

Was the "Frontier" Good for Women?: Historical Approaches to Women and Agricultural Settlement in the Prairie West, 1870-1925

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ABSTRACT

How do we interpret the experiences of women in the agricultural settlement of the prairie west, 1870-1925? Historians traditionally have focused either on the region's "frontier equality" or, conversely, on its distinctive gender inequities. This article reviews those two interpretive frameworks, then considers how new research on women's involvement in the market economy and in the colonization process provides a new lens through which to evaluate gender relations in the region.

RÉSUMÉ

Comment interprétons-nous les expériences des femmes durant le développement agricole de l'ouest des prairies, de 1870 à 1925? Les historiens traditionnellement se sont concentrés soit sur "l'égalité de la frontière" de la région, ou inversement, sur ses iniquités distinctives entre les sexes.

For historians of prairie women, region and place have been critical categories of scholarly analysis. While it is true that, over time, Canadian women's history has offered a more regionally balanced corpus of feminist scholarship than our American counterparts, studies of Prairie women have been particularly attentive to how regional traditions and economies constituted women's experiences and consciousness. Like western Canadian historians more generally, feminist scholars have acknowledged that "the west" as a place was not just the backdrop for historical events, but an historical force in itself.¹

This essay seeks to explore how historians have conceptualized the relationship of gender and region in the three prairie provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. The focus on rural women in the era of agricultural settlement (1870-1925) reflects the preponderance of research that has been generated on the "pioneer" women who helped establish agricultural communities. This focus necessarily excludes urban women, about whom we need to know more, and rural women in the post-1925 years when agricultural communities were well-established. But the emphasis on the first generations of female agriculturalists does permit a careful examination of the dominant interpretive frameworks used to analyze Prairie women's lives,

that of "frontier equality" and of "frontier inequities." This essay first reviews those two paradigms, then considers how Prairie women's engagement in the market economy intersected with their roles as agents of whiteness and colonialism. To illustrate the ways that regional identities were wrought by differences of class, race, and imperialism, as well as gender, this essay draws both on the existing secondary literature and on my own recent research addressing women, land and markets in southwestern Manitoba. While I make no claim for the representative nature of Manitoba's southwest farming district, the locally-based evidence suggests how we can complicate our understanding of women's place within the histories of settlement and colonization.

By the late nineteenth century, the northwest interior of Canada - the territory bounded by the 49th parallel on the south, the Rocky Mountains on the west, and the Canadian shield at the north and east - was undergoing a profound transformation as the fur trade economy was supplanted by an agricultural one, eventually dominated by "King Wheat." Like the American west and the Australian "frontier," the Canadian west was heralded as the "Last Best West," the "final frontier" of "free" lands available for the establishment of agricultural settlement. This

language of a new frontier served to mask the long history of colonization, extending back into the seventeenth century when the first European fur traders took up permanent residence on the Hudson Bay. Colonial relations "on the ground" were cemented and to a large degree shaped by a complex process of intermarriage between European men and First Nations women and the subsequent creation of mixed blood or Métis societies. When the fur trade began its decline in the mid-nineteenth century, not only Aboriginal culture but also Métis culture had to be dislodged in order to make way for agricultural settlement. In the 1870s through 1890s the federal government's land legislation (Dominion Lands Act of 1872), treaties with Aboriginal people, and an aggressive new immigration policy combined to bring the prairie west into Confederation, economically and socially as well as politically. Only the "Second Riel Rebellion" of 1885, in which Métis resistance to Canadian annexation was defeated, disrupted the smooth transition from resource to agricultural frontier. By 1914 the prairie west was a multi-ethnic region, the breadbasket of the British empire.

The drama of this transformation was not lost on women's historians. As early as 1923, W.J. Healy's *Women of Red River: Being a Book Written from the Recollections of Women Surviving from the Red River Era* (published by the Canadian Women's Club) claimed that in the 1870s "the women were increasing in number year by year, and gave proof of the earnestness of their desire for the betterment of the conditions of life and contributed their full share of endurance, courage and optimism to the work of Western progress. The pioneer women of Manitoba hold an important place in Canadian history. No record of our country's past will be of greater interest or more inspiring than the record of their lives..."² Subsequent authors concurred that women played key roles in the assertion of agricultural settlement in the west, but substantial disagreement has emerged over how to conceptualize the relative position of women in the region. Was the west "good" for women?

For some researchers, the answer is yes. Echoing Turner's theme of frontier equality, various authors have claimed that because homesteading was so difficult, and because homesteads so often failed, the work of women was vital. That bachelors failed to "prove up" their homesteads more

frequently than did married men, stood for some as testimony to the value of women's work.³ The many opportunities for economic advancement and community life, Susan Sundberg has argued, prompted many women to encourage their families to move west, and indeed many women initiated the move themselves. Arguing against the interpretation that prairie women were reluctant pioneers or subordinate helpmates, Sundberg claims that "viewed as ancillary to the work of farm men, our conception of prairie farm women's work loses equality within the economic structure of the farm, an equality which is justified given women's roles as providers of valuable goods and services."⁴

Historians of ethnic minority women have made particular use of the "responsibility equals authority" argument. For example, Royden Loewen's study of Russian Mennonite migrants to Manitoba and Nebraska showed that on family farms Mennonite women's productive and reproductive roles were intertwined and women's labour was essential to economic and cultural survival. Women thus enjoyed partnership status in the family and community, as reflected in Mennonite settlement patterns - where newcomers were as likely to settle close to the wife's family as to the husband's - and in the retention of the traditional partible inheritance system, which ensured that daughters and sons all inherited land. For Loewen, farm women enjoyed a degree of equality that could only be gained in household production.⁵

Susan Sundberg points out that pioneer women themselves often equated hard work with freedom. Sundberg cites Alice Rendell's 1904 letter: "I would never advise anyone to come out here who is the least afraid of work. They are better off at home. There is plenty of room to breathe in this country and if the work is hard the freedom, which is the indispensable attribute of life here, makes one far less susceptible to physical fatigue.... Here one feels that each week's work is a step onward whilst in the old country often times a year's toil brought nothing but disappointment and additional anxiety."⁶ On a similar theme, Susan Jackel's edited collection of pioneer women's diaries acquired its title from the words of one English "gentlewoman" who proclaimed in 1898: "Speaking as a ...female, I like the country...I like the simplicity, the informality of life....I like both the work and the

play here, the time out of doors and the time for coming home, I like the summer and the winter, the monotony and the change. Besides, I like a flannel shirt, and liberty."⁷

This liberal analysis whereby liberty and equality were reinforced by frontier conditions underpinned one of the first monographs in Canadian women's history, Catherine Cleverdon's 1950 study *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada*. Her chapter on the prairie provinces, subtitled "Democracy's 'Grass Roots,'" stressed that, like the American west, prairie communities north of the 49th parallel "were invariably the first to enfranchise women." According to Cleverdon, "on both sides of the border the feeling generally prevailed that women as well as men had opened up the country, had shared the experiences of settling a new land, and were therefore entitled to a voice in making the laws." For these reasons, farmer organizations in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta all endorsed women's suffrage, serving both as solid support for suffragists and as powerful lobbying groups for women's political enfranchisement.⁸ Ironically, although Carol Bacchi's revisionist analysis of "first wave" feminism presented a much less positive (and roundly criticized) picture of the early feminist movement, Bacchi did agree with Cleverdon that western women's suffrage successes flowed from agrarian radicalism and the regionally-based economic problems farm women and men shared. Bacchi concluded that the farm-women's leadership believed "tariffs, not men, were the villains...." and thus worked for voting rights that would strengthen the farm, not the female, voice.⁹ Despite their distinctly different interpretations of farm women's motivations for pursuing suffrage, Cleverdon and Bacchi concurred that shared hardship forged mutual respect and political support between the sexes on the agricultural frontier.

Studies working within the egalitarian interpretive framework stand in sharp contrast to those works by feminist scholars who concluded that the Canadian west was distinguished by the unique gender inequities it proffered. Various authors have delineated the physically demanding labour prairie women performed. And, as the evocative title Georgina Taylor's article "Should I drown myself now or later? The Isolation of Rural Women in Saskatchewan" suggests, women's work

was made even harder by the physical isolation homesteading entailed.¹⁰ The ideological linking of women and domesticity, already prominent in Victorian and Edwardian culture, was accentuated in a region where the "private" household might be several miles from the next, and where the "public" was comprised of open fields, poplar bluffs, and miles of sky. Manitoba-born author James Gray proclaimed that "if it has been done deliberately to devise a settlement plan to drive the farm women up the walls of their shacks it could hardly have proceeded differently."¹¹

Physical isolation was accentuated by a marked shortage of services, especially medical and obstetrical ones. In an era when the birth rate was dropping in eastern Canada, prairie women continued to have large families. The absence of female kin to provide midwifery or post-partum assistance meant that Euro-Canadian women might secure help from their husbands, or First Nations midwives or, more likely, give birth unattended. Under these circumstances, high rates of infant and maternal mortality persisted in the west, and even the establishment of a medical school in Winnipeg and nursing schools in most prairie centres could not ensure adequate medical or nursing attendance for most families.¹² Given these conditions, Mary Kinnear has argued, when asked "Do You Want Your Daughter to Marry a Farmer," many farm women of the 1920s answered "no."¹³

Problems of isolation and limited access to services could be intensified by language barriers. In contrast to works on ethnic minority women such as Loewen's, Frances Swyripa has argued that for Ukrainian women, the early years of agricultural settlement were particularly hard. For Swyripa, "pioneering conditions preserved and reinforced women's traditional role within the family socioeconomic unit...In some ways, the position of Ukrainian peasant women worsened as pioneering required them to perform heavier work and spend more time in the fields than they had been used to in the old country." At the same time Ukrainian and English-Canadian commentators alike held up these women as social problems who were holding back the "advancement" of the immigrant community. When Ukrainian farm women organized, they had to confront not only the material hardships rural life posed but the negative public perception of their contributions to Ukrainian and Canadian society.¹⁴

Nor did the law serve to protect women. Sandra Rollings-Magnusson's recent overview of Saskatchewan's legal codes argues that federal and provincial laws did not just reflect patriarchal attitudes, but in fact fortified "the *status quo* of male rights and ultimately supported the structure of the family farm."¹⁵ Terry Chapman's research into sexuality and violence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century revealed that community members and legal structures defined women as subordinate to their husbands and without sexual autonomy. Chapman demonstrates that domestic violence against women was often prompted by, and frequently justified in the name of husbands' dissatisfaction with their wives' work. In its reluctance to "step into the private domain of the institution of marriage," the justice system rarely meted out stern punishment to husbands found guilty of domestic abuse, but legal authorities were more than willing to intervene when the issue involved controlling women's sexual behaviour.¹⁶

Equally debilitating were the legal restrictions placed on women's economic independence. The Dominion Lands Act of 1872 is one of the oft-cited policies that overtly discriminated against women. Because only male British subjects over the age of 18, and widows or divorced/deserted women responsible for dependent children, were eligible to apply for homesteads of 160 acres, most women were ineligible for free land. The subject of much feminist critique then as now, this inequity was forcefully denounced by English immigrant Georgina Binnie-Clark. Her 1910 publication *Summer on the Canadian Prairies* and her 1914 book *Wheat and Women* detailed Binnie-Clark's experiences as a lady farmer in the 1905-1908 years, when she took over her brother's homestead in the Qu'Appelle district of south-eastern Saskatchewan. These publications chronicled her successes and failures as she struggled for and eventually made a profit. Believing that the world was "governed by laws made by men for men," Binnie-Clark insisted that women needed more economic security and options than marriage could offer. Binnie-Clark thus used her books to condemn government land policy and demand the democratization of land laws. In the 1979 reprint of *Wheat and Women*, editor Susan Jackel observed that "from her experiment in prairie wheat farming, Georgina Binnie-Clark came to

know only too well the peculiar disabilities that Canadian law and custom placed on the woman who chose agriculture as a means of self-support."¹⁷

For the region's married women, the absence of dower laws proved particularly disempowering. In 1885 and 1886 prairie policy makers decided to eliminate encumbrances on land (and the ensuing pressure on the courts) by abolishing dower rights usually granted under English common law. Thus ensued a more than twenty-year struggle for western women to regain the same dower protection as their eastern Canadian counterparts. As historians Margaret McCallum and Catherine Cavanaugh have shown, even when dower laws were reestablished they were implemented in ways ensuring that women's "traditional" rights over family property were never fully regained. For these reasons, Cavanaugh concludes that women were "not viewed as full partners with their husbands," and that the campaign for dower rights laid bare the "limitations of the pioneering partnership."¹⁸

Authors working within the "unique inequity" model argue that the regionally-specific economic, social, and legal barriers faced by western Canadian women inspired their demands for women's rights. As the editorial collective of *A Harvest Yet To Reap: A History of Prairie Women* explained:

Kept apart by distance and overwork, women didn't have much time to visit each other, but they had plenty of time to think about their experiences and about their legal and economic status. As economic conditions became more secure and settlement more dense, they began to get together, at first for company and advice, and later for community improvement and political reform.¹⁹

If, then, feminism flourished on the frontier, it did so not because of any "frontier equality," quite the opposite. Veronica Strong-Boag has argued that by the interwar decades prairie women acknowledged that they were not "pulling in double harness" but were in fact "hauling a double load." In their efforts to gain public recognition for the value of domestic work and to acquire labour saving domestic technology akin to that which had revolutionized

"men's" farm work, prairie women forged a regionally-specific feminist politics.²⁰

Did regionally-based structures strengthen gender equality or reinforce inequality? The contradictions inherent in these two analytic frameworks has prompted some feminist scholars to emphasize the diversity of women's experiences in the prairie west. For instance, her research into prairie women's diaries and autobiographical accounts led Sundberg to conclude, "some women found their chores monotonous and confining, others felt obvious pride in their accomplishments... the diversity of experiences revealed in women's writings admonishes us to look more closely at our images of pioneer farm women..."²¹ Likewise, in *The Last Best: Women on the Alberta Frontier, 1880-1930*, author Eliane Silverman explains that the shape of women's lives in the prairie west "depended often on chance and accident.... Their reactions were influenced by the cultures and psychologies that the women had brought with them.... a woman's response to the new life might arise from a self-conscious attempt to cope, or conversely, from an almost conscious awareness that she could not and would not adapt."²² Such diversity led feminist filmmaker Barbara Evans to conclude "there can be no monolithic view of women's history. Instead, we must listen to the multiplicity of voices and experiences which make up that history...."²³

There is no doubt that luck, personality, and perhaps the serendipity of the documentary record are important elements in explaining women's divergent reactions to agricultural settlement, but recognizing diversity need not preclude analyses of the structures that defined difference. Indeed, while the studies reviewed above all focus on how their experiences within the farm household translated into female political activism, diversity of a different kind emerges if we shift the focus to consider women's activities in the market economy, their experiences with race and racism, and their location within Euro-Canadian colonialism. In doing so, historians can move outside the heterosexual matrix, in which women's status is evaluated only in terms of their male peers, to explore women's relations with other women, family members, neighbours, capital, and the state, which at particular moments in particular circumstances proved equally powerful in

determining women's experiences and consciousness.

Jeffrey Taylor's *Fashioning Farmers: Ideology, Agricultural Knowledge and the Manitoba Farm Movement, 1890-1925* provides a useful starting place for rethinking how the political economies of region and gender intersected. Taylor argues that as agricultural production was integrated into the capitalist economy, western Canadian farmers found themselves subordinate to eastern policy-makers and financiers, while at the same time farm women's domestic work was subordinated to the market economy. Thus, "the two sides of the social antagonisms in agriculture were materially rooted here, in the subordination of domestic work (women) to agricultural production (men) and in the subordination of both to industry and commerce (businessmen)."²⁴

If we use Taylor's study of the production of ideologies as a starting point and then shift our focus to the actual economic behaviour of men and women in agricultural communities, critical contradictions between household and market appear. Evidence from southwestern Manitoba reveals that in the last decades of the nineteenth century the regional domination of east over west created a unique space in the market economy into which a small number of women could move. Because western Canadian agriculturalists required significant amounts of capital to maintain their operations, farmers often were substantially indebted to banks, mortgage companies, and equipment and seed suppliers. Heavy debt loads made farm households especially vulnerable to foreclosure and seizure of property, produce, or wages. Under these circumstances, female property ownership - facilitated by the Married Women's Property Act - was one strategy through which farm families could protect their assets. For instance, in 1893 Clara Hicks came before the County Court in Boissevain to resist the lien placed against her farm. The farm, originally her husband's, was now in Clara's name and she employed her husband to work for her at the rate of \$2 per month, plus board. Although Clara acknowledged that her husband had purchased implements from the Massey-Harris distributor, she insisted that she had never instructed him to do that in her name and thus should not be held liable.

In cases like the Hicks's, female property

ownership may not have constituted independent female market activity, but rather a "family economy" strategy whereby male heads of households could protect assets from creditors. Indeed, courts and plaintiffs were often skeptical whether husbands had relinquished their ownership of farm operations: lawyers and judges often went to great lengths to prove that property transfer had not occurred. Although such skepticism might have been well placed, the fact remained that in the process of convincing the courts that they were the head of household, women such as Clara Hicks inverted, even for a moment, conventional gender division of authority. How that inversion affected gender relations once the couple returned to daily life requires greater investigation, but for some women at least, claiming property ownership in the name of family survival could translate into more-egalitarian household relations.

That possibility seems even more likely when one considers the many women who were adamant that property or chattel was their own, convincing the courts that they were not protecting their husband's property but protecting themselves and their children from their husband's bad financial decisions. Matilda Cook articulated that sentiment in 1893 when she came before the Virden County Court demanding payment for her poplar bluff which was destroyed in a fire set by her neighbour. Asserting her independent ownership of the bluff, Cook explained "I started to make the bargain with [the original owner]. I started the first conversation, my husband did not. I wanted the farm on account of the bluff. My husband had mortgaged his own farm and I said I wanted a farm of my own when he mortgaged his...." Matilda's husband confirmed that he had been too poor to buy the land himself, and that Matilda had borrowed the purchase price from her parents. In another case, Hattie Ward told the County Court in Brandon that Massey Harris Company had no right to seize her crop as payment for her husband's debt. Insisting that she managed her leased property separate from her husband she explained: "I knew he owed Massey-Harris. I knew I had to provide a home for myself and little ones. I knew he couldn't provide a house for us and pay his debts."²⁵

Women's direct participation in the market economy took several forms. For Hattie Ward, leasing a neighbour's farm allowed her to grow

enough field crops to subsidize the horses she raised. Catherine Turnbull used the courts to protect the horses she was raising. Hattie McLean spent \$25 on a domesticated elk, which she raised until her neighbour accidentally killed it. She sued him for lost property, the neighbour countersued for the damage the elk had done to his garden. Even this fragmentary legal evidence, generated when conflicts over chattel livestock occurred, suggests the potential that raising animals offered those women for whom the regional economy proved precarious.

The women who inserted themselves into the regional economy by directly purchasing land are more visible to historical view. Between 1872 and 1900, at least 283 women possessed title for 418 quarter-sections (160 acres per quarter section) of land in southwestern Manitoba. Some women, such as Sarah Ann Pearce, Clara Kirchoffer, and Euphemia Smith amassed a section (640 acres) or more of land in their names, but the majority of female property-owners acquired only one or two quarter-sections.²⁶ While most of this land was purchased from the railroad companies or from the province or the federal governments, 92 of the 283 female land-owners did secure land title "free," through the homesteading process. These were the widows with dependent children that the Dominion Lands Act provided for, but whom historians have all but ignored.²⁷

The 92 women who homesteaded in southwestern Manitoba constituted only a fraction of all the aspiring agriculturalists who claimed 160 acres from the government, yet their experiences tell much about family relations and economic possibilities. Two-thirds of the female homesteaders in southwestern Manitoba were age 45-65, whereas only 44 percent of all widows in Manitoba were in that age range. These land owning women were in that phase of their lives when they still had dependent children to support, but when those children required minimal supervision and in fact might have been old enough to perform farm or other labour. Catharine McKinnon's daughters were old enough to be "out at service." Their wages as domestics, ranging from \$6 to \$10 per month, contributed to their mother's farm. Mary Knott, aged 55, had five children. At age 22 Frank could apply for homestead land himself, but James (15) and Robert (13) were several years away from being

self-supporting, and daughters Alice (19) and Marry Emma (17) were not eligible for government land at all.

If homesteading was a wise strategy for widows with dependent children needing support, it was also a means whereby women could amass some property to pass on to their children. English immigrant Elise Vane could have begun homesteading many years before, but did not take action until the late 1880s. Her timing was most likely a function of her eldest son's age. Born in the mid-to-late 1860s, he would have been eligible to claim his own homestead land by the mid-1880s. This he did. Together with his mother's quarter-section the Vanes possessed enough property to support their large family. Good relations with elder sons were often critical if women were to ensure that they were cared for in their old age. In 1905, 64-year-old homesteader Annie McIver explained to the Commissioner of Dominions Lands why she had been away from her property longer than the law allowed. Pleading "special circumstances," McIver argued that she was in "poor health" and was thus "compelled to reside with and on my son's property." For women like McIver, owning property reduced the dependency on children and in some instances the promise of inherited land may have inspired sons and daughters to support their aging mothers. At the same time, property ownership permitted some women to provide for their children from the grave. Elizabeth Young left almost all her land and chattel to her three daughters (two of whom were single), bequeathing her two sons half of her stock and implements, but no land. That her sons were self-supporting - one was a doctor and both owned property - likely motivated Elizabeth to ensure the financial well-being of her less-solvent daughters.

Women's active participation in market economies of livestock, timber, and land was structured, and often inspired, by the regional legal and political economy. Denied homestead land as married or single women, once widowed some women weathered the often-tortuous process of "proving up" their own homestead. Others entered the market in land directly, purchasing property - such as livestock - as a safeguard against the high mortgage and debt load many grain farmers assumed. The active participation of married and single women in the market economy of agricultural

production suggests that for some women the regional relations of subordination and domination between eastern metropolis and western hinterland provided space for female economic production outside the household. Measuring western women's place only in terms of their position within the domestic economy obscures the wider range of economic and social avenues for self-determination, or self-support, available to some women.

At the same time, access to land and resources was very much determined by ethnicity, nationality, and racial categories. Clearly, acquiring land and protecting it through the courts required substantial English language skills. Elise Vane - whose application for a homestead produced extensive and elegantly composed correspondence with federal land authorities - was perhaps unusual in her degree of education, but other women brought substantial writing and bookkeeping skills to bear in their claims before the legal system. Those who had to sign official documents with an "X," relied on spoken English when communicating with land agents or neighbours. Since homesteading was reserved for British citizens, most applicants did claim English as their first language. With the exception of the few naturalized citizens, like Vane, the women who applied for homesteads were British "by birth." Women who were neither British nor spoke English found the process of acquiring and protecting property complicated by the necessity to secure naturalized status or the need to conduct legal business through a translator. These processes would have been particularly daunting for women isolated in block settlements or ethnically-homogenous communities. And while "white ethnic" immigrants could acquire English language skills and British citizenship, those who were defined as "non-white," such as settlers of Chinese origin, found barriers of language, culture, and "race" too great to overcome, regardless of gender. Even when linguistic and cultural barriers were minimal, as in the case of Black migrants, race could continue to serve as a powerful category of exclusion, and intersected with gender in specific ways. The African-Americans from Oklahoma who moved north of the 49th parallel in the 1910s were experienced farmers, literate, spoke English, and endorsed British justice. Nonetheless, white westerners and the Canadian government tried to stop their migration. In the face of local *and* official

racism, it is unlikely that women from those migrants streams could secure the requisite support from neighbours and homestead inspectors to use the "widows" clause of the 1872 Land Act, nor do recent studies of Black communities in the Canadian west document female land ownership.²⁸

If race and ethnicity combined to limit the market activity of non-British or non-white farm women, colonization of native lands and people served to shape both white and Native women's involvement in community and economy. Feminist historians investigating diverse colonial settings have shown the profoundly gendered dimensions of the colonization process across the globe.²⁹ For Native women in western Canada, the transformation from fur trading to farming that accompanied colonization entailed a radical reformulation of Native women's experiences. In her now-classic work *Many Tender Ties*, Sylvia Van Kirk examined the role of First Nations women in the fur trade society of the Canadian north-west and the negative impact the arrival of white women had on the place of indigenous women. Van Kirk's research and the critical debates it has aroused have played a crucial role in writing Native women into western Canadian history and in bringing cultural difference and conflict into Canadian women's history.³⁰ Van Kirk's study ends in 1870 and only recently have researchers picked up the story to examine relations between First Nations and European women in the era of western Canadian agricultural settlement.³¹

Foremost among these scholars is Sarah Carter. Her 1990 monograph *Lost Harvests: Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy* explored the active role Native women played in efforts to establish Native farm operations. As "partners in the farm enterprise" Indian women drew on "traditional talents" such as foraging for food and fuel, but also learned new skills of gardening, dairying, bread-making, and knitting. Nonetheless, the persistently impoverished conditions in which Indian farm women worked and lived led government officials to conclude that Native women were poor housekeepers and immoral mothers.³²

These conclusions fueled the construction of First Nations' women as socially and sexually liminal. Carter's 1997 book *Capturing Women: The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery in Canada's*

Prairie West argues that "images of Aboriginal women as dissolute, dangerous, and sinister" were promoted by Euro-Canadian settlers and the Canadian state as part of their justification for segregating Native people. Claims that First Nations women lacked sexual morals helped Canadian authorities deflect accusations that government officials were abusing Native women, invalidate Native-white marriages, and institute policies constraining the geographic mobility of Aboriginal women. Out of these actions emerged the "well-established category of the 'squaw' that ...served to confirm the Euro-Canadian newcomers in their belief that their cultural and moral superiority entitled them to the land that had become their home."

As social categories were constructed to marginalize Native women, other ideological representations were being created to explain the position of white women on the agricultural frontier. Carter's analysis of the "captivity narratives" of the two women held captive by Big Bear in 1885 - Theresa Delaney and Theresa Gowanlock - demonstrates that governmental and media sources purposefully altered the women's accounts of 1885, reconstructing Delaney and Gowanlock as helpless victims of rapacious Métis and Indian captors. In so doing, the newly "manipulated" narratives reinforced popular beliefs - and subsequent historical analyses - that white women's role within western Canadian settlement was that of "passive civilizer," a "frail flower" to be protected from violation by male (and state) violence if necessary.³³

Several historians have used the concept "passive civilizer" or "gentle tamer" to explain Euro-Canadian women's participation in western agricultural settlement. In her prize-winning article, "'No Place for a Woman': Engendering Western Canadian Settlement", Catherine Cavanaugh explores the construction of western settlement as a "masculinist" enterprise: "Cast as civilizers, Anglo-Canadian women in particular were assigned the privileges that were assumed to accrue to their race, but race privilege rested on sex difference and was hedged around by dominant notions of ideal femininity."³⁴ As civilizers, white women were made responsible for cultural preservation and transmission. This role could, as American historian Peggy Pascoe has argued, provide women with

tremendous social power, what Pascoe terms female moral authority.³⁵ Indeed, white women may have emphasized their involvement in the domestic (rather than market) economy precisely because of the social and political power such claims to traditional female economies offered. Thus, in her research on Alberta farm women, Sheila McManus found that however much "outside" or "men's" work women performed, when they represented their daily lives in public forums such as the "Women's Pages" of newspapers the "social imperative to maintain the appearance of the publicly appropriate division of labour" inspired women to celebrated "feminine" domestic duties and to downplay their excursions in the masculine work terrain.³⁶ Likewise, when prairie women produced autobiographical accounts of their homesteading experiences, they often included tales of Aboriginal men and women "visiting" the farm home when white men were away. Such stories exoticized the homesteading narratives and authenticated women's status as "pioneer." Female settlers' contact with Native people served as legitimizing elements of the pioneer narrative. Because these racialized encounters occurred within domestic space, they did not undermine farm women's claims to sexual and social respectability. In these narratives women were depicted as playing key roles in the civilizing of the west, but they were represented as doing so from within the domestic realm from whence female moral authority was derived.³⁷

While more research is required before the shape of female moral authority in the Canadian prairie can be determined, focusing on the "passive" roles of women as civilizers need not exclude investigation of the more active roles as colonizers women assumed. After all, women who bought property or homesteaded did so on contested land. While many women would have acquired land *after* it had been alienated from First Nations people, the process of defining Native and non-Native land continued throughout the settlement era. For instance, in 1889 Margaret Browne endeavored to acquire clear title on homestead in southwestern Manitoba. The land Browne claimed had been "reserved" for fuel for the neighbouring Sioux community on the Oak Lake reserve. After the Indian Agent "made repeated but fruitless efforts to get these Indians to avail themselves of the timber on the reservation," the Indian Commissioner and

the Commissioner of Dominion Lands defaulted the Sioux claim on the land and granted the homestead to Browne. Mary Browne thus benefited from and participated in the assertion of Euro-Canadian beliefs about economic development, beliefs that stood in sharp contrast to First Nations' ones.³⁸

Of course, the history of colonization in the Canadian west is not only about Euro-Canadian representations or actions. Western Canadian history from the point of view of First Nations people themselves offers a radically different version of the story of agricultural settlement and Euro-Canadian colonization of the west. Historians of Native women are now beginning to make their voices heard and their histories widely known. For example, Winona Stevenson's "Colonialism and First Nations Women in Canada" provides an overview of governmental and religious strategies of colonization, and women's particular location therein. She stresses that "while colonialist transformation programs wreaked terrible damage on First Nations communities, they were not entirely successful. Traditional knowledge and skills were hidden by those Aboriginal men and women who resisted total cultural transformation."³⁹

Investigating the relations of power - power between white women and First Nations people, among women of different racial and ethnic groups, within the family, and for women participating in the market economy - together constitutes a substantial shift in the feminist scholarship on prairie women. Where once the focus was whether the west "was good for women," questions are now reframed as which west, which women? Where once they referred to the region as the last "frontier," now historians question whether we should be talking about a "frontier" at all.⁴⁰ After all, the west may have been a new frontier for Euro-Canadians, but was the traditional homeland for Indian and Métis inhabitants. Understanding the experiences of First Nation, African-Canadian, and Euro-Canadian women in terms of gender, race, and class, will facilitate a rethinking of power relations within the prairie region. Thus, reconceptualizing western Canadian women's history not only contributes to the historical scholarship on women in the various regions of Canada, but also provides some new directions for western Canadian history more broadly. In asserting that gender and race were social categories fundamental to European

imperialism and westward expansion, and in probing how the family served as source of oppression and a resource for survival, feminist theorists have altered how western Canadian historians can understand the transition from fur trade society to agricultural settlement. As regional historians pursue research on communities and districts of the rural west, we must not only be alert to what women did, felt and thought, but also to the particular constructions of masculinity, femininity, whiteness, and "Indianness" within the family and within the larger economy which shaped daily life and cultural contact.

ENDNOTES

1. Publications include monographs, articles, and also reprints of primary sources pertaining to women in prairie society. See for example, Mary Kinnear, *A Female Economy: Women's Work in a Prairie Province, 1870-1970* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998) and Norah L. Lewis, ed., *Dear Editor and Friends: Letters from Rural Women of the North-West, 1900-1920* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1998).
2. W. J. Healy, *Women of Red River: Being a Book Written from the Recollections of Women Surviving from the Red River Era* (Winnipeg: Canadian Women's Club, 1923, republished Winnipeg, 1987), 260.
3. This opinion is articulated in Barry Broadfoot's popular history *The Pioneer Years, 1895-1914: Memories of Settlers Who Opened the West* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1976) chapter 10 "Wives, Widows, and Whores," p. 199.
4. Susan Sundberg, "Farm Women on the Canadian Prairie Frontier: The Helpmate Image," in V. Strong-Boag and A. Fellman, eds. *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1986) first edition, p. 104.
5. Loewen also argues that while women who lived in the growing towns had greater opportunities for "public" roles in community and charitable organizations, ironically, those public roles only served to underscore separate spheres of male and female authority and to reinforce gender asymmetry. Royden Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and the New Worlds, 1850-1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993). See for example, Lesley Erickson, "The Interplay of Ethnicity and Gender: Swedish Women in Southeastern Saskatchewan" in Dave De Brou and Aileen Moffatt, eds., *"Other" Voices: Historical Essays on Saskatchewan Women* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1995).
6. Sundberg, "Farm Women on the Canadian Prairie Frontier," 103.
7. Susan Jackel, ed., *A Flannel Shirt and Liberty: English Emigrant Gentlewomen in the Canadian West, 1880-1914* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1982), 100.
8. Catherine L. Cleverdon, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950), 46-47.
9. Carol Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred: The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 127.
10. Georgina Taylor, "'Should I Drown Myself Now or Later?' The Isolation of Rural Women in the Saskatchewan and their Participation in the Homemakers' Clubs, the Farm Movement and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, 1910-1967," in Kathleen Storrie, ed., *Women: Isolation and Bonding. The Ecology of Gender* (Toronto: Methuen, 1987), 79-100.
11. Quoted in Norah Lewis, "Goose Grease and Turpentine: Mother Treats The Family's Illnesses" in Strong-Boag and Fellman, *Rethinking Canada*, p. 236.
12. On health services to the rural west, see Suzann Buckley, "Ladies or Midwives? Efforts to Reduce Infant and Maternal Mortality," in Linda Kealey, ed., *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada 1880s to 1920s* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1979), and Kathryn McPherson, "'The Country is a Stern Nurse': Rural Women and Urban Health Care 1920-1940," *Prairie Forum* (Fall 1995). On Canadian fertility rates, see A. Prentice, et al., *Canadian Women: A History* (Toronto: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1988), 162-65.
13. Mary Kinnear, "Do You Want Your Daughter to Marry a Farmer?" in D. Akenson, ed., *Canadian Papers in Rural History*, Vol VI (Ganonoque, Ont: Langdale Press, 1988).

14. Frances Swyripa, *Wedded to the Cause: Ukrainian-Canadian Women and Ethnic Identity, 1881-1891* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992): 21-23.
15. Sandra Rollings-Magnusson, "Hidden Homesteaders: Women, the State and Patriarchy in the Saskatchewan Wheat Economy, 1870-1930," *Prairie Forum* 24. 2 (Fall 1999): 173.
16. Terry L. Chapman, "'Till Death do us Part': Wife Beating in Alberta, 1905-1920," *Alberta History* 36.4 (Autumn 1988): 13-22; and "Women, Sex and Marriage in Western Canada, 1890-1920," *Alberta History* 33.4 (Autumn 1985): 1-12.
17. Georgina Binnie-Clark, *Wheat & Woman*, introduction by Susan Jackel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 304.
18. Margaret McCallum, "Prairie Women and the Struggle for a Dower Law, 1905-1920," *Prairie Forum* 18.1 (Spring 1993): 19-34; Catherine Cavanaugh, "The Limitations of the Pioneering Partnership: The Alberta Campaign for Homestead Dower, 1909-1925," *Canadian Historical Review* 74. 2 (June 1993): 198-225.
19. L. Rasmussen, et al., *A Harvest Yet to Reap: A History of Prairie Women* (Toronto: Canadian Women's Press, 1976): 8.
20. V. Strong-Boag, "Pulling in Double Harness or Hauling a Double Load: Women, Work and Feminism on the Canadian Prairie," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 21. 3 (Fall 1986): 32-52.
21. Sundberg, "Farm Women on the Canadian Prairie Frontier," p. 104.
22. Eliane Leslau Silverman, *The Last Best West: Women on the Alberta Frontier, 1880-1930* (Montréal: Eden Press, 1984): x; DeBrou and Moffat, *Other Voices* explicitly aims to explore diversity of women's experience.
23. Barbara Evans, "'We Just Lived It as It Came Along': Stories from Jessie's Albums" in Catharine Cavanaugh and Randi Warne, eds., *Standing on New Ground: Women in Alberta* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1993): 54.
24. Jeffrey Taylor, *Fashioning Farmers: Ideology, Agricultural Knowledge and the Manitoba Farm Movement, 1890-1925* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1995), 14.
25. Provincial Archives of Manitoba (PAM), T.D. Cumberland, *Judge's Notebooks*, County Court, Western Judicial District G2052--G 2073.
26. Tabulated from government of Canada, *Township Register* (PAM). Some of the case files relate to women who eventually received patents for homesteads, but the existence of many files pertaining to women who were unsuccessful in their bid for free land testifies to the broader significance of homesteading as an economic strategy for women.
27. Case files pertaining to the female homesteaders in southwestern Manitoba is derived from Manitoba: Department of Mines and Natural Resources, Crown Lands Branch, *Winnipeg Homestead Patent Applications 1880s - 1914* (PAM).
28. On the African-Canadian communities on the prairie region and the stereotypes of black male sexuality, see, R. Bruce Shepard, *Deemed Unsuited: Blacks from Oklahoma Move to the Canadian Prairies in Search of Equality in the Early 20th Century Only to Find Racism in their New Home* (Toronto: Umbrella Press, 1997), and Howard and Tamara Palmer, "The Black Experience in Alberta" in *Peoples of Alberta*, pp. 365-93. To date, no research has been completed that focuses directly on gendered patterns of experience within this racist framework in western Canada.
29. On gender and colonialism on the west coast of Canada, see Adele Perry's forthcoming *Edge of Empire: Gender-Imbalance, Race, and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), and her "'Oh I'm Just Sick of the Faces of Men': Gender Imbalance, Race, Sexuality and Sociability in Nineteenth-Century British Columbia," *BC Studies*, vols. 105 and 106 (Spring/Summer 1995): 27-44. See also, B. Roberts, "'A Work of Empire': Canadian Reformers and British Female Immigration," in Kealey, ed. *A Not Unreasonable Claim*.
30. Sylvia Van Kirk, *"Many Tender Ties": Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1690-1870* (Winnipeg: Watson and Dyer, 1980), 201, 240.
31. New work such as Erica Smith's excellent article "'Gentlemen, This is no Ordinary Trial': Sexual Narratives of the Trial of the Reverend Corbett, Red River, 1863," in Jennifer S. H. Brown and Elizabeth Vibert, eds., *Reading Beyond Words: Contexts for Native History* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1996) provides a discursive analysis of one of the more salacious tales of Red River.
32. Sarah Carter, *Lost Harvests: Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990): 176-80. See also Pamela Margaret White, "Restructuring the Domestic Sphere - Prairie Indian Women on Reserves: Image, Ideology and State Policy, 1880-1930" (PhD diss., McGill University, 1987).
33. Sarah Carter, *Capturing Women: The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery in Canada's Prairie West* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997): 104.
34. Catherine Cavanaugh, "'No Place for a Woman': Engendering Western Canadian Settlement," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 28 (Winter 1997): 493-518.
35. Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Several historians of American women have critiqued the stereotype of "passive civilizer" or "gentle tamer." See for example, Joan Jensen and Darlis Miller, "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New

- Approaches to the History of Women in the American West," *Pacific Historical Review* 49 (May 1980).
36. Sheila McManus, "Gender, Work, Politics. Southern Alberta Farm Women, 1905-1929" (MA thesis: University of Victoria, 1994), 60-61.
37. Kathryn McPherson, "Captivity Narratives? Farm Women and Domesticity in the Canadian North-West, 1870-1925" paper presented to the York University History Colloquium, November 1998.
38. Manitoba, *Homestead Patent Applications*. For a discussion of the changing First Nations' views on land use and tenure, see Irene Spry, "The Tragedy of the Loss of the Commons" in Ian A. L. Getty and Antoine S. Lussier, eds., *As Long as the Sun Shines and Water Flows: A Reader in Canadian Native Studies* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1983).
39. Winona Stevenson, "Colonialism and First Nations Women in Canada" in Enakshi Dua and Angela Robertson, eds., *Scratching the Surface: Canadian Anti-Racist Feminist Thought* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1999).
40. Patricia Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988).