility of lesbianism in the text ... If Lyman is ill at ease with his grandmother's potential for a lesbian attachment, Walsh is more so, actively working to reel Susan, and Foote through her, back into contained heterosexuality.

It is fair to say that Walsh seems shocked by the possibility that Foote may have been anything but sexually conventional, still the 'pains' 'actively' taken by Walsh actually consist of a single endnote of five lines in her essay, where she refers to Stegner's 'advance' of 'the lesbian theme in *Angle of Repose*', referring the reader to Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's essay exploring intimate relationships

between women in a period before same-sex love was codified.⁴¹ This is an energetic attack for a footnote.

It may be that we can catch a more febrile atmosphere in academe with respect to feminism than Murray suggests in the perhaps unlikely source of a detective novel published in 1981 by the feminist literary scholar Carolyn Heilbrun under the pseudonym of Amanda Cross: *Death in a Tenured Position*. The plot is propelled forward by a vindictively staged encounter between the newly appointed and anti-feminist woman professor of literature and a radical activist, divorced from an oppressive husband and angry. It is resolved with the professor's suicide and the disappearance of the latter character from the plot. The novel's point of view is provided by a feminist professor at Columbia, bored both with lecturing 'unceasingly' on 'George Eliot's purposeless heroines' and with acting as a token woman on university committees; and viewing the 'changes of the seventies' with irony shading into impatience. Danger lies in wait, the novel suggests, if 'one defined oneself too sharply.'⁴² This was certainly what Walsh had done.

If Walsh, then, had reacted with passionate anger to the sexual experiences given Foote in *Angle of Repose*, this was nothing to the rage directed at her by Stegner and his supporters. Walsh's work was that of a nonentity ('Does she need four names before she'll believe she exists?'); as a spiteful attack on an individual ('an *ad hominem* attack on a writer of great integrity and dignity'); 'She has taken all the family's objections at face value, become their spear-carrier, and set out to slay the male dragon in an essay. ... It is a nasty piece of character assassination.' 'Some of the charges grew out of misunderstanding and miscommunication; some out of spite and, no doubt,

jealousy.’³⁵ Stegner himself seemed to go out of his way to describe what he had done in sexually charged terms in which he subordinated Foote to his creative and intellectual life, as, for example, in: ‘She [Foote] lay around in my mind like an unfertilized egg ... What hatched, after three years, was a novel about time, about cultural transplantation and change.’³⁶ He insisted, too, that he and Rodman Paul had recovered Foote singlehanded: ‘Between us we’ve more or less revived Molly FooteShe was dead as a doornail before we began working on those papers.’

Above all, though, the attacks of Stegner and his supporters identified Walsh’s attack as feminist and dismissed it accordingly as ‘angry denunciations by feminists’. It was as if the discussion of feminism in the novel had not existed, and so therefore no argument mobilising feminism could possibly engage appropriately with it. Subsequently, in writing about *Angle of Repose*, the argument between Stegner and ‘the feminists’, represented invariably and relentlessly by the single figure of Mary Ellen Williams Walsh, was revisited and summarily demolished again and again, referred to repeatedly in interviews, rehashed by journalists, its minutiae rehearsed in biographies of Stegner and work on Foote.

What, then, is to be learned about the feminist recovery of the past during the 1970s from the quarrels generated by this anxious, essentially anti-feminist novel? Reading the accounts of busy activity in the work of feminist historians of the 1970s, one has the sense that they shared the assumption that recovery offered a fertile arena for feminism. Separated from, though far from unrelated to, the vicissitudes of activism’s battlefields, feminist historians, professional and

amateur, planned their restorative recoveries. In an important article written in the mid-1970s, Dawn Lander describes the impulse to recover female writers as finding 'my own feelings ... duplicated in the experiences of historic and contemporary women.' Lander described her experience in the following terms:

Ten years after I left Arizona, I began my graduate studies in American literature, and, not surprisingly, my interest focused upon literature of the wilderness. Repeatedly, however, I could find no place for myself and for my pleasure in the wilderness in the traditionally recorded images of women on the frontier ... ⁴⁵

In the 1970s, feminist recovery was suffused with this desire to find 'duplicated feelings.' Walsh was looking to populate an American west that was not a 'playground of masculine adventure,' Smith-Rosenberg a counter-cultural world of intimacy between women.⁴⁶ Personal aspirations as well as contemporary ideals could be validated by reference to traditions constructed from forebears: pioneer women could become feminist pioneers or indeed oppressed foremothers.

The politics of recovery proved much more fraught than this, however. The case here demonstrates how feminist recovery did not operate in a supportive environment, but in a largely hostile one. It was subject to the play of cross cutting relations and the interventions of figures whose attitudes to feminism were as much in flux as the movement itself. It suggests how many players there might be with different interests in resurrecting a woman. A sense of ownership accompanied recovery on the part of all concerned. Stegner proudly made the point in an interview quoted earlier that he and Rodman Paul had recovered Mary Hallock Foote: 'Between us we've more or less revived

Molly FooteShe was dead as a doornail before we began working on those papers.' Walsh, meanwhile, ended her paper with a rallying cry to recover and contain her own Foote:

It is true that *Angle of Repose* has reawakened interest in Mary Hallock Foote and her work. It is unfortunate that many readings that many readers have accepted the novel as a valid interpretation of her life. It is doubly unfortunate that few readers have recognised how much of her work Stegner used to build his book. Her life is fascinating in its own right.⁴⁷

Foote's family believed that Mary Hallock Foote deserved to be recovered, but only in a form they could find attractive. Recovery in the 1970s took place within a cacophony of competing voices within, at the edges and outside the movement.

In the end, the fight to recover Mary Hallock Foote was blocked and perhaps this has most to tell us about the whole project of recovery in the 1970s. Multiple narratives about Foote raise questions about her intimate life only to draw back. We're left with Steger's and Walsh's frustration. But they both knew that. about a wounded bitter man frustrate narratives of recovery. Walsh's argument retains a sense of outrage at a blocked recovery.

Notes

1. Judith M. Bennett (2006) *History Matters: patriarchy and the challenge of feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), p. 7; Gerda Lerner,

Women among the Professors of History: the story of a process of transformation, in Eileen Boris and Nupur Chaudhuri (Eds) (1999) *Voices of Women Historians: the personal, the political and the professional* in (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p.1; Peter Novick (1988) *That Noble Dream: the 'objectivity question' and the American historical profession* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p.499.

2. Useful accounts of the shape of debate among feminist historians include: Bennett, *History Matters*, pp. 1-20; Barbara Melosh (1990) Recovery and Revision: women's history and West Virginia, *West Virginia History*, 49, pp. 3-6; Pamela S. Nadell and Kate Haulman (Eds) (2013), *Making Women's Histories* (New York : New York University Press), especially the essays by Gerda Lerner and Kathy Peiss; and Linda Nicholson (1997) Introduction, *The Second Wave: a reader in feminist theory* (New York and London: Routledge); In a massive field, the following contemporary analyses give a flavour of the separate and distinctive strains in the field of feminist history: Ann D. Gordon, Mari Jo Buhle and Nancy Schorm Dye (1976) The Problem of Women's History, in Berenice A. Carroll (Ed) *Liberating Women's History* (Urbana: university of Illinois Press), pp. 75-92; Mary Hartman and Lois W. Banner (1974) Preface, *Clio's Consciousness Raised: new perspectives on the history of women* (New York: Harper and Row).
3. Patrice McDermott (1994) *Politics and Scholarship: feminist academic journals and the production of knowledge* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), p. 85.
4. Susan Salter Reynolds (2003) Tangle of Repose, *Los Angeles Times*, March 23, accessed <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/mar/23/magazine/tm-stegner12>, February 15 2015

5. Accounts of the dispute usually centred upon the argument between Mary Ellen Walsh Williams and Wallace Stegner. The fullest exposition of the argument appears in Philip L. Fradkin (2008) *Angle of Unrest, Wallace Stegner and the American West* (New York: Knopf), though see Salter Reynolds, *Tangle of Repose*, for a version less sympathetic to Stegner. The argument has been thoughtfully revisited in terms of literary critical debate in Linda K. Karell (2002) *Writing Together Writing Apart* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), pp. 153-80.
6. Wallace Stegner (1971) *Angle of Repose* (New York: Doubleday, 1971)
7. Quoted in Fradkin, *Wallace Stegner and the American West*, p. tbc
8. Quoted in Jackson J. Benson (2001) *Down by the Lemonade Springs: essays on Wallace Stegner* (Reno: University of Nevada Press), p.145.
9. The concept of warping appears in the novel's epigraph, but Stegner used it again in a 1971 letter to Janet Micoleau, quoted in Fradkin, *Wallace Stegner and the American West*, p. 253.
10. Stegner repeatedly uses the word 'ribald' with its associations of unruly sexuality to describe Shelly: *Angle of Repose*, pp. 163, 169, 270.
11. Stegner, *Angle of Repose*, p. 163
12. Interview with Stegner quoted in James R. Hepworth (1998) *Three Interviews with Wallace Stegner* (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press), p. 68.
13. Fradkin, *Wallace Stegner and the American West*, p. 252.
14. Interestingly, Stegner, in the interview in Hepworth, *Three Interviews*, quoted above that Rodman W. Paul had been 'mad at me as a matter of fact,' p. 68.

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15. Deborah Paes de Barross (2004) *Fast Cars and Bad Girls: nomadic subjects and women's road stories* (New York: Peter Lang), p. 44.
16. David Bouchier (1984) *The Feminist Challenge: the movement for women's liberation in Britain and the USA* (New York: Schocken Books), p. 124.
17. Few histories of 1970s US feminism fail to list the appearance of a rush of foundational second-wave texts at this time: Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* and Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Powerful* in 1970. Simone Murray (2004) has written interestingly on the interest of publishers in this kind of material in *Mixed Media: Feminist Presses and Publishing Politics* (London: Pluto Press), chapter 5.
18. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (1975) *The Female World of Love and Ritual: relations between women in nineteenth-century America*, *Signs* 1.1, pp. 1-29. The significance of this work is discussed in McDermott, *Politics and Scholarship*, pp. 142-46; Melosh, *Recovery and Revision*; and Novick, *That Noble Dream*, pp. 500-502.
19. Smith-Rosenberg, *The Female world of Love and Ritual*, p. 14.
20. Stegner, *Angle of Repose*, pp. 57-58; Smith-Rosenberg, *The Female world of Love and Ritual*, pp. 7-8.
21. Smith-Rosenberg, *Female World of Love and Ritual*, p. 3.
22. McDermott, *Politics and Scholarship*, p. 142; the description of Helena Gilder, as 'Helena a New York friend' appears in Smith-Rosenberg, *Female World of Love and Ritual*, p. 5, footnote 12.
23. Carl N. Degler (1980) *At Odds: Women and the Family from the Revolution to the Present* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 37, vi, 38.

24. Mary D. Garrard (1994) Feminist Politics: networks and organizations, in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (Eds) *The Power of Feminist Art: the American movement of the 1970s, history and impact* (New York: HarryN Abrams), p. 91.
25. Blake Green (1976) The Genteel Western Lady behind this Season's New Opera, *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 8, p. 18.
26. The obvious examples here are the publication of Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will* in 1975, the NOW Task Force on Battered women in 1976, and the beginning of the Take Back the Night Marches across university campuses during this period.
27. Jessamyn West (1961) Foreword, *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), p. vii.
28. Hartman and Banner, *Clio's Consciousness Raised*, p. xi.
29. *Heartland*, dir. Richard Pearce (Wilderness Films: 1971). Fred Ferretti (1981) 'Heartland': A Triumph of True Grit, *New York Times*, November 22, accessed at: <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/11/22/movies/heartland-a-triumph-of-true-grit.html>. February 15 2015
30. John Faragher and Christine Stansell (1975) Women and their Families on the Overland Trail to California and Oregon, 1842-1867, *Feminist Studies*, 2. 2/3, p.151.
31. Quoted in Reynolds, *Tangle of Repose*.
32. Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge*, p. 139; For a range of interesting discussions of mainstream's feminism's fading profile, see Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge*, pp. 124-39, 160-75; Garrard, *Feminist Politics*, pp. 98-99; Becky Thompson (2010) *Multi-Racial Feminism: recasting the chronology of*

- second wave feminism, in Nancy A. Hewitt (Ed) *No Permanent Waves: recasting histories of US feminism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press), pp. 39-50.
33. Natalie Angier (1999) *Woman: an intimate geography* (London: Virago), p. x.
34. The talk is described in Fradkin, *Wallace Stegner and the American West*, pp. 257-58.
35. Benson, *Down by the Lemonade Springs*, pp. xx-xxi.
36. Mary Ellen Williams Walsh (1982) *Angle of Repose* and the Writings of Mary Hallock Foote, in Anthony Arthur (Ed) *Critical Essays on Wallace Stegner* (Boston: G. K. Hall), pp. 205-206.
37. Barbara Cragg (1980) Mary Hallock Foote's Images of the Old West, *Landscape*, 24, p. 42.
38. Stegner quoted in Page Stegner (Ed) (2007) *Selected Letters of Wallace Stegner* (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker and Hoard), p. 96; Anthony Arthur quoted in Fradkin, *Wallace Stegner and the West*, p. 260; Jackson J. Benson (1996) *Wallace Stegner: his life and work* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), p. 355; Stegner in Benson, *Down by Lemonade Springs*, p. 140.
39. Fradkin, *Wallace Stegner and the West*, p.260
40. Murray, *Mixed Media*, p.47
41. Walsh, *Angle of Repose* and the Writings of Mary Hallock Foote, p. 209, footnote 11.
42. Amanda Cross [pseud](1981) *Death in a Tenured Position* (New York: Random House), pp. 56, 54, 65.
43. Sands Hall, *Fair Use* (2001), premiere Foothill Theatre, Grass Valley, California.

44. Linda Rasmussen, Lorna Rasmussen, Candace Savage, Anne Wheeler, *A Harvest Yet to Reap: a history of prairie women* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1976), p. 9.
45. Dawn Lander (1977) Eve Among the Indians, in Arlyn Diamond and Lee R Edwards (Eds) *The Authority of Experience: essays in feminist criticism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press), p.195.
46. Barbara Cragg. Mary Ellen Williams Walsh and Dennis M. Walsh (Eds) (1988) *The Idaho Stories and Far West Illustrations of Mary Hallock Foote* (Pocatello: Idaho State University Press), p. xvii.
47. Interview with Stegner quoted in James R. Hepworth (1998) *Three Interviews with Wallace Stegner* (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press), p. 68; Walsh, *Angle of Repose* and the Writings of Mary Hallock Foote, p. 208.