



LOOKING BACK: CANADIAN WOMEN'S PRAIRIE MEMOIRS AND INTERSECTIONS OF CULTURE, HISTORY, AND IDENTITY

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The “Precarious Perch” of the “Decent Woman”: Re-Visioning the Space(s) of Western Settlement

In the wild west, where men were men and life was hard, women were supposed to be one of two things – commodities or prizes... We are not here counting the wives of homesteaders, of course. They were neither commodities nor prizes. They were, like anything that was likely to produce, used as devices to prepare the dream of a future.

– George Bowering, *Caprice* (1987)

Dad straddled one wall, I straddled the other, then Dad fitted the log... The blows of the axe sent shivers up and down my thin arms, and often I almost fell off my precarious perch.

... Mother couldn't straddle the walls the way I could. Her long skirts got in her way, and since no decent woman exposed her ankles in those days she couldn't do a thing about them. She tried sitting sideways on the walls, but that didn't work very well. She couldn't balance both the log and herself, so the log slipped, the

notch was wrong, and the whole thing had to be done over again, which irritated everybody.

– Mary Hiemstra, *Gully Farm* (1955)

Space is abstract. It lacks content; it is broad, open, and empty, inviting the imagination....

– Yi-Fu Tuan, “Place: An Experiential Perspective” (1975)

The issue of “space” has long dominated studies of the Canadian prairies; indeed, whether seeking to determine the evolutionary history of a western “landscape of the mind shaped by the myths, stories, and attitudes” (Francis, *Images* xvi) of a culture, or to delineate a trend in fictional representations of human reactions to the “surrounding emptiness” (Ricou ix), what stands prominent in most treatments of western settlement is the engagement between the physical vastness – the seeming unboundedness – of the region, and the limited and culturally specific language used by contemporaries to represent it. Examination of both historical and literary images of prairie settlement further suggests that the language settled on to describe this space is often gendered as female, so that western expansion becomes figured and idealized as a physical projection of Anglo culture into the fertile prairie landscape as a means to conceive a new national identity, one that is sustained on an individual level by the (male) farmer’s battle to control the productions of the land through “cultivation” and “improvement.” Accordingly, contemporaries posited that the type of “healthy society” being imagined in the Canadian west could only be “successfully erected” by “men of British tradition” (Mitchell 108–9). The majority (though certainly not all) of these gendered descriptions of “Man” on the prairies stem from the imaginations of male writers, which begs the following question: Given that women’s implied role in this drama of prairie settlement was to be “used as devices to prepare the dream of a future,” is there any difference in the way that the white, English-speaking memoirists gathered here have represented their engagement with this geographic space, which has attained mythological status as being “blessedly free of most conventional restrictions” (Stegner 29)?

In an attempt to answer this question, my concern in this chapter is to examine how gender is represented within specific spaces, including the geographic space of the Canadian west, the physical space of the female body, and the textual space in which memoir writers represent their lived experience of prairie settlement. As will be seen in the memoir passages taken up in this chapter, these three spaces are inter-related, so that the memoirists themselves have to negotiate between exhibiting conformity to cultural expectations of the female body in the prairie landscape when representing the moment of settlement, and at the same time using the textual space of the memoir to provide less constricted representations of prairie women; to document female transgressions of cultural expectations, both as they may have occurred in the lived experience of settlement and as new and empowering constructions at the moment of “looking back.”

Chapter Three ended with a quote from Katherine Magill’s *Back o’ Buffuf* (1977), in which the author remarks concerning the moment of departure from rural life in northern Alberta in mid-century, “we had lived here, deeply, often precariously, and we would never be the same” (73). While Magill’s use of the word “precariously” highlights the economic difficulties of survival on a homestead, nevertheless that image of living precariously – of moving into a new geographic territory that, as seen in the epigraph from Mary Hiemstra’s *Gully Farm* above, challenges conventional expectations of the female body, and specifically the type of work that that body is able to perform – and of being significantly changed by the end of such an experience, erupts again and again within the memoirs included in this study. Through implication, the phrase “precariously perched” suggests spatial location, both the space upon which one is perched as well as the space of downfall below that perch. For many women settlers, even those who emigrated in the first two decades of the twentieth century, “precarious perch” adequately describes the Victorian values that dominated cultural expectations about the type of society being created in the Canadian West, as well as women’s (re)productive role within that society – the imperative to be a “decent woman.” To be “precarious,” however, is to be uncertain, without solid foundation, and certainly many of the earliest women settlers discovered that “civilization” in the prairie west was “the dream of a future,” and that the isolated conditions of prairie life often

demanded behaviour that threatened to topple them into the perilous depths lurking below social/cultural expectations/conventions. And liberation from expectations/conventions was not simply a matter of historical progression, either, for sometimes it was precisely the early and most isolated conditions of prairie life that allowed white, English-speaking women, if they were able to relinquish even temporarily their own internal self-monitor, to embrace physical behaviours that deviated from idealistic cultural images. Ironically, as time and “civilization” marched on and as prairie communities grew, women settlers who had experienced a feminist revolution of behavioural codes in the wider world emigrated to the prairies only to discover that rather Victorian attitudes and values had solidified and become the norm, meaning that women often had to consciously and publicly choose between ascending or rejecting the prevailing cultural perch. The immediate experiences/choices of women settlers remain largely silent within historical narratives; however, women’s memoir representations of those experiences/choices provide us with a means to revisit contemporary expectations of female behaviour as well as to discover the “traces of the past that are less than exemplary” (Rukszto 17) in terms of those expectations. Indeed, if we accept Tuan’s definition of space in the epigraph above, then the memoir as textual space allows for considerable and imaginative play with the culturally constructed Prairie Woman image; it effectively becomes an “interface between individual and communal identities” (Higonnet 2).

In order to discover the “less than exemplary traces” that might rest within that interface, we must first consider the behavioural norms that dominated the construction of women’s experiences in western settlement. That the Canadian West was intended to inspire a rebirth of the British Empire, together with all its perceived superior and “civilized” values, inevitably meant that cultural narratives of western expansion and settlement became inscribed by a spatial politics of gender. As an ideological vision, the Canadian West was figured as a masculine domain: as one Canadian historian puts it, “in constructing and reconstructing the West – from wilderness wasteland to economic hinterland to agrarian paradise – expansionist discourse perpetuated the myth of the West as a ‘manly’ space, assigning to it a moral and political force that underwrote

elite Anglo-Canadian men's hegemony in the territories" (Cavanaugh, "No Place" 494). Indeed, the national project of bringing the prairie landscape under cultivation was seen as a necessarily masculine endeavour, as reflected in the vocabulary chosen by contemporary writers on the subject: for example, as J. Ewing Ritchie phrased it in 1885, "there is a good deal of hardship to be encountered by any who would *penetrate* to the dim and mysterious region we denominate the North-West" (160; emphasis added). For those who would so penetrate, however, the hardships experienced would ultimately enhance one's masculinity, as seen in George M. Grant's 1873 assertion that "a man out West feels like a young giant, who cannot help indulging a little tall talk, and in displays of his big limbs" (87) and also in Thomas Spence's 1880 characterization of the settler "gazing out" across the landscape and "feeling himself every inch a man" (qtd. in Owram, *Images* 126). Similarly, in 1891 Nicholas Flood Davin had a message for potential emigrants from eastern Canada: "The Ontario farmer is a fine specimen of the yeoman, but three years in the North West raises him higher on the scale of manhood" (108).

Meanwhile, the prairie landscape itself – the "garden of abundance" (Francis, *Images* 107) – was usually figured as feminine, as seen in George Livingstone Dodds's 1906 poem "The Canadian West," which ends with the following lines: "Food for the great world's millions/ She pours from her fertile breast;/ This land with a mighty future,/ The fair Canadian West" (39). In 1908, towards the end of her idealistic prairie novel *Sowing Seeds in Danny*, Nellie McClung provides the following (rather violent, I would suggest) post-harvest image of the landscape: "The earth had yielded of her fruits and now rested from her labour, worn and spent, taking no thought of comeliness, but waiting in decrepit indifference for her friend, the North Wind, to bring down the swirling snow to hide her scars and heal her unloveliness with its kindly white mantle" (294–95). The designation of the earth as female is a cultural construction that has been noted in a variety of contexts, both geographic and historical. For example, in *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*, Annette Kolodny examines "what is probably America's oldest and most cherished fantasy: a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially

feminine” (4).¹ Similarly, and with particular importance for our understanding of western settlement in imperial and national terms, Jean Pickering and Suzanne Kehde suggest that “the object of colonial encounters is typically feminized, held to be in want of masculine (imperial) authority. This feminization can be applied both to geography ... and to the colonial population” (6). Prior to the mid-nineteenth-century rise of expansionism, the Canadian West had been figured as a wasteland, a space inimical to human habitation, but the conversion of the region to an Edenic paradise demanded re-figurement along human lines. Thus, borrowing from Kolodny we might say that “to make the new continent [or region] Woman was already to civilize it a bit, casting the stamp of human relations upon what was otherwise unknown and untamed” (9). The “stamp of human relations” can certainly be seen in an 1875 essay titled “The New Canada” by Charles Mair, one of the founders of the Canada First movement, who figures the Empire-building imperative of western settlement in the following way:

This new Dominion should be the wedding of pure tastes, simple life, respect for age and authority, and the true principles of free government on this Continent. It stands, like a youth upon the threshold of his life, clear-eyed, clear-headed, muscular, and strong. Its course is westward. It has traditions and a history of

1 Frieda Knobloch traces this “cherished fantasy” back historically when she writes that “nature was, of course, female and came into the English language at the same time as the plow, in the eighth century, replacing the woman who produced food *in* the field with the woman *as* the field” (74). Although Kolodny notes that “other civilizations have undoubtedly gone through a similar history,” she goes on to suggest that they did so “at a pace too slow or in a time too ancient to be remembered” and that “only in America has the entire process remained within historical memory” (8). For the purposes of Kolodny’s study, “America” means the United States of America, although a great deal of her conclusions are applicable to the Canadian experience of land settlement. Indeed, Dick Harrison notes that “the identification of woman with the land [in Canadian prairie fiction] is not uncommon,” citing Arthur Stringer’s *The Mud Lark* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1931) and Ralph Connor’s *Gwen, an Idyll of the Canyon* (Toronto: Fleming H. Revell, 1899) as prime examples (97).

which it may well be proud; but it has a history to make, a national sentiment to embody, and a national idea to carry out. (151)

Mair's insistence on the masculine nature of the "new Dominion" and its need to, as he goes on to suggest, "project into the fertile immensity of the west" (153) as a means to "embody" forth "national sentiment," delineates the contemporary narrative of western settlement as a sort of "gendered romance" (New 107), a "wedding" of Anglo-inspired cultural values and the feminized prairie landscape as a means to achieve – conceive? – a legitimate national identity.² Indeed, as one early-twentieth-century author described the advent of spring on the prairies, "the land is clothing herself with verdure as a bride adorning for her husband" (Ferguson, *Open* 72).³ In the act of carrying out the project of western expansion, the individual farmer as representative of the new nation would play the role of husband by taking ownership of his

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- 2 The image of national expansion into the west as a process of legitimation gains significance when contrasted with the words chosen by Canadian imperialist, George R. Parkin, to describe the proposed effect on Canadian identity of continentalism:

In a Great Britain reorganized as a federation, or union, or alliance, Canada would hold an honorable place, gained on lines of true national development; in annexation to the United States she could have nothing but a *bastard nationality*, the offspring of either meanness, selfishness, or fear. (qtd. in Bennett, Paul W., et al. 303; emphasis added)

It should also be noted that Mair's narrative relies heavily on a rhetoric of constriction: as he suggests, the new nation's "power and cohesiveness are being felt at last, and already it is binding the scattered communities of British America together in the bonds of a common cause, a common language, and a common destiny" (152). In this way, then, did narrative constructions of the Canadian west as both geographic and ideological space seem to preclude individual resistance to/transgression of the common "bonds" of nation and empire building.

- 3 Compare these romantic images to the language used by Henry Kreisel to describe "the conquest of the land": "into the attempted conquest, whether ultimately successful or not, men pour an awesome, concentrated passion. The breaking of the land becomes a kind of rape, a passionate seduction" (49). Kreisel's suggestion of rape here – which he then rather unnervingly corresponds to "a passionate seduction," surely a subject for a whole separate study – is particularly apt given that western expansion is so often figured as an "irresistible force" (Owram, *Promise* 102).

own section of land, bringing it under cultivation, and making it productive. He would, through hard work and perseverance, unlock “the wonderful, mysterious promise” which “hang[s] over” the “abundant broad bosom of earth!” (Stringer, *The Prairie Wife* 220).⁴

Given the sensual directives to the male farmer regarding his possession and use of prairie lands, one might well ask if there was room for the presence of real women in such abstract narratives of western settlement? Was the Canadian West really a space where only “strong *men* gathered”⁵ and where the ideal prairie woman, like Martha Perkins in Nellie L. McClung’s *Sowing Seeds in Danny*, could be described as “a nice, quiet, unappearing girl” (199)?⁶

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- 4 That the images of fertile abundance illustrated here were an effect of changed cultural expectations of the prairie region is evident from the fact that, in contrast, in the late-seventeenth century, Henry Kelsey, the “first white man to visit the Canadian interior,” popularized the “mental image of the Prairies as barren and unprofitable” (Watson, J. Wreford 15).
- 5 I am referring here to Douglas Hill’s *The Opening of the Canadian West: Where Strong Men Gathered* (New York: John Day, 1967). In contemporary “masculinist definitions of the ideal settler,” says Catherine Cavanaugh, “women’s exclusion continue[d] to be so taken for granted that it seem[ed] to be less an idea than the natural order of things” (“No Place” 504). The implicit bias towards a masculinization of the prairie settlement project can also be seen in Dorothy Kamen-Kaye’s discussion of “The Composite Pioneer,” in which she suggests that “a pioneer is an individual who blazes a trail into strange territory for others to follow. But they do not refer to themselves as ‘pioneers’, these *men* who came to what is now Saskatchewan” (6; emphasis added). Georgina H. Thomson’s *Crocus and Meadowlark Country: A Story of an Alberta Family* (1963) also documents the typically masculine conception of pioneering in the west, as seen when she mentions the “First Council Meeting in the Parkhill (now Parkland) district” of Alberta, held in “the summer of 1904 before we women folk came out” (13). This meeting of “the pioneers of the community” even included, writes Thomson, “our 17-year-old [brother] Jim” (14) and was commemorated by a photograph, provided by the author for the reader’s perusal.
- 6 We can see the “unappearing girl” phenomenon also in Frederick Philip Grove’s *Settlers of the Marsh* (1925), in which we are first told about the “hero” Niels Lindstedt that in his “longing for the land that would be his,” he dreamt of having a house of his own and “a wife that would go through it like an inspiration” (39). Then it is clarified that

woman had never figured as a concrete thing in Niels’s thought of his future in this new country. True, he had seen in his visions a wife and children; but the wife had been a symbol merely. Now that he was in the

In many representations of the immigrant family, the main focus was upon the male head of the family – the individual who would undertake the actual process of land cultivation and who, in a marketplace-driven economy, represented an immediate monetary potential to the process of western settlement. The woman settler, on the other hand, often appeared as merely an appendage to her husband. For example, in 1922, the former Minister of the Interior Clifford Sifton drew the following image of what he deemed to be a “quality” immigrant to the Canadian West: “I think a stalwart peasant in a sheepskin coat, born on the soil, whose forefathers have been farmers for generations, with a stout wife and a half-dozen children, is good quality” (qtd. in Hall 90).⁷ Leaving aside for the moment the fact that Sifton is enunciating an image that defers from the essentially Anglo-focus of immigration policies during the height of westward expansion, it does seem that the “stout wife” and her children are rendered here as merely part of the implements necessary to a male farmer’s success on the Canadian prairies. We also see this construction of women in a Department of the Interior pamphlet titled *Western Canada: How to Get There; How to Select Lands; How to Make a Home* (1902), in which settler W.E. Cooley testifies to the origins of his success as a farmer: as he states it, “My earthly possessions at the time I reached this place were \$1.75, a wife and seven children,” all of which, by dint of “work[ing] hard and faithfully,” he translated into “520 [of 800] acres under cultivation,” “12 horses, 81 head of cattle, 15 hogs and all the equipment necessary for a farm,” and “as fine a residence as there is” (qtd. in Francis, *Images* 131). Women and children were literally accorded a lesser monetary value than men, as seen in the fact that “the Canadian government paid American railway booking

country of his dreams and gaining a foothold, it seemed as if individual women were bent on replacing the vague, schematic figures he had had in his mind. He found this intrusion strangely disquieting. (39–40)

- 7 Interestingly, Sifton’s characterization of what, in his mind, was the ideal settler woman contrasts sharply with a feminine ideal represented in Frederick Philip Grove’s *Fruits of the Earth* (1933), in which Ruth Spalding says of her husband “that he had begun to look critically at her. She had caught herself wishing that she could make herself invisible; [*sic*] She was getting stout. Not that Abe said a word about it; but she knew he disliked stout women” (46).

agents a bonus of \$3 for every male agricultural immigrant over 18, \$2 for every female and \$1 for each dependent child” (qtd. in Bruce 19). Ralph Allen even increases the value of the male immigrant (by implication) when he notes that “Sifton sold huge tracts of Canadian government land at give-away prices to private colonization companies, then paid them a bounty out of the Dominion treasury for every settler they could produce – five dollars for the head of a family, two dollars each for women and children” (262), thus conflating women down to child-size value.

However, as Sarah A. Carter suggests in *Capturing Women: The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery in Canada’s Prairie West*, within the explicitly British-Canadian imperative of western settlement, women occupied a position of paramount importance: in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the image of the white prairie woman was represented as the central vessel through which the Anglo ideology of “civilization” would be replicated in the west. Despite the fact that a Department of the Interior immigration pamphlet titled *Twentieth Century Canada* (1906) suggested that “Canada is a man’s country, from the fact that all new countries first attract men, because the labour required for early settlement calls for that of man rather than that of woman” (qtd. in Bruce 22), women’s labour was also needed in the making of a nation – after all, the prairie woman “was to be the civilizer and the reproducer of the race” (Carter, *Capturing* 8) in the Canadian west.⁸ In her discussion of early female immigration to rural Manitoba, Mary Kinnear states the function of women thus: “Women were needed to help produce crops and goods, and they were needed to swell the population. Women were in the spotlight both as producers and reproducers” (*A Female* 22). The woman settler’s function was thus both metaphorical (as image, in her role as disembodied reproductive vessel of a culture – a particularly fitting role for the gender who would not be formally declared “Persons” until 1929) and literal (as lived experience, in her real life role as a mother). This

8 Catherine Cavanaugh also suggests that women settlers’ role within expansionist discourse was to ensure a gender hierarchy of power: “Created in opposition to the middle-class ideal of active, conquering manhood, civilizing womanhood is made passive and disembodied, thereby guaranteeing representations of men’s dominance” (“No Place” 497–98).

dual function is clearly articulated in contemporary literature on the subject of western settlement: in Marion Dudley Cran's *A Woman in Canada* (1910), for example, the author suggests that, "in the North-West, where wives are scarce, a work of Empire awaits the woman of breed and endurance who will settle on the prairie homesteads and rear their children in the best traditions of Britain" (14–15). In a similar vein, in *An Englishwoman in the Canadian West* (1913), Elizabeth Keith Morris suggests that women settlers could fulfil "their highest and noblest mission in life" simply by becoming "the mothers of Canada," "our true empire builders" (26).⁹ Thus does the cultural narrative of western settlement appear to rely upon the population of the prairies as a reproductive act – that is, reproductive of the "best traditions of Britain" – with actual women being represented as the cultural vessels through which the failing greatness of the British Empire would be given new life. The work of the ideal Prairie Woman, then, was a replication of the work of the idealized prairie landscape: re-constitute, hence re-invigorate, the British Empire, and be concretely productive. The connection between the fertility of the western landscape and the fertility of the Prairie Woman can be seen in Marion Cran's poetic description of one of the women she met on her travels through Western Canada: "Here, where they found virgin prairie, she stands; the heavy ears [of corn] lap against her splendid hips, and here and there they tip her breast; round her skirts the children cling, she moves in this beautiful, fruitful land like Ceres among plenty" (137).

The inevitable result of this construction of woman's dual role within the geographic space of the Canadian prairies, notes Sarah Carter, was a rather "limited repertoire of behaviour available to white women" (*Capturing* xv):

The wise women from the East would exemplify all the qualities of the ideal Victorian woman, which included purity and piety. At

9 In illustration of the contention that motherhood was "at the center of empire building" (Stoler 649), in her memoir *Pioneering in Alberta* (1951), Jessie Browne Raber remembers her mother's own numerous productions: "I stayed home every day now, for Mother told me, a new baby was to come in February. I thought we had enough, but one more didn't make much difference. They were sweet anyway, so we had to do our very best to have them grow up to be good and helpful citizens" (140–41).

times it proved useful also to emphasize the frailty and delicacy of the white woman, as well as her dependence on males, though these were scarcely the qualities that would ensure stability or success in the Prairie West. (8)

What is clear from the prescriptions on female behaviour as here articulated by Carter is that “the prairies were not, after all, culturally isolated from the rest of the world” (Rasmussen et al. 88). Indeed, as already alluded to in Chapter Two, Carter’s “repertoire” is commensurate with the domestic images perpetuated throughout the British Empire and North America, as in the Victorian “Angel in the House” (Perkin 233) and what Barbara Welter identified in nineteenth-century American society as the “Cult of True Womanhood.” The role of Prairie Woman as “civilizer,” then, was meant to aid in “the government’s purpose of recreating the middle-class domestic ideal on the prairies” (Cavanaugh, “No Place” 505). This desire for “recreation” of female behavioural norms can be seen in contemporary literature. For example, in 1901, Elizabeth Lewthwaite contributed an article to *The Fortnightly Review*, in which she assures potential emigrants that “robust health in England is not a necessary qualification, though of course desirable, for the prairie atmosphere is so pure and invigorating that many delicate folk on their arrival become new creatures; and I have often been amazed at what fragile, delicate-looking women are able to accomplish” (717). The civilizing presence of “fragile, delicate-looking women” was also acknowledged in 1913 by Elizabeth Morris, who noted regarding the “shaggy appearance of some of the [male] settlers” that “these men had become rough through the lack of a woman’s refining influence, but it was a roughness that could be very quickly rubbed off by a dainty, gentle hand” (25).

In the desire to translate the domestic role to a very different geography, there was created a paradox to be faced by real women: on the one hand, they were expected (and usually expected themselves) to adhere to the accepted female role as domestic icon; on the other hand, the practical nature of their participation in the settlement of the Canadian west would demand many activities to be undertaken and provide many opportunities to be seized, that would be profoundly unsettling of that role. Indeed, the demand on

women for “purity and piety,” “frailty and delicacy,” and a “dependency on males,” as Carter notes about white prairie women, had very little to do with the reality of women’s lives. There has been scholarly debate about the extent to which middle-class domestic ideals actually influenced the behaviour of white, English-speaking women who emigrated to the Canadian West, with some people laying stress on strict adherence to cultural dictates and others adopting the more individualist idea of the West as a space of liberation,¹⁰ but given a subject with so many variables attached to it (e.g. place and time of settlement; age, personality and personal experience of the settler), it is now more generally agreed that the prairie region was often a highly ambiguous space for women settlers. It was a space in which, once again, extremes often had to be rejected in favour of a continuum of lived experience. As Catherine Cavanaugh puts it,

But just as seeing women as unambiguous agents of Empire is problematic, it is equally mistaken to assume that the frontier acted invariably as a liberating force in the lives of newcomer women. The West was not a priori a place where established cultural practices and beliefs were easily and readily abandoned; rather, middle-class British women measured the freedom of the West by contrast to the social and economic constraints imposed on them in England. (“Irene” 105)

In the parallel constructions of the prairie landscape and the female settler’s body as spaces of “civilizing” potential, I would suggest, we see the female body functioning as “a space of mimetic representation” (Blunt and Rose 5)

10 In illustration of the debate that has gone on, in his examination of American women’s travel diaries about the Overland Trail, John Mack Faragher suggests that “feminine farm roles had little to do with the fetishized domesticity that was a part of the womanly cult flowering in the East, for in most ways these pioneer wives and mothers were the very antithesis of that antiseptic and anesthetized version of femininity” (171). In *Frontier Women: “Civilizing” the West? 1840–1880*, though, Julie Roy Jeffrey asserts that “frontier images of women were closely tied to images of middle-class women current in the East. The concept of woman as lady, the heart of domestic ideology, survived” (129).

of the larger cultural project. I would further suggest that the universalizing and “limited repertoire of behaviour available to white women” ensured that the female body as culturally inscribed space would be veiled in an “illusion of transparency”: as suggested by Henri Lefebvre,

The illusion of transparency goes hand in hand with a view of space as innocent, as free of traps or secret places. Anything hidden or dissimulated – and hence dangerous – is antagonistic to transparency, under whose reign everything can be taken in by a single glance from that mental eye which illuminates whatever it contemplates. (28)

The “illusion of transparency,” then, is a repudiation of difference or of the unknown, which enhances the idea of the domestic ideal as a script, a known “repertoire” of physical/emotional/spiritual behaviours, the performance of which can be unproblematically judged as either appropriate – or not.¹¹ Most important, at all times the female body as a space reflective of Anglo norms of “civilization” must perform its denial of a “space of the ‘impure’ beyond [its] own utopian boundaries” (Blunt and Rose 6). The question inevitably becomes then: Is the cultural pressure for “transparency” so overwhelming that the female bodies represented in the memoir texts gathered here remain complicit with domestic ideals, even though they were written sometimes many years after the cultural moment of settlement life? As Rachel Blau DuPlessis clarifies regarding the idea of the cultural regulation of individual behaviour, “sociologists and other students of social practices use terms like ‘scripts’ to explain the existence of strongly mandated patterns of learned behaviour that are culturally and historically specific, and that offer a rationale for unselfconscious acts” (*Writing 2*).

11 Historian Julie Roy Jeffrey suggests that the ability to judge people on the basis of, amongst other things, physical behaviour, was essential to “civilizing” efforts in the American west in the mid-nineteenth century, and “because middle-class white women and men relied on their own cultural standards to judge others, they found many groups deficient and unworthy of social inclusion when they did not adopt white values and standards of behavior” (7).

So to phrase my question another way, are the memoirs written and published by white, English-speaking women produced as “unselfconscious acts” of behavioural complicity? Or do they represent a self-conscious attempt to confront those “strongly mandated patterns of learned behaviour” that still dominate our domestic conception of the Prairie Woman image? If we accept the idea enunciated in Chapter One that the memoir genre is a unique narrative choice for an author seeking to write at the intersection of self and social context, and if we concur with Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose that “there is always a space of some kind for resistance” (15) to the “imposition” of cultural norms, then I would suggest that the prairie memoirs gathered here function to provide just such a (temporally safe) space for the possibility of resistance. We might say that memoir functions to provide “a space of the ‘impure’”; it functions as a textual “frontier” in which the woman writer stakes her claim in his-story and embodies forth the possibility of resistance to western imperialism’s construction of female behaviour. While these memoir texts tend to represent women’s general coherence with domestic scripts, nevertheless they also make clear that the “Prairie Angel”¹² was often required to step down from her pedestal and participate in the daily reality of settlement life, which necessitated a rather less delimited “repertoire” of behaviour from the female body. These texts betray that real women “seized chances, or responded out of necessity, to act, to do more than adorn the hearth or their men’s status” (Silverman, *The Last* xii).

One of the ways in which women’s bodies were subject to cultural expectations of female behaviour is through the dictates of fashion, including such adornments as clothing and hairstyles, both of which can be seen to function as “an encroachment of social norms upon the body’s surface” (Stadler 20). More important to our understanding of Prairie Women as “custodians” (Carter, *Capturing* 6) of the western settlement project, “social identity expressed in dress becomes not only an answer to the question of *who* one is, but *how* one is, and concerns the definition of the self in relation

12 For a discussion of the “Prairie Angel” as an example of the “iconography of pioneer prairie women” in North America, see Carol Fairbanks, *Prairie Women: Images in American and Canadian Fiction* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986) 76.

to a moral and religious value system” (Barnes and Eicher 2). The connection between outward appearance and morality can be seen in a January 27, 1916, report in *The Calgary Albertan* about a sermon given by Rev. Dr. Fulton “on the subject of ‘Wives’”:

He quoted the Bible to show that wives’ duty was to “love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, keepers of home, good, obedient to their husbands.” He exhorted wives to retain their husbands’ affections as it was said that “Love is a wife’s only wages”.

The question is: How is a wife to get her pay? A great number are not, he said. There are a good many homes where love is stark and dead, but the remedy is in the wife’s hands. He advised her to make herself agreeable and attractive, keep herself neatly dressed, hair well in order, and always wear a smile. Keep the home cheerful, clean and cosy. (qtd. in Rasmussen et al. 94)

One of the important points raised in Fulton’s sermon is the idea that the major responsibility for adherence to social norms/expectations rests in the individual herself. The imperative to exhibit conformity is thus made an empowering act; a means of achieving public approbation, if you care to take it; if you take care. In many contemporary narratives, female settlers are specifically noted as upholding ideals of domestic femininity, based on outward appearance. For example, Marion Cran provides the following model:

[T]here she is – my pretty hostess with her young face and grey hair, lighting the kitchen fire for the day’s work. I watch her for a little while. She has a contented face and works very neatly; her dress is a pretty blue cotton and over it is a linen apron, the sleeves are rolled to the elbow, her feet are thickly shod, she wears a low collar, her skirt is four inches from the ground, there is nothing to impede her movements, and yet the whole effect is very smart and workmanlike. (130)

In addition to rendering white women's bodies as "transparent," as readable for signs of transgression of social norms, the Anglo bias of fashion (clothing and/or hair) as moral barometer also allowed for the rejection of non-white/non-Anglo women as not being suitably "pure" enough to participate in the "civilizing" project of western settlement. As Sarah Carter notes, in contrast to the idealized images of white women that were produced during the early phase of western settlement, native women were constructed in an entirely negative way with "images of Aboriginal women as dissolute, dangerous, and sinister" ("Categories" 61). A fictional example of this occurs in Harold Bindloss's *Prescott of Saskatchewan* (1913), in which Ellice, a half-breed woman "married" to a white farmer named Jernyngham, is described as being "a young woman with fine dark eyes and glossy black hair, whose appearance would have been prepossessing had it not been spoiled by her slatternliness and cheap finery" (4). Given that "her character was primitive," Ellice is particularly unfit for the role as "civilizer" of a race, as seen especially in descriptions of her clothing and hair, which form a stunning contrast to Cran's female model given above: "Her white summer dress was stained in places and open at the neck, where a button had come off. The short skirt displayed a hole in one stocking and a shoe from which a strap had been torn" (28). Only a few pages later, when the title hero goes to visit Jernyngham's home, "the clatter of domestic utensils indicat[ing] that Ellice was baking" holds promise for cultural ideals of the prairie woman's role; however, her apparent conformity is interrupted when she appears at the door "with a hot, angry face, and hands smeared with dough, her hair hanging partly loose in disorder about her neck, her skirt ungracefully kilted up" (35).

One can imagine that the desire to be deemed a "pretty hostess" rather than a "slattern" was a major incentive for self-regulation in choices of dress and hairstyle. Here again we see debate about the extent to which women conformed to or confronted Anglo standards of fashion. Seena B. Kohl, for example, seems quite unequivocal about the impracticability of conventional women's clothing, especially in the early days of prairie settlement: as she asserts, "one has only to look at the early mail order catalogues to become aware of the incongruity of urban constraints upon women in their daily lives on the frontier. No pioneer woman could milk six cows, drive a horse team, or plaster her house in the corsets and skirts of that period – and they did not" ("The

Making” 178–79). But Nanci Langford repudiates vast generalizations when she states that “the fact that traditional modes of dress and hair styling were inappropriate on a prairie homestead because of the nature of women’s work and the environment in which they lived and performed their work, did not bring about any significant changes in women’s approach to female fashion on a broad scale” (“First Generation” 150). Once again, the reality likely rests on some middle ground, with individual women weighing at various moments in their lives the potential social risks of non-conformity relative to the practical needs of homestead work. The balancing act between self-regulation and criticism can be seen in the following “incongruity” noted by contemporary writer Emily Ferguson:

A woman should never attempt to weed. She is not made that way. Pray consider my difficulties! If I stoop, every drop of blood in my body falls to my head and I thus court death from apoplexy, hæmorrhage, congestion, or a multiplicity of nameless ills. True, this is only a contingency; but as an actual happening, I always break the steels in my stays, and often the laces.

If I get on my knees I soil my skirt, and our village Celestial will charge me \$1.25 to starch it again. Besides, this attitude has a disastrous effect on my shoes. It wrinkles them across the toes. To weed with anything like comfort, one must squat after the manner of the monkey eating pea-nuts. I would prefer to let the weeds grow.

Men should be forced to weed the flowers. Women are only meant to wear them. Nature made men ugly of a purpose that they might grub in the dirt and “crick” their backs. (*Janey* 143)

In Ferguson’s avowal we see that “She” is explicitly aligned with the “female costume”; that is, while Ferguson suggests that “She is not made that way,” meaning “She” is not capable of the physical behaviour necessary for effective weeding, it is, rather, only “She” as constrained by her clothing – her “stays” and “laces” – who is incapable of the exertion of weeding without threat to social standards of feminine fashion, as seen in the “disastrous effect” of being

“soiled” and “wrinkled.” Ferguson more openly criticizes Anglo standards of “female costume” when, earlier in the same text, she notes of the women in the “Doukhobor village of Vosnesenia” that, “on the whole, their dress spells comfort. Their arm-holes are easy; their skirts do not drag; their bodies are not jails of bones and steels, and they wear no cotton-batting contrivances” (42). She works to deflect her own criticism of Anglo fashion constraints, however, when she continues her observation by noting that, “while I was undressing, the women returned and examined my clothing with apparent interest... They seemed much pleased with the ribbons running through my underwear, but were shocked and, at the same instant, amused by my corsets” (43).

For many of the earliest female settlers to the sparsely settled Canadian West, regulation of bodily behaviour/appearance was virtually non-existent, except at the level of the individual; that is, for well-socialized women of Anglo background, “the principle of self-surveillance” (McClintock 58), like Lefebvre’s “mental eye which illuminates whatever it contemplates,” was always in effect, even when living at the very margins of “civilization.” To borrow from another theorist, who significantly borrows from the language of land ownership, “a woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself ... she comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman.... The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed, female” (Berger 46–47). Constructions of femininity were so all-pervasive, so thoroughly entrenched in cultural rhetoric in general, let alone in narratives of western imperialism, that it was extremely difficult for early women settlers to the Canadian West to relinquish the “ways of seeing” themselves learned as part of their inherited cultural knowledge. This difficulty is certainly present in Clara Middleton’s memoir about homesteading near Carstairs, Alberta, from 1904: as she writes in *Green Fields Afar: Memories of Alberta Days* (1947), even while performing what would be considered traditionally male work, and even when doing so without reservations, a woman had to adhere to appropriate fashion:

Then came shingling time. Homer was never any good on a roof, or a stack, or any elevation. Ladders were deadly threats, so far as

he was concerned. They made him giddy. So while he kept his feet on the ground and his hands busy at ground tasks I went on the roof with Free and helped him lay and nail six or seven “squares” of shingles. I wore a sweater, an old skirt and a flannel petticoat, for in those days no woman of taste would have been seen in men’s pants or overalls. There was a time, a little later, when I had a divided skirt for riding, but even that seemed a little less than modest and decent. (15)

Mary Hiemstra’s *Gully Farm* provides us with a glimpse into the difficulties of maintaining Victorian standards of “purity” as related to clothing and the behavioural performances of the female body. Prior to the family’s arrival on their homestead, while still on the train ride from St. John to Saskatoon, Sally Pinder appears to adhere without difficulty to the orderly physical symbols of her position as a “decent woman”: as Hiemstra writes,

How Mother managed to keep herself and three children, one a small baby, neat and clean on that long trip I don’t know, but somehow she did. Her long, lovely hair was never unkept and frowzy. She always combed it first thing in the morning and twisted it into a neat, thick roll on top of her small head. Her dress was as tidy as her hair. There was never a gap between her trim skirt and bodice, and she never walked about with her shoes unlaced as some of the women did. (46)

The author is here playing on polar oppositions of order/disorder, such as “neat,” “clean” and “tidy” versus “unkept,” “frowzy” and “unlaced.” But I would suggest that it is especially in Hiemstra’s insistence upon the symbolic lack of “a gap between her trim skirt and bodice” that Sally Pinder’s body displays its adherence to cultural expectations of feminine decency. From her meticulously maintained hairdo, right down to her shoelaces, the author’s mother has evidently not yet been “undone” as a result of her journey to the margins of “civilization.” However, once she has arrived in a virtually unpopulated – and hence “uncivilized” – portion of the region, Sally Pinder finds herself living in

a tent and facing the advent of a prairie winter. Despite her fear of the great outdoors, she is forced by necessity to at least occasionally emerge from the family tent and aid her husband in the construction of their first home on the prairies. As suggested in the scene used as an epigraph to this chapter, Sally Pinder and the then six-year-old author are placed in what Hiemstra calls a “precarious perch” (162) as they find themselves sitting atop the ever-growing walls of the new structure, helping to pull up logs. For the author’s mother, especially, the performance of such work places the female body in a position that threatens the maintenance of Victorian values in terms of female behaviour and, as Hiemstra takes care to note, it is only the log that slips and not her mother’s strict adherence to ideals of the “decent woman.” What is not contained in the epigraph above is the ending to this scene, which suggests that, however much Sally Pinder might prefer to live in an environment that does not necessitate engagement in activities that challenge domestic ideals of femininity, nevertheless she does imagine at times a physical presence that exceeds cultural norms:

“We just aren’t big enough to build houses,” Mother said as she struggled to hold the log and keep her balance. “It isn’t as if we’re going to stay here. We could just as well leave now, and save ourselves all this trouble.”

“I started this and I’m going to finish it,” Dad said grimly. “You go back to the tent if it’s too much for you.”

Sometimes Mother took Dad at his word and went back to the tent, taking Lily and Jack with her. When that happened Dad always chopped viciously for a while, and I kept quiet no matter how much the log rolled and the axe tingled my arms. After such a day, however, there was always a better than average supper waiting for us, and Mother often said she wished she was a bigger and stronger woman.

As Sally Pinder’s stay on the prairies lengthens and necessity demands an increasingly “indecent,” or “impure,” repertoire of behaviour, we begin to see Hiemstra construct a textual space of liberation for her mother, a growing

freedom from cultural constraints as reflected in fashion. Keeping in mind her orderly image while on the train ride to Saskatoon, we must compare that early image to a later scene in which Sally Pinder participates with her husband and another immigrant couple in chasing a bear. The bear scene occurs while the Pinders are still in the midst of building their first winter home, and after they have spent an entire day cutting, loading, and installing “sods” onto the roof, with both of them ending the day “black and hungry” (166). If it is true that middle-class women “could not bear on their bodies the visible evidence of manual labor” (McClintock 153), then Sally Pinder has now firmly entered the realm of the “impure.” The Pinders are on their way back to their tent home when the author’s mother sees a bear, for the second time. Earlier, Mrs. Pinder had to endure her husband’s disbelief about the existence of the bear, but this time he sees it too, and is ready to take action. After loading his gun, Mr. Pinder takes off into the bush to chase the bear and, to the surprise of her children, Sally Pinder “dashed after him.” This seemingly instinctive decision is shocking for the reader, especially given that just a couple of pages previous to this scene, Sally Pinder has remarked as follows on the gender inequality of life in Canada:

They [men] liked being their own bosses and doing as they pleased. They could work or not just as they wanted, and if they wanted excitement they went to the gully and shot ducks. With a woman it was different. All she could do was stay at home and worry, especially when she had bairns. Canada was a man’s country, and if the women were sensible they’d leave. (164)

Two pages later, Sally Pinder seems eager for some excitement herself, and when she decides *not* to “stay at home and worry,” it is understandable that her three children are “startled at being left alone” (166). After a period of waiting, Sally Pinder returns from her sojourn in the bush and is described by Hiemstra as follows:

She didn’t look at all like the quiet mother I was used to. She was young and excited, a Diana enjoying the chase. Her cheeks glowed

pink, her blue eyes sparkled, her lips smiled, even her knot of hair that had slipped a little looked adventurous. A long bramble clung to her skirt, but she didn't seem to notice. (167)

Hiemstra's description is particularly interesting given what I suggest in Chapter Three is the most common female characterization of the displaced settler woman as a modern-day Ruth, the always loyal servant to and follower of her husband and family, an image that Hiemstra herself utilizes in her text. As a Ruth, we might well assume that Sally Pinder is following her husband into the grove as an act of self-effacement, of concern for his safety; however, by very deliberately invoking an earlier cultural image of female behaviour – and especially by invoking the image of Diana (Artemis, in Greek mythology), “the huntress, with her golden bow and moaning arrows, who leaves in her trail howling animals and a shuddering earth, is goddess of the wild, virgin nature, all the inviolate places of the earth where humans dare not enter” (Baring and Cashford 321) – the author deliberately represents her mother in a more self-interested chase after the bear and away from Victorian concerns of female “decency” and “purity.” In details such as the “knot of hair that had slipped a little” and the “long bramble [which] clung to her skirt” – not to mention that her self-monitor is off, as she “didn't seem to notice” her own state of disorder – Sally Pinder's perch seems ever more precarious as her reflective memoirist-daughter begins to redefine the spatial politics of western settlement.

Hiemstra clearly constructs her mother's final plunge into the depths of behavioural transgression in another fiery scene. Although Sally Pinder has stated that, in the event of a prairie fire, she would be able to do nothing more than “run away” (183), nevertheless at the first signs of a fire, perhaps as a result of the previous disorderly pleasures of bear-hunting, she unhesitatingly plunges into the burning bush. Hiemstra begins her prairie fire scene with an interesting conversation between her parents, one in which the traditional spatial politics of female behaviour are simultaneously invoked and rejected:

“What are you doing back so soon?” Mother asked anxiously when we clattered into the yard.

Dad tried to smile though his face looked pale. "There's a prairie fire coming," he said.

"Where?" Mother looked around. "I can't see any fire."

"You can't see it for the bush," Dad said. "But it isn't far off."

"Well, then, don't stand there looking gormless," Mother snapped. "Let's go and put it out."

"It's too big for that." Dad began taking out the heavy iron pin that held the double-trees to the wagon. "But I'll go and plough a wider guard. You stay in the house with the bairns. You'll be all right."

"The bairns can stay by themselves," Mother said. "I'm going with you."

Dad told her she'd be better off in the house, but Mother paid no attention to him. "Where's them sacks?" she asked, and she ran into the barn and got them.

I helped hitch the horses to the plough, then Mother told me to take Lily and Jack and go into the house.

"You'd better go with them, Sarah," Dad said. "You'll be better off there. All I have to do is start a back-fire."

"Then let's get on with it." Mother's round face looked frightened but firm. (183–84)

Thinking back to Sarah Carter's repertoire of behaviour available to white women in the Canadian West – "purity and piety," "frailty and delicacy," and a "dependence on males" – Sally Pinder's impatient desire to attend upon the scene of the fire and her decision to leave her children alone appears to transgress cultural norms. Hiemstra even seems critical of her mother's decision to again leave her children in a terrifying situation when she enunciates a childhood fear about abandonment and documents the wait that she and her siblings endured, and expresses their feelings of trauma: "[W]e were alone in the turmoil. Mother and Dad had forgotten us." However, when the author recounts her mother's return to the farmyard she works to reconstitute an heroic version of motherhood in which a sense of adventure beyond the confines of domestic duties does not negate prospects for maternal attention.

Indeed, when she finally emerges from the smoke and ash-filled air, Sally Pinder appears ironically cleansed of her complicity with acts of “decency” and now carrying the bodily symbols of her conversion to acts of “impurity”:

Lily and I stood still in the little trail and looked at each other. We were too frightened to speak. The whole world seemed to be on fire. We didn't know what to do.

Suddenly, *as if she knew we needed her*, Mother came out of the smoke, but she looked so unlike the pretty mother we were used to we were almost afraid of her. Her face was black, and her eyes were red. Her hair was singed, and so were her eyelashes and brows. “Where are you going?” she called.

“To the Metherells' away from the fire,” I shouted.

“There's fire at the Metherells', too. You'll be burned to death if you try to go there. Go back home, and be quick.” And without waiting to see whether we obeyed or not she went back into the smoke. (185; emphasis added)

After her second plunging “into the smoke,” Sally Pinder emerges once again, this time represented by Hiemstra in a symbolic tableau of Victorian woman resisting the physical restrictions of her clothing: “Mother was driving the team and doing very well at it. She was running and her long, wide skirts streamed out behind her, and so did the little shawl tied around her neck” (186). It is clear to the reader at this point that Sally Pinder has travelled far away from being merely the “reluctant emigrant.” While the author's mother arrives from the Old World initially complicit with cultural norms of female behaviour, the sometimes harsh realities of early prairie settlement often necessitate bodily transgressions of those norms. In the end, the cumulative effect of Sally Pinder's acts of impurity, her adventures beyond the confines of appropriate female behaviour, is significant for, as Hiemstra tells us, at least for a little while after these experiences, “Mother never mentioned going back to England” (189).

Writing in *The Silent Song of Mary Eleanor* (1983) about her mother's arrival on the prairies, Marjorie Wilkins Campbell illustrates one of the

immediate “challenges of space and geography” to the female body in the following description of her parents’ arrival:

It was the spring of 1904 when William Herbert Wilkins and his wife Mary Eleanor Elliott stepped from the colonist car at the little South Qu’Appelle railway station that, like every other station they had passed since leaving Winnipeg, had been painted deep *sang de boeuf*, the color of dried blood. He carried the baby and she held tightly to the two-year-old while the wind tugged at her hat and wrapped her skirt about her ankles. (4)

Despite the immediate wrenching at her sense of order (as expressed in her fashionable exterior), Mary Eleanor’s sense of propriety does not immediately suffer. In fact, her sense of herself as a “decent woman” seems to redouble despite her feelings of displacement in the new environment:

For her it had all been too swift and too overwhelming. She needed more than a few weeks and months to understand that the West cared little for old-world distinctions between a lady and a woman. Despite her acceptance of father’s trust in her adaptability, she could not have helped the slightly disdainful swish of her long, modishly dust-ruffled skirt as she followed him along the plank sidewalk to their boarding house. (5)

However, Campbell’s mother, an “Edwardian gentlewoman brought up under the restraints of late Victorian middle class modesty,” soon experiences a more severe moment of “consternation” (12) when her husband presents her with the mode of travel that will be used to get to the family’s homestead site:

But nothing he had said prepared her for the shock of that equipage. She had expected to see a fine team of horses, and perhaps some sort of carriage. Never having imagined how they would move their belongings from the railway station to the new farm, she was utterly unprepared for father’s solution. Their equipage –

he obviously savored the term – was a high green wagon box on wheels. Hobbled nearby were two great, heavy oxen, beasts she had hitherto seen only in Dutch paintings at the galleries, or hauling drays. (11)

Faced with a sight which contradicts her class-based “expectations,” Mary Eleanor’s immediate point of reference, the way that she attempts to make sense of what she sees, has to do with the culture of “civilization” (“paintings at the galleries”) back Home. As she soon discovers, however, “civilization” of the prairie landscape is, as noted in the epigraph by George Bowering, “the dream of a future,” and in the meantime she finds herself being asked to accept a rather “precarious perch,” one that is ungirded by the social/cultural conventions she previously knew and trusted. When told by her husband that “she and the children were to travel on the narrow seat on top of the load,” the disjunction between “Old” world expectations and “New” world realities is made apparent:

Again she was handicapped by her ignorance. She had never seen a woman riding on top of such an equipage, except, perhaps, a Breton fisherwife. Naively, she could not imagine herself in the role of a peasant. She did not know that every pioneer woman would ride to her new home as he had suggested. Nor did she understand that the high seat would be reasonably safe for herself and the children. (12)

Physically safe, perhaps, but a “shock,” to be sure, to Mary Eleanor’s sense of decency, as evidenced by her efforts to ascend and maintain her perch: as Campbell writes,

Mother wore the only travelling costume she had until their boxes could be unpacked. Father held the baby while she grasped the long skirt and struggled up onto the high seat. Then he handed up the baby and lifted the toddler to a place beside her. There was nothing he could do, had he tried, to help her with the hat that

threatened to escape its long pins and sail off in the strong, gusty wind.

Without his brief account of that departure I would never have believed it happened.

“No amount of imagination could quite picture the sheer lunacy of that trip. The only excuse is that most explorers and pioneers are considered fools by the sane of their community. Friends and relatives in England would have sought means of preventing such foolhardiness.

“A green Englishman with most of his goods and chattels piled high on a wagon, and, hitched to the clumsy vehicle, a pair of green oxen. The crowning bit of folly was the slim, steady-eyed young woman, attired in her London-made costume, seated with her two children on top of the nearly top-heavy load.”

...

Like the boarding-house experience, mother seldom talked about that journey. From the top of the high load the vast countryside looked utterly empty, the horizon endless. The slow, steady swaying of the oxen's broad backs made her feel giddy. Struggling to keep her balance and to hold the two children, she tried to remind herself that they were on the last lap of their journey to the new home.... (13)

Mary Eleanor's British sense of dignity is further breached when the family stops for a rest and she faces the indignity of a foreign geography's effect on her bodily behaviour: facing her husband “in sudden consternation,” she asks,

“What shall I do for a W.C.?”

“What the native women do, I suppose,” he suggested practically.

“Or the gypsies!” she retorted, trying to accept the situation. Lifting her long skirts in the long grass behind the wagon, she learned how desperately she needed to accomplish what she later

saw Indians performing easily and naturally as women have done since the beginning of the species. (14)

In Campbell's description of her mother "trying to accept the situation," we see the Edwardian woman forced, as a matter of physical necessity, to literally behave beyond the confines of private domestic space, as defined by Anglo and middle-class cultural values. In addition, by choosing to represent this event, the memoirist-daughter uses the space of her writing as a means to document ways in which prairie women's lived experience often exceeded cultural expectations and ideals of "civilization." By invoking what "native women do" as a "practical" solution to one experiential problem, the author highlights that Anglo norms of behaviour are constructions rather than divine sanctions, and that a different geographic space affects bodily space and function. What Campbell notes as a "natural" function experienced by all women had long been dominated by cultural expectations demanding silence on issues of the female body, so that her decision to represent this intimate moment becomes a deliberately confrontational narrative re-vision of the Prairie Woman image. Given her mother's silence about this journey, one can only imagine that Campbell's recreation of this scene derives at least in part from her use of her mother's diary account of the homesteading experience, so that a contemporary and private "incoherence" (Weir 127) with feminine ideals becomes the inspiration for a public re-presentation of the gap between image and reality.

Further assaults on Mary Eleanor's external appearance of female decency occur along the trail, as when the family joins up with a local rancher to cross "the bridge across the Narrows between Echo and Lebret lakes" (16). Learning that "the approach was under several feet of water," Campbell's mother prepares for one more adventure beyond the pale of female purity, as reflected in dress:

Both men ignored her anxious attempt to delay the departure that to her threatened our very lives. While the rancher jumped down from the democrat and helped her up to the high seat, father held the baby and then handed the toddler up to a snug place between them. The rancher in his wide sombrero and high-heel boots

gripped the reins firmly, spoke quietly to his team and they lunged into the murky, deep, swirling water. Terrified as she clutched the baby with one arm and held the toddler with the other, mother saw it rise to the nearest hub. The turning wheels churned the water like the wash of a fast boat until it sprayed her face. Without knowing what she did, or why, she braced her feet against the dashboard. Moments later, when the horses' hooves clattered onto the firm surface of the bridge, she knew she had been so intent on sharing the ordeal that she had forgotten all trace of her personal fear. As the wheels rattled over the gravel at the far side of the Narrows she casually ignored the muddy water that dripped from the sopping wet hem of her dust-ruffled skirt and her boots. (17)

In the words "forgotten" and "casually ignored," we see, as with Hiemstra, a transformation occur as the prairie woman begins to realize that the demands of the new geography necessitate at least a temporary dismissal of her "mental eye," her self-surveyor, as a means to allow for acts of "impurity"; acts of physical survival in a new space.

Again similar to Hiemstra's mother, Mary Eleanor, too, experiences the challenge to female "decency" and "purity" presented by a prairie fire, an experience once again represented by the prairie woman's state of dress. Returning home one day after taking "his first paying crop" to the nearest grain elevator, Mr. Wilkins smells "the first whiff of burning prairie grass" (64) and arrives at the family farm to witness the following "indecent" sight: "Between the two rows of ploughed fire guards around the yard mother stood poised with matches in her right hand, ready to back-fire as soon as uncle Leo gave his order. Her skirt was hitched up about her waist, a scarf knotted about her hair, a dripping grain sack clutched in her other hand" (65). Unlike Sally Pinder, however, Campbell's mother is "saved" from actually battling with the fire; thus she undergoes no symbolic divestment of her "Edwardian" attitude regarding female "decency," either in terms of geographic or bodily space, with the result that her self-confidence about staying and coping with homestead life does not soon improve. In fact, directly after this scene, rather than being enervated by physical exertion as Hiemstra's mother was, Campbell shows

her mother to be incapacitated by the stress of the situation as she “fell into father’s arms as he jumped down from the wagon, sobbing her relief,” and as she retreats to the safety and privacy of the domestic sphere to perform one of the most intimate functions of the female body:

After the first agonizing moments mother rushed into the house to us two terrified little girls and the baby screaming with hunger. While uncle Leo watered and rubbed down and fed the horses and father quietened Nora and me with bread and butter and jam and milk, mother sat down in the rocking chair and opened her blouse to the nudging, searching infant mouth.

But no milk came. None of the milk that normally by now would have saturated the blouse and her chemise and corset. There was nothing for the baby, and no relief from her own numbing agony that was worse than the worst toothache she had ever known. Her breasts felt hard and tight, the nipples excruciatingly painful. The smell of smoke in her hair and on her clothes sickened her, and the crackling sounds of flames that had been less than a mile away echoed in her ears. Remembering the possibility of having to wade into the slimy slough with the baby in her arms, she felt a terrible shudder take hold of her entire body, and the terror of it made her long to scream, knowing that somehow she must relax her awful tension.

She did not scream. It was the baby who screamed again, frustrated and hungry. Across the room father sat at the table with us two older children. She herself sat in the now familiar rocking chair and as she moved with it from sheer habit she began to croon, not conscious of the melody or the well-known words that were part of her being. Slowly, as the melody took charge of her mind, she massaged her taut breasts and though for minutes she did not realize that the miracle had occurred, she felt the guzzling little mouth draw the first welcome drops. The flood of milk brought unspeakable relief. The gossamer touch of the baby’s caressing

hands assured a complete return of the natural function. Some day, mother knew then, she would sing again. (65–66)

This stunning narrative moment in Campbell's memoir is complex. On the one hand, as I've offered it up here, this scene seems to represent the prairie woman's retreat from an activity that forced her to exceed the repertoire of possible behaviours available to the "decent woman" of the early twentieth-century to an activity that confirms domestic ideals of femininity. And yet, on the other hand, in the detailed intimacy of the scene as drawn by the author, in her narrative transgression of the culturally silenced female body, there seems to be a desire to complicate even an act of seeming adherence to gendered scripts. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, white women's role in the Canadian West was reproductive in both metaphorical and literal terms; that is, in their role as "civilizers," or "moral and cultural custodians," white women would effectively reproduce the Anglo values and norms that would bring the Canadian nation into being, thereby re-invigorating the British empire. Metaphorically, they would nurture a nation. At the same time, they would literally give birth to and raise children, who would populate, inherit, and maintain this "civilized" nation. In cultural narratives and images, however, all of this work of women remains rhetorical and disembodied. In personal narratives, such as the memoirs studied here, that undertake to document the literal work of women, what gets detailed are the traditional domestic tasks such as those examined in Chapter Two. The bodily acts of child-bearing and child-rearing are only ever mentioned cursorily, and not in the kind of minute detail that one might represent, say, the planting, growing, nurturing, and harvesting of crops. The female body may have been constructed, as I said before, in alignment with the productive capabilities of the prairie landscape itself, but cultural constraints on representations of female bodily functions would not have allowed for the same degree of detail in documenting adherence to this particular type of women's labour. The cultivation of crops could be explicit, but not the cultivation of a nation's future population. While most of the transgressions of "transparency" in female bodily behaviours occur outwardly – outside the constraints of fashion, outside the home, outside the repertoire available to white women – the strength and difference of Campbell's

text, and specifically in passages like the one above regarding the intimate acts of the maternal body, is that the author transgresses inwards. She takes us inward and beyond the surface fashion of the “decent woman” to reveal her “blouse and her chemise and corset,” eventually exposing those physiological happenings within a space that is “antagonistic to transparency” because it cannot be “taken in by a single glance” (Lefebvre 28). Cultural narratives of domestic femininity colonize the female body; they effectively bring the unknown under control by disembodiment real women. In scenes such as the one given above, Campbell re-presents the prairie woman’s physical body and literalizes the metaphorical role, thus ironically transgressing cultural narratives of the “decent woman.”

In both Hiemstra’s and Campbell’s memoirs we are dealing with representations of the adult female body that move us beyond cultural norms of physical behaviour to make space for transgressions. As the epigraph from Hiemstra’s text illustrates, however, the prairie girl’s body was not as completely constrained by the ghosts of convention as the adult female body, so that many of the memoirists use the “frontiers” of narrative space to document the experiences of obedience and transgression that occur between mother and daughter as the latter gets older and begins to take up the domestic script. Remembering a time when she was a teenager *Pioneering in Alberta* (1951) in about the first decade of the twentieth century, for example, Jessie Browne Raber writes about getting her first lesson in gender ideals as related to an article of clothing:

Mrs. Brown gave mother many clothes to make over for the girls. Black velvet was one thing. Oh, we were so thrilled! Mother made skirts for Margaret and me. That was just about the most wonderful thing that could of happened to us. We certainly were careful with them. Then I had a beautiful blue skirt and with a white blouse, I surely was dressed up. Mother let Margaret and me go visiting over to Pleasant Valley one day. We had a grand time with the family whose name was Holben. They had four boys and one girl, and one of the boys liked me quite well, but I didn’t have time for just one boy. We played games and raced. One race was to climb

over a fence and reach the barn first. I won, but discovered I had a little three-cornered tear in the very front of my skirt. I nearly died, for we were to go over to some more friends, the Smiths, for supper. I didn't care if they saw it so much, but what would Mother say. It was such a pretty skirt. I was so proud of it, but there was the tear. Well I'd just have to face the music when I got home. (151)

Here we see the prairie girl's simultaneous appreciation for an article of female fashion and desire for greater physical freedom than that article seemingly allows. We also see a simultaneous acknowledgment of the mother's probable negative reaction to what the tear in the skirt would imply about her daughter, and maybe about her own performance of the domestic role, and the daughter's own confession of unconcern about being read for signs of adherence to feminine norms. Once she arrives home, Raber waits anxiously for maternal judgment and rather predictably the major issue for Mrs. Browne is not the condition of the skirt *per se*, but rather how the tear in the skirt reflects upon the "precarious perch" of her eldest daughter's femininity:

I still felt guilty over the skirt, tried to mend it but not very satisfactorily. I stayed home a long time, scared Mother would tell me to wear my pretty blue skirt. Of course I knew the day would come, which it did. I was scolded good, for acting so wild, not a bit ladylike. Mother gave Sis and me quite a lecture on a young lady's behaviour. I still had to undo the stitches and do it better, but I felt such a relief to get it off my mind. The tear was mended quite neatly under Mother's supervision. (151-52)

A few pages later in Raber's text, the author notes another way that fashion norms hindered the performances of young female bodies:

The summer had been very nice, that is we children thought so, for we were really getting up into our teens now. Sis and I had to have our skirts made longer, much to our disgust, as they were in our way for running. They were all right for going to parties though. (157)

While that last line indicates a change in activities that marks the change of focus from childhood to womanhood, the other issue of running as “unlady-like” behaviour – as a geographic transgression of physical decency – in the early years of settlement is evident in other of the memoirs gathered here. For example, in Nellie McClung’s *Clearing in the West: My Own Story* (1935), a memoir about homesteading life in southern Manitoba in the last two decades of the nineteenth-century, the author writes as follows about a community picnic “early in the summer of ’82”:

A committee was formed and a program of sports arranged. There was to be a baseball game, married men versus single men; a pony race, an ox race, a slow ox race, and foot races. I was hoping there would be a race for girls under ten, or that girls might enter with the boys. But the whole question of girls competing in races was frowned on. Skirts would fly upward and legs would show! And it was not nice for little girls, or big ones either, to show their legs. I wanted to know why, but I was hushed up. Still, I kept on practising and tried hard to keep my skirts down as I ran. I could see it was a hard thing to do. In fact, I could see my dress which was well below my knees, was an impediment, and when I took it off I could run more easily. I suggested that I would wear only my drawers, (we did not know the word bloomers) I had two new pairs, held firmly on my “waist,” with four reliable buttons. My suggestion was not well received. Then I wanted a pair of drawers made like my dress; for that would look better than white ones with lace. Lizzie thought this a good idea, but mother could not be moved. There was a stone wall here that baffled me. Why shouldn’t I run with the boys? Why was it wrong for girls’ legs to be seen? I was given to understand that this was a subject which must not be spoken of. (106)

This scene surely documents McClung’s early feminist inclinations and as a retrospective account it certainly establishes the author’s sense of herself as a dissenter from cultural norms of femininity. Just as importantly, as with

Raber's account above, we see here the gap that occurs between mothers and daughters when inculcation in gender construction is being questioned. Like Raber's mother, Mrs. Mooney is portrayed as complicit with contemporary expectations of gender and is presumably the one who "hushes up" her daughter's determined and creative search for spatial liberation; for the establishment of new and different boundaries of "decency" in fashion more suited to transgressive bodily behaviour. Ultimately, of course, the young McClung comes to the realization that cultural norms are difficult to change and the "stone wall" of social expectation will continue, for the time being at least, to dominate her physical performances. Like Raber, however, McClung uses the moment of writing her memoir, an act of self-narration, to confront cultural constraints by representing youthful thoughts/acts of rebellion.

Change would come for little girls who desired to run free, as seen in Nell Wilson Parsons's *Upon a Sagebrush Harp* (1969). In this story of homesteading life in southeastern Saskatchewan in the first two decades of the twentieth century, the author gives a detailed description of the voluminous clothing which female children had to wear: "Over Rena's and my long underwear, flannel petticoats, and heavy stockings, we wore woollen dresses and enveloping aprons Mama called 'pinnies'" (74). Although Parsons notes the efficacy of such clothing on a winter's morning on the Canadian prairies, as the following dialogue with her mother illustrates, she is also aware that the layers of clothing a girl is forced to wear throughout the year have more to do with social convention than real life climatological needs:

Putting on these petticoats on icy mornings reminded me of a time the last summer in Iowa. I had come downstairs for Mama to button my dress up the back. It had been a sizzling hot morning.

"Stop dancing up and down," Mama chided, turning from the task of frying sausage at the stove. Her hands stopped moving as she began to button the dress.

"You've left off one of your petticoats."

"It's so hot, Mama. I could go with no clothes on and not be cold."

"Hush you! No clothes on. The very idea!"

“It’s so hot,” I insisted. “I don’t need but one petticoat. I’ve got my ferris waist on and the ruffled petticoat and my ruffled drawers. That’s enough clothes.”

“W---ell, I don’t know. A lady has to wear clothes she doesn’t exactly need, many a time ...” (74)

Significantly, we are not told how this matter resolves itself, for the ellipses in this passage are the author’s own. The effect for the reader, then, of this open end, of the author’s mother’s obvious final hesitation to re-assert the norms of what “a lady has to wear,” especially when combined with Parsons’s alignment of the young overdressed girl on a “sizzling hot morning” with the “frying sausage,” is to make possible the questioning of cultural norms. Unlike McClung, Parsons is not “hushed up,” and the “stone wall” of appropriate femininity appears to have suffered some instability.

In a later scene recounting the family’s preparation for a community picnic, Parsons again questions the clothing which she and her sister were made to wear for this public occasion:

Our excitement grew into a suffocating frenzy in the days before the picnic. There was hurried trying on of dresses we had not worn since leaving Iowa, elaborate, lace-trimmed dresses of pink china silk. The dresses for Rena and me were exactly alike. Six-inch lace dripped from yoke and sleeve.

Iowa relatives had thought Mama clever to get a dress for each of us from Cousin Ida’s full-skirted, long dress with leg-o-mutton sleeves. Our dresses were, indeed, almost exact replicas of the original. (96)

What is particularly important here is that the young girls are dressed into “exact replicas” of the fashion worn by an adult woman, thus symbolically representing the seemingly inevitable path of socialization to cultural norms of femininity. However, as the picnic anecdote goes on, Parsons notes a gap in her own appearance of conformity:

I think Rena and I must have looked a little peculiar at the grove picnic in those fussy dresses with wide, pink satin sashes, but bare-foot. The town girls all wore white, and patent leather slippers! I envied those girls their slippers, but the enduring memory of that day is the footrace. The prize for my age group was fifty cents. FIFTY CENTS!

One million dollars! Fifteen cents would buy a new hair ribbon from Eaton's catalogue. Twenty cents would buy a tin of new water colors. Painting was my passion, and the paints brought from Iowa were long since used away. What else, with a fortune of fifty cents? I would need the catalogue in hand for final decision. (96–97)

The gap, of course, is between the “fussy” dress and the bare feet, but it is also in the emphasis of the scene itself. While she begins by noting her momentary attachment to an article of fashion (the “patent leather slippers”), the overwhelming emphasis in this anecdote is the young girl's privileging of a physical exertion that could garner economic freedom and indulgence in a private passion. The act of financial independence is only partly undertaken, however, for after having run one race which ended in a tie, the young author is waiting for the deciding race when her own lack of decent clothing becomes an ironic economic advantage:

The wait for the running off of the tie was agony. If I could beat the tall girl ... fifty cents ... fifty cents! The judges were placing my competitor and me for the run-off when the girl's mother came forward and took her daughter's hand. I am not sure, but I think perhaps a fifty cent piece may have been pressed into the girl's palm. She smiled at me, turned to the judge and said, “I think I would rather Cora did not run again in this heat. Give the other girl the prize money.”

The prize was mine! A millionaire by default! (97)

What is delightful about this scene is that when the mother of the town girl sees that the young Parsons is not fully appropriately dressed (in social terms),

she feels sorry about the symbol of economic lack and throws the race by resorting to a particularly feminine excuse for her own daughter. In the end, then, Parsons's mildly indecent self-presentation is rewarded publicly.

In Kathleen Strange's *With the West in Her Eyes* (1937), a memoir of homesteading in Alberta in the 1920s, we are able to observe that an increase in population and post-war changes in the norms and values of the wider world did not necessarily result in a greater liberation from cultural constraints upon the female body. Strange experienced homesteading as an adult, and in her memoir she arrives in Canada with new behavioural expectations in hand and herself fully marked with evidence of her "impurity," only to discover that the establishment of close-knit prairie communities seems to have consolidated the gender norms of an earlier period. Despite the burgeoning emancipation of women in the larger world, women living in prairie communities, which were now less isolated than when Hiemstra's and Campbell's mothers arrived, seemed to be clinging to older ideals of female behaviour: indeed, as Jacqueline Bliss notes of women in a Saskatchewan context, "as the need for survival skills in Saskatoon women diminished with the growth of the community, women began to revert more closely to the Victorian ideal" (97).¹³ Strange's first impression of the small prairie community of Fenn, Alberta stresses her sense of difference and exclusion:

I felt sure I read a measure of suspicion and disapproval on every face I encountered. I am sure, too, that there were many dark prophecies, when our backs were turned, as to our apparent unfitness for farm life. I am equally confident that many of our future neighbours believed then that we would not endure the life very long. Not only did they *expect* us to fail, but I rather fancy they unconsciously *wanted* us to fail. We were so obviously city products, and we were, also, by way of being interlopers, since we

13 The stifling effect that a small prairie community can have on female behaviour is most clearly illustrated by Sinclair Ross in his novel, *As For Me and My House* (1941; Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1957), which Henry Kreisel describes as "contain[ing] the most uncompromising rendering of the puritan state of mind produced on the prairie" (51).

had come into a community that consisted mainly of one large family from a certain part of Ontario, related, if not by ties of blood, then by ties of marriage and long association. (11–12)

Strange here marks her family's difference as being based on both their status as "city products," as members of a class of people whose values differ radically from rural populations, as well as being imperial "interlopers" in a colonial community that, especially after World War I, was beginning to feel its independence from the Mother country. In addition, by here joining the words "*apparent* unfitnes," Strange gets at the concept of transparency introduced earlier, for she documents human culture's tendency to align a person's surface appearance, including style of dress, with a person's character.

While all of her family members are subject to disapproval, however, it should be noted that Strange appears to merit special attention in being judged as appropriate or not for settlement life. As she steps off the CN train, she finds herself immediately confronted with cultural expectations of female bodily behaviour as her family members are made objects of public scrutiny and her body functions as a public symbol, a transparent space subject to cultural judgment. As Strange admits, she does not fare well in her first display:

A group of people, waiting near the platform, eyed us curiously as we approached. Word had evidently gone forth that the newcomers would arrive on the noon train, and so our future neighbours had turned out in full force to look us over, and to pass judgment on us, as well as to extend to us a kindly if somewhat inarticulate greeting.

I realize now that we must have appeared to them to be rather queer-looking people. I myself, for instance, did not look the part of a farmer's wife in any particular. I was small and none too robust-looking. I was dressed, city fashion, in a tailored suit, and wore a little hat that had its inception in Paris. I also wore high-heeled shoes and the filmiest of silk stockings. To make matters worse, I had my hair cut short, and wore it in a straight Dutch bob with heavy "bangs." Short hair had been a fairly general custom

in England since early in the war, but it appeared not to have penetrated this particular part of Western Canada at all. For some time after my arrival, to tell the truth, I felt very uncomfortable and conspicuous on this account, and was more than once tempted to “grow it out,” so that I would not seem so very different from everyone else. (11)

Leaving aside the issue of Strange’s apparent physical inappropriateness for “the part of a farmer’s wife,” we see here that her clothing problem stems specifically from the fact that she is dressed “city fashion,” a style apparently too frivolous, too delicate, for the practical necessities of rural life. Like many immigrant women before her, Strange is perched precariously (on high-heeled shoes); she is on the verge of exceeding rural notions of female “decency” and “purity” as reflected on the body through clothing.¹⁴ In addition to inappropriate footwear, Strange’s hairstyle – despite its obvious practicality for women’s work anywhere – marks her as “different,” as not appropriate enough, to play “the part of a farmer’s wife.”¹⁵ Despite the fact that, as Aileen Ribeiro notes in her study of *Dress and Morality* in Britain, in the first decade of the twentieth century the fashion “ideal” had become “a young, slim girl with short hair fitting close to the head,” “a curious mixture of sophistication and boyishness” (149–50, 154), this style trend had obviously not become the norm in western Canadian society, probably due to the existence of a colonial mentality whereby gendered customs of an earlier period were preserved as a mark of communal stability and identity. On the other hand, as Strange goes on to make clear in the real ending to the above passage, her impure presence in the landscape of the Fenn community does eventually result in accommodation

14 Rural disdain for such city fashions as high-heeled shoes is also evident in Peggy Holmes’s *It Could Have Been Worse: The Autobiography of a Pioneer* (1980). Holmes, who also emigrated to Alberta as a new bride at the end of World War I, relates an “afternoon teaish” conversation with a female neighbour, who gossips about a “new settler,” Mrs. Bright, who is notable for her “fine airs and fancy talk, spiking around on them high heels” (97).

15 Again we can refer to Holmes’s *It Could Have Been Worse*, in which the author notes that in 1922 she wore her hair “long, as was the custom” (143).

of difference: “However, one by one the younger members of the community began, somewhat daringly I suspect, to follow my example. Eventually, to my own secret relief, even the older women followed suit, and today, of course, short hair is as general a fashion among prairie women as it is elsewhere in the world.”¹⁶ Short hair had become so fashionable, in fact, that by the 1930s in Alberta, Kathreen A. Nash only ever knew her mother with that hairstyle: as she writes in *The Maypo Lea Forever: Stories of a Canadian Childhood*, “I never saw my mother’s abundant chestnut hair except in her wedding picture, piled high on her head, and in one lock, which she had saved when it was cut. Even before I was born it was cut short and waved, as old snapshots show, in the fashionable 1920’s ‘bob’” (100).

Just as with her hair, so, too, with her style of dress does Strange manage ultimately to make her mark on the western Canadian community in which she lives. As Anne McClintock notes about cross-dressing, “clothes are the visible signs of social identity, but are also permanently subject to disarrangement and symbolic theft” (67). Strange does not take long to perform a “symbolic theft”; she does not wait long to challenge both geographic and corporeal space in relation to “decency” in clothing:

Just before Grandma Strange went away, she and I unwittingly did something that greatly shocked the community.

We had decided that we would both like to do some horseback riding. Good saddle horses were available on the farm and we wanted to make the most of them. I had brought with me from

16 The “bob” style had caused considerable controversy in this period, as evident in a contemporary Canadian novel, Douglas Durkin’s *The Magpie* (1923), in which Marion Nason, whose hair was “‘bobbed’ in the latest mode,” finds herself subject to expectations of female decency, for, “although her mother had once hinted that longer hair might be more becoming in the wife of Craig Forrester, she had refused to forsake the ‘bobbed’ hair mode that she had affected before her marriage” (25, 127). Criticism of short hairstyles for women could even take on political connotations, as seen in Durkin’s mention of another female character, Rose, the “communist,” who is “a disciple of the Thing-that-is-not,” as evidenced by the fact that “[she] bobbed her hair before anyone else in her crowd” (162). For more examples on the politics of women’s hair in the memoirs gathered here, see also Inglis 39–40; Johansson 163; Moorhouse 28, 33; Nelson 37–40; and Schroeder 88.

California some new riding breeches, in which I felt I looked quite smart. Naturally I put them on. Grandma was induced to wear a pair of Harry's army slacks. They were rather a tight fit, I confess, but we trusted they would stand the strain.

Somewhat gingerly we rode forth, intending to visit a neighbour. Neither of us had ridden a Western stock saddle before. We found them very comfortable, however, and easy to ride.

When we arrived at the neighbour's house we were received with a decidedly frigid reception. We could not understand it at all. This same lady, a short time before, had treated us most cordially. So charged was the atmosphere that we only remained a few minutes and returned home wondering what on earth could be wrong.

We were not left very long in doubt. A few days later a deputation of ladies called at the shack and asked to see my husband alone.

They told him they had called to protest against my wearing breeches. They said that no women had ever appeared in such an immodest garb in that community before, and they wished to inform my husband that I must be stopped from ever appearing in such an outfit again. They did not mention Grandma, though I imagine they considered her appearance equally disgraceful.

My husband listened solemnly to them and promised that he would take me severely to task about it.

When he told me what had happened I was furious.

"What is it to do with any one what I wear?" I demanded. "I shall certainly please myself." (39–40)

In this scene we have one of the best examples of the female body as transparent space, and clothing as a visible sign on that space that can be read as being appropriate or not. While earlier women settlers to the Canadian West had their own self-monitor attuned to the constructions of femininity that prevailed in Anglo culture and could thus judge themselves accordingly (as well as break the rules where necessary, with relative impunity), Strange arrives

in rural Alberta after women's participation in the work force during World War I had wrought major changes in fashion trends and she arrives apparently truly believing that, by outside standards, her "new riding breeches" should make her appear to be "quite smart." In fact, she deems it "natural" to wear them because in the world she comes from they are appropriate for the activity she engages in. According to her own self-monitor, she expects to gain public approbation rather than public censure. What she does not know is that the boundaries drawn around appropriate femininity in the Canadian West are tighter than in places like England and California, and in this scene she rides straight into the gap of competing standards. She ascends her rather precarious perch, only to discover that "the boundaries of appropriate femininity were also collectively and strictly enforced by other White women in the area" (McManus 124).

As with the issue of her bobbed hair, however, Strange does not here acquiesce to charges of "immodesty."¹⁷ In the hair scene, while she indicates having felt "very uncomfortable and conspicuous" with her "different" hairstyle, she nonetheless adheres to her own barometer of appropriate femininity and fairly modestly confesses her "secret relief" in helping to bring short hair within the bounds of acceptability. In this later scene, Strange's response to the "deputation of ladies" is less equivocal as we are told that she is "furious," an emotional response that she uses as "an instrument of cartography" (Frye 93–94) to, once again, map change:

Defiantly I went on wearing the offending garments, and in time apparently wore the resistance down. But it was by way of being a hard-won victory, for I had to endure a constant atmosphere of disapproval, at least in certain quarters, all of which made those early days of mine the harder to live through. (40)

17 As Angela E. Davis has noted elsewhere – and as Strange here discovers – prairie women "seemed unable to break free of traditional values. Women were 'doomed to the skirt,' said one writer, 'any attempt to get away from it has raised a hue and cry of immodesty and ridicule'" ("Country" 169).

Strange's use of the word "endure" in this context repeats her earlier usage – when referring to how her neighbours believed "that we would not endure the life very long" – and makes apparent that, at least in the time period in which her family faced settlement, the major antagonistic forces on the prairies were not environmental conditions and hard work, but rather social constraints regarding bodily behaviours for women. Importantly, other women in the community eventually begin to wear "breeches" as well, which suggests that, as with the younger women and the bobbed hairstyle, the desire to transgress and thus rewrite the boundaries of appropriate femininity had existed within the closely knit community for some time, but that only a stranger with the willingness and the privilege to make an "extravagant display of [her] *right to ambiguity*" (McClintock 68) would be able to achieve the feat of fashion change. Dress, says Ribeiro, "act[s] as a kind of social lubricant, to ease contacts between people in society. It is thus a conservative force, and the history of dress can be seen as a constant battle against the introduction of new styles, which may be thought of as 'immoral' until their novelty is muted by the passage of time" (12). Thus, in this one small but effective way, Strange's determination to resist cultural expectations results in cultural change. In the simple act of riding out over the vast space of the prairies "indecently" clad, she destabilizes the boundaries erected on the female body as a culturally defined space and ultimately frees other women in the community to dress in a way that makes their work more comfortable.¹⁸

Strange's physical defiance in the above scene documents a change in women's physical behaviours across the span of years of prairie settlement on at least two fronts, the wearing of "breeches" and the riding of horses (especially western style), thus bringing together the transgressions of bodily and geographic space. For women in Canada, "the long skirt remained standard until the 1920s when skirts were shortened and clothes in general became more comfortable" (Davis, Angela E., "Country" 170). Once again we see a

18 For more examples of how prairie women's clothing and hairstyles represent obedience to/transgressions of the boundaries of appropriate femininity in prairie society, see also Ebbers 36–37; Hewson 3–5, 61, 73–75; Middleton 21, 23; Nash 169–79; and Thomson 57–58.

difference between the values and standards of the larger western world and western Canadian society: as Ribeiro notes about women in Britain, “from 1915 women began to work in munitions factories, on the buses, and on the land, and many of them for convenience and comfort began to wear trousers. There were some complaints of indecency, especially by the older women” (152). Clearly this largely urban phenomenon had not affected the values of small prairie communities by the time of Strange’s immigration to Fenn, Alberta. In contrast, homesteading in the more sparsely populated area of northern Alberta in the early 1920s seems to have provided Peggy Holmes with the ability to don the latest fashion trend from back Home in England, for at least some activities. As the author writes in *It Could Have Been Worse* (1980) about the labour-intensive activity of clothes washing, “I always had several long skirts and petticoats to wash as there were no jeans in those days, although I wore breeches for riding” (142). Holmes’s “breeches,” as she explains earlier in the memoir, are a creative gesture towards the fashion trends for women in the larger world: as she states with characteristic good humour, “I felt very smart as I rode around the estate. My parents had sent me a discarded uniform worn by the ‘clippies’, the wartime bus conductresses – navy blue with silver buttons. With my large hat, turned up at the side, I looked like a relic from Custer’s last stand!” (66). Ultimately, however, the skirt, whatever its length, remained an identifiable, or “transparent,” marker of appropriate femininity, as seen in Emily Ferguson’s assertion that “the unequal distribution of trousers and skirts in Canada makes countless thousands mourn, and so, perforce, the Eastern spinster and Western bachelor sigh vainly for each other like the pine and palm” (*Janey* 28).

Nevertheless, the exterior form of the skirt was not always so transparent an object; it did not always reflect a strict adherence to cultural standards and could, in fact, work to hide something “dangerous” to gender norms. We can see this, for example, in Beulah Baldwin’s *The Long Trail: The Story of a Pioneer Family* (1992). When recreating her parents’ journey from Edmonton to the Peace River district during the winter months of 1913, Baldwin’s description of her mother’s restrictive clothing indicates the reality that, where the conventions of female fashion are concerned, “to a considerable degree, the Edwardian period – which for convenience we will take up to the First World War, an

event which changed the course of history and ushered in a new age of political and social attitudes – is a postscript to the late Victorian era” (Ribeiro 146). As Baldwin writes, “Mother dressed hurriedly in a skirt and blouse over several petticoats, put on long black stockings, and heavy shoes. Because she was pregnant, she was spared the agony of corsets, then considered *de rigueur* for every woman, no matter what her living conditions” (16). In her pregnant body, Olive Freeland epitomizes both the biological and social function of her gender, and the clothing with which she begins her settlement journey conforms to and confirms this function. As the Freelands continue on their journey, however, the geographic impracticability of such attire becomes obvious, and Baldwin interestingly documents that her mother’s inspiration to deviate from the strict expectations about gender-based fashion, and also culture-based fashion, initiates from the authoritative experience of a freighter who was used to conditions in Northern Alberta:

Looking at her feet, the man told Mother she would never make it if she had to walk any distance during a storm in the shoes she was wearing. He advised her and Dad to buy Indian moccasins and moccasin rubbers along with heavy knee-length socks. He went on to tell them that when his own wife came out with him, she wore a pair of men’s heavy macinaw pants under her long skirt in the worst weather. (18)

In this scene, Western Canada is clearly being depicted as a geographic space that necessarily allows for some free play with behavioural codes as related to fashion. It is especially interesting, I think, that while the freighter explicitly “advises” Mr. and Mrs. Freeland to deviate from Anglo norms of dress and to adopt “Indian” footwear as a survival tactic, his admission of his wife’s own blurring of gender distinctions as they relate to dress is “told,” like a story, or a sidelong suggestion of possibility, and one that quickly fades into narrative obscurity when Baldwin quickly moves on in the following paragraphs to a discussion of her parents’ continuing journey.

However, later in the text, later in the journey, we learn that, in reaction to the harsh reality of northern Alberta in winter, the author's mother has in fact undertaken her own bodily transgressions of appropriate femininity:

My parents were glad now that they had taken the freighter's advice and bought warmer clothing. They probably would need them for the rest of the trip. Dad's extra union suit had been indispensable from the start and was the first article Mother reached for in the morning, pulling it on under her voluminous nightgown. Although it was a bit long for her short legs, she tucked the cuffs into her heavy socks and wrapped her moccasin flaps neatly over them to help keep her body heat from escaping.

While the men harnessed the teams, Joan said to Mother, "On mornings like this, I usually wear a pair of Robert's trousers under my skirt." So Mother dug out the pair she had bought at the Landing. But when she tried them on, she discovered they did not fit over the small bulge of her waistline. She yanked them down, only to have them slip past her knees. When they recovered from laughing, Mother asked, "Now what do I do?" "Make them fit with a piece of string," Joan answered. (72)

What I find interesting here is the fact that, while the author's mother has transgressed as far as wearing her husband's "extra union suit," and while she has apparently not at this point taken the implicit advice of the freighter to wear pants, she has actually bought a pair of pants that are now readily available to her, but only when another woman has (again, not quite explicitly) opened up the possibility of using them. When Joan Andrews acknowledges the hidden item "under [her own] skirt," she makes space for Olive Freeland to engage in the same quietly transgressive behaviour. It is especially delightful that Mrs. Freeland's pregnant body at first rejects the unusual covering, but that the women go on to persist in adapting the masculine article of clothing to the ultra-feminine body. The women in this scene hide their trousers under their skirts, thereby maintaining at least a surface appearance of conformity to cultural standards; nevertheless, as Baldwin continues, "Dad caught a glimpse

of the trousers while helping Mother into the sleigh, and smiled his approval. They were both learning to take advice" (73). Clearly, in extraordinary circumstances, exceptions can be made to cultural rules.

Olive Freeland's need to hide her bodily transgressions is not only attributable to the fact of her being an adult, for even memoirists who write about the experience of girlhood on the prairies in the first three decades of the twentieth century often represent the wearing of pants as a private rather than a public behaviour. For example, in *No "Coppers" in Saskatchewan!* (1973), a memoir of homesteading life in "the Strongfield district of Saskatchewan" in 1906, Winnie E. Hutton, who, at the time of her family's emigration west, was "still a school girl" (2), provides the following rather humorous note to a discussion about battling mosquito attacks: "We also put paper inside our stockings as slacks, for ladies had never been heard of" (20). These privately constructed "slacks" are not necessary in a settler girl's *Prairie Dreams* (1991) for, as Adeline (Nan) Clark writes in her memoir of homesteading life near Oxbow, Saskatchewan, from 1918 to 1924, on mornings when her central character Ruth remained within the confines of the family farm, she "hurried out of bed and into her overalls" (50). As Sylvia Bannert documents in *Rut Hog or Die* (1974), even as late as 1936, cultural attitudes towards females in pants remained prohibitive for prairie girls. While the Cooper family had by then moved further west in search of economic success, nevertheless their prairie values apparently migrated with them, as seen when Bannert describes her younger sisters' response to attending school in Grand Forks, B.C.: "Little Dal and Lolie said they liked the teacher but the girls here wore jeans to school and one person was real nice, but they couldn't tell if it was a boy or a girl because of the jeans" (157–58). For Bannert, who spent her teenage years in Saskatchewan from 1911 on, wearing pants was preferred as a private act, although there is one occasion when she unintentionally finds herself quite publicly exceeding conventional boundaries of geographic and bodily space:

One night when I came home from school, Merlie [her older sister] was asleep and I saw the horses were out. I put on overalls and a cowboy hat. I did not put a bridle on Roy, just the halter. I rounded up the horses and they started for home, hell bent for

leather. Roy started to race with them. Off went my hat, down came my hair. The horses took off for the hummocks with Roy in the lead. I prayed he would stop, but I knew I was riding a runaway horse. He hit the hummocks, over went his ankle, and I was sent flying through the air. I came down flat on my back. The run was all out of Roy and me, too. Bees were buzzing in my head and everything was black. Finally I looked around. Roy was limping home. I saw Will coming on the run for me. At that moment my biggest worry was that he would laugh at me in overalls, for girls did not wear jeans in those days. (83)

Bannert's experience here takes me back to Kathleen Strange's act of fashion disobedience, for both women expose themselves to public censure (or, in Bannert's case, the possibility of public censure) while riding a horse, a rather suggestive and voluntary adoption of a "precarious perch" that challenges cultural expectations about appropriate femininity in a variety of ways. What women wore and what position they assumed when riding, and, indeed, whether they should ride at all, was a matter of great discussion in contemporary literature, especially as the activity was very often undertaken in public. For a long time, cultural conventions of female "decency" demanded that women who rode did so side-saddle, rather than in the masculine posture of legs astride, or Western style. Nellie McClung is openly critical of this convention for women in *Clearing in the West* when she writes about an experience she had being thrown from a horse:

I was not hurt for I fell on the grassy roadside and I was not far from my destination. I hoped my friends had gone to bed, and so would not know that the sorrel had come home without me. If I had been riding the right and natural way astride the horse this could not have happened. A side-saddle is surely the last word in discomfort for both the rider and the horse; another example of life's injustice to women I thought as I hastened along through the dark. (309)

In *Land across the Border* (1978), Donnie M. Ebbers remembers such an “injustice” at work during her prairie childhood in Saskatchewan in the late-nineteenth/early-twentieth centuries:

The next door neighbors had two girls and two boys who were companions for Gertie, Jackson, Ottie and Joe. They all went on sleigh rides and skating parties. There was no one Donnie’s age but the oldest one of the neighbor girls was a “good sport.” She came over and played with Donnie some afternoons. Donnie remembered one sunny day Kate had taken her around the yard on her little hand sled. Then they noticed a low out-door root or vegetable cellar back of the house. They made a path in the snow to the top of it and tried sliding down on the sled. Then they sat astraddle of the peaked low sod and snow-covered roof, pretending they were riding horses. Kate has whipped the “horse” with a willow and they had laughed and whooped together like cowboys. Later Papa remarked, “It wasn’t lady-like of Katie to sit astraddle of that snow-covered roof and get her skirts all dirty.” (Thank fashion for slacks today). Donnie had always liked Katie and she liked her more than ever after that fun filled afternoon, which she always remembered. (27–28)

In that last line especially, Ebbers’s memoir becomes a narrative space of rebellion against her father’s judgment of “unladylike” behaviour, and this particular scene has implications for the reader’s understanding of a later event when the author’s mother prepares for a day of family berry-picking:

When they were getting the logs for the barns, Ottie had noticed blue-berry and cranberry bushes growing under the trees and told Mama he thought there would be lots of berries there in the fall. So on a sunny day in early September Mama put Joe and Gertie astraddle the big white mare, gave each a pail, handed Donnie up to Gertie to hold till she could climb on in front with the big pail,

then sat Donnie in front of her, shook the reins and said, "We're off to the berry-patch!" (40).

Perhaps in the earlier scene Ebbers's father is really just concerned about the dirt on Katie's skirt, but it reads to me more as though he disapproves of *the way* the young girls are sitting on the roof of the cellar and "pretending they were riding horses," and specifically doing so "like cowboys." In this later scene, then, there is some transgression of norms going on under the authority of the mother, for not only Donnie and her sister Gertie, but also Nannie Yokley Cummins herself appears to be seated in an "unladylike" manner.

As seen earlier with hair and clothing fashions, however, cultural norms are ultimately fluid, as seen in the variety of attitudes in women's memoirs towards the issue of women riding "astraddle." For example, as Marjorie Campbell writes in *The Silent Song of Mary Eleanor*, in the first decade of the twentieth century there were many behavioural constraints on a girl who would be entering into society:

Nothing had prepared me for going to school. I had never played with other children who had been to school for that frightening first day. It was the last thing I wanted to do. I hated all mother's admonitions that I must be a good girl; sit properly with my knees together like a young lady and not in the hoydenish tomboyish way Nora and I straddled the leopard's stuffed head; never let anyone kiss me on the mouth and remember that nice little girls kissed people on the cheek. (105)

At about the same time period, however, as Georgina H. Thomson notes in *Crocus and Meadowlark: A Story of an Alberta Family* (1963), sitting "straddled" could be considered a cultural norm. Writing about various visits from neighbours, Thomson notes that "Mr. and Mrs. Til Fisher rode up on horseback the first day too. They had a ranch on Mosquito Creek and Mrs. Fisher rode with her husband there, but we were surprised to see her riding side-saddle. Most of the western women rode astride like men" (35).

When Kathleen Strange and her mother-in-law set out in 1920 to ride their way into charges of “immodesty” while wearing trousers, they did so in “Western stock saddles,” which they found “very comfortable” and “easy to ride” (39). The fact that the Strange women’s riding astride is not what triggers public censure indicates that, by the 1920s, this position had apparently become a norm of female behaviour. Indeed, as early as 1910, Emily Ferguson was able to openly declare her own sense of liberation in this regard, thereby playing into prevailing contemporary notions of western exceptionalism in terms of social norms for women:

Off we go! Champ of bit, ring of shoe, creak of saddle, neck for neck, stride for stride in a duel with time and space.

It is a great place this Canada West – the country of strong men, strong women, straight living, and hard riding. Tut! Who wants to go to heaven?

Goldenrod is making a superb run, and his great barrel pulses evenly between my knees, without catch or strain. He is a mighty fine fellow, this Irish hunter, a rare equine unification of fire and steel that always keeps me dubious as to my mastership of him.

Yes! I am riding astride. Most of us do. It is safer, more comfortable, more healthful, and in every way consistent with good taste. Besides, here is the wide and tolerant West; every one knows that a woman’s boots are not pinned to her skirts. (*Janey* 213–14)

Increasingly, western women were choosing to “ride astride,” and to do so publicly, as Ferguson rather humorously observes in another of her social treatises of Western Canadian life, specifically regarding Jasper Avenue in Edmonton in 1912:

There are many women who ride on this street. Most of them ride astride, because it is not pleasant or, for that matter, safe for a woman to be hooked to the side of a horse as if she were a bundle of clothes on a peg. The gentlemen from England hide their faces

as the equestriennes go by; but I know they peep through their fingers. (*Open* 108)

Ferguson here diplomatically equates cultural expectations as they relate to women riding horses with the general issue of physical safety – after all, as women have always recognized, being placed on a pedestal of virtue means that the only place to fall *is* down – but elsewhere she admits her own personal desire to break free from spatial constraints, both geographic and physical: having witnessed the equestrienne prowess of a western farmgirl, Ferguson rather vigorously exclaims, “I would barter my sphere, any time, to be able to keep my seat and hitch a plunging steer to my saddle-horn. Yes! or I would barter my hemisphere” (182). Later, after returning from a day in the fields, she laments her return to “civilization”: “We make believe we are valkyries speeding to Valhalla. For my part, I am Brunhilda on Grani, my great, white horse. I, Brunhilda, who this day have been a goddess riding a wild horse into a wilder sky, must ever, hereafter, sink into womanhood. I, a wild valkyrie, to sit by the fire and spin!” Ferguson’s choice of imagery here is informative, for she privileges horseback riding as an act that, by its very precariousness (“to be able to keep my seat”) becomes a deliberately rebellious perch chosen by the female rider as a means to achieve bodily and geographic liberation (“I would barter my sphere”) from the constraints of her culture’s domestic ideal (“to sit by the fire and spin!”). I would suggest that, by figuring that domestic ideal as a sort of downward motion, a “sink[ing] into womanhood,” Ferguson uses her narrative representation of prairie life to invert the “Angel in the House” icon of Anglo culture and thereby provide a transgressive alternative to cultural norms of femininity.

For most of the memoirists included in this study, however, the issue of women riding horses provided a slightly less dramatic narrative space for documenting female rebellion against cultural expectations for female behaviour. That young girls should learn to ride seems to be generally unproblematic, even in the earliest stages of western settlement. But as Barabara (Hunter) Anderson writes in *Two White Oxen: A Perspective of Early Saskatoon 1874–1905* (1972), for the author and her sister, the lack of horses on the family

homestead in Saskatchewan in the 1880s meant that, if they wanted to ride, alternative modes of transportation had to be found:

My sister Maggie and I used to ride on Brisk [an ox] and sometimes on Jock [a bull] and many a rough ride we had if the mosquitoes got bad and made the cattle run. Often I was left behind for I was usually helping Maggie to get mounted first. One day she was riding Jock, the bull, when suddenly they all went on a stampede and when they headed for a deep slough, she slipped lightly off his back and waited for me. I had been afraid for her but she was alright. (74)

Later in her memoir, Anderson documents the simple act of riding a horse as a means of self-expression outside the family unit:

The year I was thirteen, my twin brothers were born. I was at home from school to help and was persuaded by my Father to try and ride Ned, the two-year old colt. I was much afraid at first, but he got used to me and I to him, in a few weeks. I have never loved a pony as much as I did him. The rest of the family were united in the opinion that he was stubborn and balky and it might be that was the reason I always favored him. (76–77)

In that last sentence the intended reference for “that” is vague, implying that Anderson either “favored” Ned as a mark of disjunction with her family’s collective “opinion” of him or that she did so because his “stubborn and balky” temperament suited her own personality on some level.

Nowhere does Anderson actually suggest that her horseback riding is anything unusual for a young woman on a Saskatchewan farm in the late-nineteenth century; however, her use of the term “escapade” to describe something that she undertook at about the age of twenty-one is suggestive of an activity that exceeds behavioural bounds for women and that secures her identification with the “stubborn and balky” Ned:

Another escapade I got into was when I tried to harness a broncho. My father had bought a mare that was very thin, had been working, and I thought I could ride up from the river on her back. She had no bridle or even a halter on her. Just a rope on her neck. I stood on a big stone and jumped on her back, but I found myself on my back among the stones instead. I walked up the river bank but decided I should be more cautious. The next broncho I tried was a little chunky black mare my Mother and I bought with John Blackley's help. We gave two yearling steers for her. The cowboys caught her and halter-broke her, and we tied her in our stable where I fed her and led her to water every day for two weeks. Burpee said he would come and hitch her up some day before haying time. One day I took her out and tethered her to the clothesline post; she was so quiet I thought I could put some harness on her, so I got a collar and put it on her. She was perfectly quiet and I led her around. Then I took the oxen neck-yoke, straps – large new leather straps – and buckled the two together and put them around her, buckled them up tight, and the fun started. She bucked to get the straps off, and then ran the length of the tether rope, bucking and kicking like mad. The good new rope broke right at the knot at her neck and away she went. I stood looking helplessly after her. Thinking I had lost forty dollars for Mother, and how could I ever repay it. When Mother found out she said, "It's a mercy you weren't killed." I got on Ned's back and tried to follow her but she was far out of sight, and I had no idea where she had gone. (119–20)

Significantly, it is after this scene that we are told by the "discouraged" author that the unwilling mare's name is, significantly, Eve, that icon of female rebellion. But our young rebel Anderson is, at least for the time being, chastened of her confrontational behaviour for she tells us that, in the end, "I had to promise I would not try again to break bronchos, and I wouldn't. That was in 1895" (120).

For Nell Parsons, too, there is a certain thrill to be found in playing rodeo cowboy. As she writes in *Upon a Sagebrush Harp* about homesteading life on

the Saskatchewan prairie in the first decade of the twentieth century, riding the family's first horse Kit "was one of our chief pleasures" (70). However, while Kit was gentle, Parsons remembers most fondly a slightly wilder ride, one attractive enough for a young girl looking to stretch her limbs over the vast geographic space of the prairies:

That second summer Dick Sharland, a bachelor neighbor a mile northeast of us, loaned us a wiry bronco with a baleful eye. His name was Buster and he was round enough for comfortable riding. Saddles were unknown to us then. We children liked to ride Buster.

He was faster than old Kit had been. It was a thrill to ride him over the undulating grass, the strong wind in my face. I could whoop and holler and sing at the top of my voice. I could try a dozen voices, from high soprano down and no one to hear me.

Papa did not altogether trust the restless bronc. (109)

Here we can see the female author's reflective narrative attention to the intimate connection between body and geography as her act of unconstraint exceeds contemporary expectations of femininity (preferring a "wiry bronco" to safe "old Kit"), as well as paternal judgment. Similarly, for Myrtle G. Moorhouse, whose *Buffalo Horn Valley* (1973) documents her family's experience homesteading near Swift Current, Saskatchewan, from 1910, riding horses becomes a retrospective narrative transgression important in the process of self-identification. Noting at one point in her narrative that "to be a cowboy was the aim of every young lad" (17), Moorhouse elsewhere represents herself as "the rebel of the family," in contrast to her older sister Olive, who is "a dutiful daughter" (11). Two pages later, she provides a number of photographs to accompany her text, and the final one on the page has the following description provided by the author and clearly illustrating the truth of her designation of herself as rebel, especially against norms of femininity: "8. Myrtle Moorhouse, the author, on 'Baldy,' a pinto pony. 'I love this picture, and I loved this horse and his mate 'Bugs,' wise and gentle, and full of pep" (12). The picture itself shows the author as a young girl seated on Baldy, whose forelegs paw at the air under

the control of the adventurous rider (13). What is particularly significant about this picture and the anecdote provided by Parsons is that neither girl seems terribly precarious, even while they push at the limits of “decency.”

The romance of the rodeo cowboy eventually translated into the romance of the cowgirl, in both the wider social context as well as the horizons of a prairie childhood. For example, in about 1925, Ferne Nelson resolved that she wanted to be a “cowboy” (111); however, as she describes in *Barefoot on the Prairie: Memories of Life on a Prairie Homestead* (1989), there was one major hindrance to this dream, the lack of an appropriate mount, although considerable creativity is shown in her improvisation:

We were quite young then and weren't allowed to ride Papa's saddle horse, so we had built up a stable of stick horses, which we rode everywhere around the farm. These humble steeds had names and were stabled and groomed continually. We must have been a comical sight astride these sticks as we galloped madly from bluff to bluff and raced our mounts on the dusty roads. We also rode the calves in the calf pen for a while, but Mama discouraged that after Ve fell off one of the frisky young steers and got her face stepped on. (111–12)

The only horse that Nelson is allowed to ride does not bode well for her future riding career, although it certainly allows her and the animal in question to exceed the confines of “proper,” or domestic, “function,” in contravention of both natural and parental law:

I had to settle for old Buck, whose proper function was to pull the buggy. However, in my ambition to become a cowgirl, fate played into my hands. That year Ve wasn't attending school, and Rus hadn't started yet, so I had to go alone and ride old Buck. This was perfect. Alone on the prairie, I could perfect my techniques and emerge as a skilled rider.

Every morning I saddled my old blue roan and set off for school, a dumpy twelve-year-old on a reluctant horse that moved at a sedate walk or, at best, a slow trot.

Every morning Papa warned me not to try to gallop old Buck.

“Remember, you keep him at a trot. He stumbles if he tries to go any faster.”

“Yes, Papa, I’ll remember.”

Out of sight of the farmhouse, a metamorphosis took place. No longer was I a lumpish schoolgirl on a tired old nag, but a dashing cowgirl on a fiery bucking horse. In my imagination my chaps were the gayest imaginable, my white hat shaded my eyes, and those bare heels that dug into my horse’s flanks were really encased in hand-tooled boots with high heels and twinkling silver spurs. Old Buck wasn’t slow or unwilling, but “rarin’ to go” – a snorting, unmanageable piece of horseflesh that only I could control. (112)

Nelson’s daydream fashion image here might at first appear to concur with what Collette Lassiter and Jill Oakes note was the 1920s “golden age of the show cowgirl, an innocent time’ for the country’s rodeo sweethearts” (61); however, the author’s narrative representation of the “dashing cowgirl” in “control” of a “snorting, unmanageable piece of horseflesh” defies a spatial politics in which behavioural denominations such as “innocence” and “sweetness” confine female bodies in specific geographic locations (the safety of the rodeo ring, for example). Unfortunately for Nelson, her attempt at maintaining the “precarious perch” of geographic and physical rebellion fails miserably:

But the reality was most discouraging to an aspiring rodeo star. Buck did stumble, regularly. His short bursts of speed always ended the same way, with me sitting on the prairie and him standing by, patiently waiting for me to mount him again. This I would do in complete frustration, muttering my disappointment that Papa wouldn’t give me a better pony to ride. (112–13)

In the end, conformity prevails for, as Nelson writes, “Buck and I continued to go to school, at a sedate trot or a fast walk. Both of us knew our limitations” (114).¹⁹

As implied in many of the examples above, perhaps one of the reasons for limiting women’s access to horses had to do with the fact that, once they experienced “control” of such an unpredictable source of power, female bodies quickly responded to the excitement to be found in the transgression of domestic space, both geographically and physically. However, the fact is that most prairie women had little time for experiencing life on the prairies beyond the domestic duties that kept them largely confined to the home sphere, and the inculcation of daughters in the performance of such duties was certainly a norm in prairie families. As Donnie Ebbers notes in *Land across the Border*, her father’s expectations for her future assumed a reinforcement of a spatial division of labour along gender lines: as Mr. Cummins advised his teenaged daughter, “Your mother is a good housekeeper and a good cook. She can teach you to keep house, to cook and sew, and even to nurse the sick. She can teach you all you need to know to be a good wife for a farmer” (94). Mr. Cummins’s words indicate a certain cultural understanding that to be a “good wife for a farmer” was a teachable/learnable task, a role with definable boundaries into which any willing and hard-working girl could be fitted. Similarly, Kathleen Strange determines to learn the “natural dut[ies] of the farm housewife” (44), Peggy Holmes seeks “to learn how to be a farmer’s wife” (58), and Katherine Magill admits her initial failure “in the role of farm wife” (13). In Georgina Thomson’s memoir, the author fairly frequently uses the term “women-folk” to designate the female members of their particular family group, a term apparently initiated by the author’s father and taken up and repeated by Thomson, first as a seemingly natural category then increasingly as a feminist criticism of categories of women’s work. What Thomson’s use of the term “women-folk” indicates, and what many of the other memoirists imply, is that in settlement communities there was a tendency towards separation of prairie folk into two

19 For more examples of women and girls riding horses, see also Hiemstra 142–43; Inglis 41–42, 49; Middleton 29–30, 34; Raber 113, 125–27; and Thomson 21–22, 34.

sub-groups, men- and women-“folk,” whose designated functions in rural culture were clearly separate. Thus, for example, does Thomson remember one of her family’s hired men as follows:

Harry [Wakeman] hadn’t the slightest interest in cows. He fed them and cleaned out their stable grudgingly, but he drew the line completely at milking them. He didn’t know how to milk and he wouldn’t learn. It was good policy on his part, but it left the milking still entirely to the women-folk, as Father referred to us. How I hated that term! It seemed to put us in a menial category. (247)

Although Thomson herself has used the term “women-folk” several times throughout her memoir, nonetheless, after this statement about hating the term and her relation of it to her father’s less-than-liberated view of women, her use of the term becomes layered with the sarcasm of quotation marks: for example, speaking of another hired man who did milk the cows, she says, “this was a break for us ‘women-folk,’ but we still didn’t like his treatment of the horses” (249).

Although I suggested in the previous paragraph that men and women in prairie culture appeared to comprise sub-groups “whose designated functions in rural culture were *clearly* separate,” in point of fact, while the ideal of separate spheres seems to have been a fairly common familial/cultural concept, nevertheless the reality of what exactly constituted the boundaries of women’s work (both in terms of geographic and physical space) seems to have been constantly shifting. It is one thing to speak, somewhat paradoxically, of the “*natural* duties” of the prairie woman, but it is quite another thing to achieve a consensus as to what duties make up that role. When Jessie Raber makes the statement, “Daddy was a busy man outside; Mother and we girls busy inside” (89), she reflects the general cultural understanding of how the ideology of separate spheres functioned; however, in the farming context of western Canadian settlement, the division of labour along gender lines is usually a little less spatially discrete. For example, certain outdoor chores, because they were deemed as women’s work, can be represented as a penetration of the domestic sphere outwards into what Sheila McManus calls “the shared space

of the barnyard, the grey area of work that was neither a strictly 'feminine' nor a strictly 'masculine' responsibility" (134). Activities that were assumed to require a particularly maternal sense of nurturance for success, such as responsibility for laying hens, turkeys, etc., were thus often deemed as a "natural duty" of the farm woman. As seen in Georgina Thomson's discussion of hired men above, responsibility for milking cows – in contrast to the use of and caring for horses, a breed of animal traditionally equated with masculine power – most often rested in the hands of women. In *Changes: Anecdotal Tales of Changes in the Life of Anna Born, 1888–1992* (1995), for example, Anna Schroeder asserts that "milking was one of the 'girl's jobs'" (58). However, milking cows was not always viewed as an appropriate activity for female bodies. In fact, at one point in her memoir, Thomson refers to a Mrs. Hawk, whose "sphere of action ended at the kitchen door. She never milked a cow, fed a stubborn calf, put a clucking hen on the nest, hoed the garden or carried water" (100). Here we can see that for some immigrants to the prairie west, and especially for those emigrating from "more urban settings," outdoor work of any kind challenged their sense of decency, and "some women were able to accommodate this work to their construction of gender, while others continued to claim and preserve feminine domestic privilege" (McManus 123).²⁰

Changes in the boundaries of "women's work" were not simply a matter of historical progression, either; indeed, it would be erroneous to suggest that those women who emigrated at the height of Victorian culture remained firmly confined within the domestic sphere while women of later settlement periods were increasingly liberated by changes in the wider world and consequently experienced freedom from domestic bonds. Rather, there is a real disjunction between the ideal of separate spheres and the lived experience of settlement life that allowed women across the historical spectrum represented by the memoirs in this study to make space, both within the cultural moment of homesteading and within their narrative re-presentations of that cultural moment, to challenge what Judy Schultz in *Mamie's Children: Three*

20 For more examples of attitudes towards milking and caring for cows as an appropriate chore for women, see also Anderson 72; Baldwin 220; Holmes 59; McClung 334; Raber 48; Strange 44–48; and Thomson 46–47, 70–71.

Generations of Prairie Women (1997) labels “the myth of the good woman, a myth that began in Mamie’s era and just won’t go away” (108–9). When Katherine Magill announces in her memoir *Back o’ Baffuf* her determination to “learn the necessary skills” of the farm wife, to adhere to “local standards, recognize the good old pecking order, evident in every rural district,” and to “KEEP MY MOUTH SHUT about all and sundry experiences outside the sphere of this place” (14), she acknowledges a behavioural reality that exceeds the domestic “myth of the good woman,” a reality that must be silenced in favour of seeming adherence to the boundaries of appropriate femininity. More importantly, Magill’s ironic capitalization of the words “KEEP MY MOUTH SHUT” points to the function of the memoir as a temporally safe space in which the author is able to represent the reality of excessive, transgressive behaviour, so that our understanding of women’s experiences of prairie life broadens in the act of reading.

While ideological constraints theoretically confined them to domestic duties, white, English-speaking, prairie women soon discovered that the practical necessities of prairie life often demanded their participation in work outside of conventional definitions of what constituted domestic space. Many prairie women also soon discovered that they actually desired to get beyond “the confining nature of women’s work” (Sundberg 83), to enter more fully into the prairie landscape and experience physical labour beyond such traditional tasks as cooking, cleaning, and childcare. Willing or not, it is certain that “women’s contributions to sustenance reached beyond the domestic sphere” (81). As Mary Kinnear discovered in her examination of women’s responses to the question “Do you want your daughter to marry a farmer?,” their answers “stress the interdependence of family members who, while accepting a rough sexual division of labour, were not immutably constrained by it” (149). Quite often, in fact, homesteading required both sexes to learn new skills and put aside, or hold in abeyance, traditional concepts of “‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ behavior” (Bennett and Kohl 92). Women could, and did, participate beyond the confines of the household.²¹ Nevertheless, although

21 Emily Ferguson notes the facility of rural isolation in allowing women some behavioural freedom when she notes of her penchant for “painting the vehicles” (which

the relative isolation of prairie life, especially in the early years of western settlement, “did permit greater variation from accepted behaviour and ideology,” this “loosening of sex role definitions did not release women from their primary tasks” (Kohl, “The Making” 179), nor did it very often mean that they received help in accomplishing their domestic tasks; indeed, “while women were expected to adapt and take part in the ‘male sphere’ of farming activity whenever required, the opposite seldom held true” (Rollings-Magnusson 227).²² It has become a critical axiom in Canadian women’s historiography to repeat Veronica Strong-Boag’s image of prairie women as not so much

she describes as her “master-passion”), “polishing the brass on the harness,” and sometimes “bandag[ing] the horses’ legs and giv[ing] them a special polish,” that such activities result in social isolation within a village setting: “No! I may deceive the people several blocks away, but my neighbours are better posted. They can readily see that I am ‘no lady,’ and ought to be ashamed of myself. Now, in the country, without neighbours, I could sin against the law of the usual with impunity” (*Open* 116–17).

- 22 When men did engage in tasks traditionally seen as women’s work, it was often regarded as a kind of joke. We see this in Jessie Raber’s *Pioneering in Alberta* when she writes about the moment when she and her siblings arrive at the new family home built by their father and see “the man that had helped Daddy, cooking supper. It looked so funny to see a man doing the cooking that we started to laugh. Mother told us not to be so rude, that in a new country one would see many different things, so we felt rather ashamed then” (28). We can also see shock and surprise, and lurking danger, at the sight of a man undertaking “women’s work” in Clara Middleton’s *Green Fields Afar* when the author comments on attending the home of an Englishman bachelor with two other couples:

They looked on with surprise as Godfrey set the table, flipping white granite plates along the white oilcloth tablecover, and planting at proper intervals the granite cups and silver flatware. Their surprise was greater when he bore in a sirloin roast of beef, mashed potatoes and canned corn which he had prepared himself, and all cooked to perfection. Where he got the apple pies was his secret, but he whipped the cream for them and made the coffee. No woman was to be seen.

All through dinner he led with the stories and the laughter, and afterwards supervised the toss-ups which decided which men were to wash the dishes. The lot fell on my husband and Jack, the latter not practised in the art. Mary observed the operation with a kindling eye, and said as we drove home, “I didn’t think he could do it; wait till I get him home – and I never ate so much in my life.” (42–43)

“Pulling in Double Harness” as “Hauling a Double Load” in regards to the work of running a family farm operation.²³ While women rarely questioned their responsibility for domestic duties, they also accepted the need for their occasional participation outside the family home. “Occasional” is the keyword here, and certainly in much contemporary literature, women’s farm labour was represented as a temporary measure – that is, it was not meant to “imply a permanent confusion of spheres” (Jeffrey 31) – that could be left behind

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- 23 Commensurate with Strong-Boag’s assertion that “for most women life continued to consist of hauling a double load, or, as today’s feminists would have it, working a double shift” (418), Mitchell makes the following highly sarcastic comments regarding the notion of western equality and the unreality of men and women “Pulling in Double Harness”:

Canadian men in the West are usually very helpful, not at all “John Grumlies.” ... they are clever at housework, having mostly had some experience as bachelors. The Old-Country husband has a bad reputation on the prairie (among the men), as leaving too much to his wife. One man occasioned quite a scandal by allowing his wife to help him harvesting (he was not strong); another gave offence by making no attempt to give his wife, who had been a woman of leisure, any better dwelling than a wretched sod hut. But, in any case, the man has to go out to his work, and the wife has to look after the babies and cook the food and bake the bread and do the washing and keep the house decent, though she may leave any egg-collecting or milking to the man at bad times. There is no one to help; and so many a woman dies and many a baby dies, and some lose their health and their bloom, and many a wife is the cause of her husband’s leaving the country and going to town. (48–49)

The sense of imbalance in Mitchell’s list of the chores which, “in any case,” “have” to be done by the husband and wife respectively already implicates the project of western settlement in a politics of inequality, then that critique is followed by the author’s rather caustic suggestion that the woman who cannot cope with the reality of farm life is the “cause” of her well-intentioned husband’s failure.

Similar to Mitchell, in *Crocus and Meadowlark* Thomson also suggests that concepts of women’s work change depending upon the husband’s geographic background: referring to the husband of Mrs. Hawk, who refused to milk cows, she states that “Mr. Hawk and the boys did all the outside chores, and we noticed that most American men did not consider these to be women’s work. Farmers from Eastern Canada and from Britain, however, were for the most part less chivalrous and expected their women to rally round and do all sorts of jobs around the place” (100–101).

once economic security allowed her to adopt a more traditionally domestic role. In 1910, Marion Cran spoke to a prairie farmer who admitted his wife's unorthodox workload: "When she started here, I tell you, she often drove the hayrake with a pair of oxen, and I've known her pitch hay till sundown"; however, he assured his listener, "we're in better shape now and doing good; she doesn't do that any more" (132–33). As seen in the following fabulous gender distinction, complete deviation from strict domesticity resulted in condemnation: "With the family dog as companion ... the boys roamed the prairie or woodland and learned its lore. The house cat ... saw the little girls grow up into good housewives as they helped their mothers. Barn cats were not named" (Kamen-Kaye 8).

In the early years of settlement, when homes needed to be built and the land needed to be broken in order to fulfil cultivation obligations, and when no help beyond the family unit was available, prairie women often found themselves, as did Mary Hiemstra's mother, precariously perched on the edge of the domestic sphere while trying to lend a hand with those chores which, at least in Anglo culture, were traditionally deemed to be within a man's sphere of duty.²⁴ For example, as Mary Hiemstra describes in *Gully Farm*, during her family's first summer on the prairies, Mr. Pinder decided that ploughing the land and planting potatoes was necessary for survival in the coming winter, so he began the chore, unaware of the new geographic reality confronting him. In fact, in undertaking this crucial agricultural task, Mr. Pinder is constructed by the daughter-author as bordering on maniacal in terms of his adherence to the way things had been done in his country of origin:

He looked the land over carefully and decided to plough a ten-acre patch not far from the tent. No trees or willows grew on it and he thought the work would be easy.

24 Some "men's jobs" that women had to perform in the early period of land settlement were housebuilding (Raber 44 and Holmes 100–102), digging wells (Campbell 98), haying (Holmes 84, 94) and clearing scrub (Johannson 182).

Furrows in England had always been straight, and Dad wanted the first furrow on the new farm to be perfect. He set up a line of stakes, sighting them carefully, and moving one or two that seemed a little out of line, then he hitched Darkie and Nelly, our two horses, to the plough.

Dad had often ploughed in England, but the earth there had been tilled for generations and turned easily. The new, unturned prairie sod resisted the ploughshare with root and stone. (126)

As the scene continues, Mr. Pinder discovers his inability to accomplish the work alone, and so he is forced by necessity to call on the aid, first, of his daughter, and second, his wife, who, as indicated in Chapter 3, has hitherto been painted as the prototype of the “reluctant emigrant”:

Dad, however, didn't realize how tough the sod was, and thought Darkie and Nelly knew nothing about ploughing. He told me to get a stick and keep them going.

I did as I was told, and the horses made a little progress, but they didn't go straight as Dad thought they should. They wavered from side to side, and the furrow, instead of being straight, was a frightful zigzag. It went first east, then west, and in one spot it was almost a half-circle. “A fine farmer they'll think me,” Dad fumed, and called to Mother to come and guide the team while he held the plough.

Mother had come to see the first furrow turned, but she knew nothing about ploughing, or even driving the team. She was, however, willing to help. (126–27)

There are several interesting things going on in this scene. First, the author seems to be toying with those futuristic cultural narratives that envisioned “an unbroken sea of wheat fields” (Hall 84), for in depicting her father's struggle with making even the first furrow on a landscape that now seems inimical to such an effort, she confronts both paternal (“he thought the work would be easy”) and cultural authority/rhetoric on the purpose and process

of western settlement. When the horses struggle with the reality of the task, they are disempowered (“Darkie and Nelly knew nothing about ploughing”), and when Mrs. Pinder is asked to lend a hand she is likewise disempowered of knowledge (“she knew nothing about ploughing”), and yet this scene clearly points to the father as being the truly disempowered one as he comes to realize that the idealistic narratives that lured him to the Canadian West, that veritable Garden of Eden, belied the truth of the prairie landscape. Mr. Pinder’s frustration with his inability to perform the role of prairie farmer as idealized in the promotional literature is reflected in his concern for what some vague “they” will think of his skills.

Second, by depicting the massive difficulty ahead of the Pinder family if they are to succeed at farming, Hiemstra provides a context for understanding what a deviation this type of labour will be for her mother, who, very significantly, is here positioned as “willing to help.” That willingness certainly challenges the boundaries of appropriate femininity as Mrs. Pinder has known them to this point in the memoir:

Mother tried hard. Her round face got pink with sweat and excitement, and the hairpins came out of her neat bun of hair. She told me not to frighten the horses so, and shook the reins and waved her arms, but the horses still reeled from side to side.

“Can’t you even drive a team straight?” Dad snapped, and glared at her.

“No, I can’t.” Mother’s face was red by now, and she glared back at Dad. “And I never had to before I married you. If I’d only had sense and married Edmond Barstow – here, you drive if you think you’re so smart, and I’ll hold the plough. You always did take the easiest job if you could.” She tossed the reins to Dad and took hold of the plough handles.

Dad said she wasn’t strong enough to hold the plough, but Mother said she was as strong as he was if not stronger, and for him to go ahead and drive if he thought it was so easy.

“Well, have it your own way,” Dad said, and took the reins. “Hold hard,” he warned. “The plough jumps.”

Mother told him to mind his own business and tend to his driving, she could plough as well as he could.

Dad looked doubtful, but he shook the reins and told the horses to get up.

The horses were tired by that time, and they jumped nervously. The plough jumped too, and since Mother wasn't holding firmly it tipped over, pulling her with it. (127–28)

Sally Pinder ends this effort by retreating in anger back to the family tent, but she is ultimately proven right in her assessment that she “could plough as well as [her husband] could,” for as the scene continues on, and as Mr. Pinder gets more and more abusive towards the horses and his daughter (“Dad, also tired and excited, shouted at me and at the team” [128]), he is thrown off his own perch of self-righteousness:

Dad wasn't a bit pleased with the furrow, and shouted at me to go first right, then left. I tried hard, and so did the sweating team, but the plough wouldn't co-operate. At last, as if it, too, was tired of the struggle, its nose struck a stone and the handles flew high in the air, hitting Dad a smart blow on the jaw and, to use his expression, knocking him spinning into the middle of next week.

Throughout the course of this scene, Mr. and Mrs. Pinder are equalized; that is, the inability of Mrs. Pinder to successfully perform the work is never ascribed to her gender, as Mr. Pinder appears equally incapable of success. In fact, when discussing this event with her husband while dressing his wounds, Sally Pinder finds an alternative reason for their failure to accomplish this task, one that ultimately works to question the Anglo boundaries of appropriate femininity; to show those boundaries as being socially constructed rather than some natural state of being:

Mother was upset when she saw Dad's bruised and swollen jaw, but under her concern there was a noticeable trace of satisfaction. “I told you this prairie was never meant to be ploughed,” she said as

she put hot cloths on Dad's black-and-blue face. "Even the Indians had more sense than to try it."

"The Dukhobors ploughed it," Dad mumbled.

"The Dukhobors are a lot bigger than we are." Mother put water in the kettle and lit the fire. "This country was never meant for little people like us."

...

"If them Dukhobors can break this prairie so can I," Dad said. "Though I have heard tell the women do most of their ploughing." And miserable as he must have felt there was a chuckle in his thick voice, and a twinkle in his good eye. The other was swollen shut.

"Well, if you brought me to this god-forsaken place to plough for you, you can send me right back to England, then you can have one of your Dukhobors," Mother said, and, her pretty little figure stiff with indignation, she flounced into the tent. (128–29)

Again there is such complexity in this scene. In shifting the ground away from concerns of gender to concerns of cultural background, Hiemstra effectively confronts those cultural narratives which, at the time her family emigrated, were depicting the British as the ideal settlers to the Canadian West as a means to ensure imperial purity in the colonial project. While this passage appears to play into stereotypes of the Doukhobor people, and especially of Doukhobor women, as being less "civilized" than British people, that kind of image faces serious challenge at another point in the text (which I'll get to in a moment). Even here Hiemstra seems to be playing with Anglo notions of female "decency," as seen with that final image of Mrs. Pinder as a "pretty little figure stiff with indignation." That phrasing seems to me to encompass Anglo constructions – and simultaneously an implicit critique of those constructions – of appropriate femininity, especially as related to its unsuitability for the real conditions of prairie life.

A different image of femininity is recuperated earlier in Hiemstra's text, in a more dynamic image of Doukhobor women. When travelling around looking for a good homestead site, the Pinder family come upon a small Doukhobor settlement, and are greeted as follows:

The door of the nearest house opened, and four or five women popped out and came towards us. They were not tall women, but they were wide and strong looking, deep of bust and thick of thigh. Their long, shapeless dark dresses hid their legs, but their bare feet and ankles were as big as the feet and ankles of most men. If the women had been horses they would have been *percherons*: large, thick-chested animals, accustomed to hauling huge loads without any fuss or bother. According to the stories we had heard these women were also used to hard work. They toiled in the fields from daylight to dark; hoeing potatoes, weeding, and cultivating gardens, ploughing the fields, and if a horse got sick they were said to help pull the plough. Mother had always laughed at these stories, and said the old-timers were having us on, but when she saw these wide women, more like oaks than willows, I think she believed part of the yarns, at least.

The faces of the women were brown and weathered, and they had what in Yorkshire was known as a stolid look, but they were not dull. Their small, light blue eyes, set deep in sun wrinkles, were bright and intelligent, and their wide mouths were strong and firm. They looked contented and capable, and oddly proud, as if they enjoyed their lives and the work they did. Afterwards Mother said: "You can't tell me anybody makes them women do anything. If they plough it's because they like ploughing, not because some man tells them to." (90–91)

Here we see Hiemstra at her usual clever work of balancing off cultural narratives ("According to the stories we had heard") with her own alternative perspective. The overwhelming sense of the Doukhobor women in this scene is positive, with an accumulation of generous words all meant to counterpoint the image that has hitherto been drawn of Mrs. Pinder, both physically and emotionally. The physical capability of these women is not condemnatory and seems an interrogation of contemporary Anglo ideals of femininity. In *God Bless our Home: Domestic Life in Nineteenth-Century Canada*, Una Abrahamson provides an anonymous quote that identifies the prevailing concept of the ideal

female body in this period, a concept quite foreign to the descriptions provided by Hiemstra of the Doukhobor women: “Small feet and small ankles are very attractive, because they are in harmony with a perfect female form, and men admire perfection. Small feet and ankles indicate modesty and reserve, while large feet and ankles indicate coarseness, physical power, authority and predominance” (6). Mrs. Pinder certainly encompasses this typology, for her “petiteness” is highlighted at several points throughout the text, and we are told at one point that she is “only a little woman with soft round arms and small hands, not the axe-swinging type at all” (156). We are also told that she “often said she wished she was a bigger and stronger woman” (162). There’s also a difference in emotional capability, for Mrs. Pinder is most often depicted as being angry, partly at being in Canada, and partly at being unable to help her husband with the necessary work of farming. In contrast, the Doukhobor women are depicted as being “contented” and “proud.” In fact, as Mrs. Pinder insists, these women seem to enjoy a greater degree of liberation than she was previously led to believe. This scene representing the Doukhobor women is thus important to our understanding of Sally Pinder’s own desire to break free from domestic constraints at other points in Hiemstra’s memoir, such as her “willingness” to try her hand at ploughing and, as already examined earlier in this chapter, her performance as “a Diana enjoying the chase” when in pursuit of a bear.²⁵

25 Although Hiemstra provides a positive interpretation of Doukhobor women, contemporary images of these women reinforce the idea that all female bodies were subjected to Anglo ideals of form and behaviour. For example, in his 1911 book titled *Canada's West and Farther West*, Frank Carrel, Journalist, includes an article (originally published in *Collier's Weekly*) written by Jean Blewett and titled “The Doukhobor Woman.” Blewett focuses upon physical details, noting that “the Doukhobor woman is no Venus. A long while ago she acquired the habit of working, and, theorists to the contrary, hard, incessant work does not tend toward beauty of face or form” (227). Blewett goes on to assert that “doing the whole year round a man’s work, has given her the figure of a man. She has muscles instead of curves; there is no roundness or softness visible.... Her hands and arms are the hands and arms of a working man.” Obviously, the concern here is that the female body and the labour it performs no longer acts as a physical marker of appropriate femininity; on the contrary, the bodies of the Doukhobor women are transparently “indecent” in their outright rejection of woman’s traditionally domestic role. As Blewett concluded, supposedly in direct contrast to the ideal life of an Anglo woman settler,

While women helping with ploughing, as Mrs. Pinder wanted to do and the Doukhobor women contentedly do, demands that a woman's body exceed the domestic sphere at least to the extent of the family's homestead land, another common activity, wagon or buggy driving, provided women settlers with a sometimes more liberating vehicle of geographic and bodily transgression. Indeed, the act of driving allows a person to exist temporarily within a constantly moving, unsettling, and ambiguous space, one that defies the stasis of separate spheres. In Ferne Nelson's *Barefoot on the Prairie*, for example, the author remembers one particular woman who presented a stark contrast to her mother's domestic ideal of "settling down," which, "in Mama's world," means "to marry some decent man and assume the status and demeanour of a respectable married woman" (15). As Nelson writes about the "Rawleigh Company's representative,"

"there is no romance in the life of a Doukhobor woman" (Carrel 227). We can see similar judgments in Emily Ferguson's observation of a Doukhobor woman one year prior to Blewett's article:

Our hostess does not bear the slightest resemblance to a Venus de Milo or Diana. She is deep-chested, iron-muscled, and thickset, like a man. Her legs are sunbrowned, her feet splayed like the saints in stained-glass windows, and her flat, stolid face bears the imprint of monotony.

It would appear as if the females of all races who are subject to undue physical exercise lose early their picturesqueness, comeliness, and contours. They tend to become asexual and to conform to the physical standard of the males. As this woman leaned over the swinging cradle and nursed her baby, even her breasts appeared shrunken and flaccid. (*Janey* 148)

Interestingly, while Ferguson seems to have felt it her duty to provide cultural criticisms through the image of Doukhobor women's bodies, she certainly did not appreciate being the object of a sort of reverse "illusion of transparency" (Lefebvre 28), which she experienced when visiting the "Doukhobor village of Vosnesenia": first she notes her "feeling that [she] was being examined with a directness that was disconcerting," then she admits her awareness that "they were taking us in, and it would doubtless have been a thorn in our pride if we knew what they thought of us" (40, 42).

Any visitor was welcomed to our isolated farm, and Mrs. Krause was no exception. She came a couple of times a year, and in style, too, in a shiny black democrat buggy pulled by two lovely bays. I remember her as a sort of Queen Victoria, sitting regally on the front seat, holding the reins, and expertly controlling her spanking team. (27)

This early characterization of Mrs. Krause is interesting because by invoking the image of Queen Victoria we have an ambiguous model of womanhood: on the one hand, Queen Victoria was the inspiration for the rigid domestic ideal of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, but on the other hand, as a figure of royalty, she was a woman with power that exceeded the purely domestic realm. Mrs. Krause, too, is depicted as a woman who encompasses two states of being, as seen in a physical description that at least appears to be within the boundaries of appropriate femininity:

Mrs. Krause was a sweet little woman. Did I say little? Well – she had tiny hands and feet. She was short, too, but very stout. She really was a lot like the famous old queen. Dumpy, I guess. Well-corseted, but no rigid stays could control the rolls of fat around her middle. Her hair was strawberry blonde, piled high, and always very neat. It was held in place with beautiful tortoise-shell combs. (27)

What a great figure of femininity here, as she hovers between containment (“Well-corseted”) and excess (“the rolls of fat”). This woman is domestic, but more than that, as she travels across the landscape, “sitting regally,” “holding the reins” and “expertly controlling her spanking team.” She is a figure of empowerment, but her perch is nonetheless precarious in relation to domestic ideals. As we learn at the end of the chapter dedicated to Mrs. Krause, “She had a husband and a houseful of kids at home. In our world, all the other

women stayed home, but she spent her days bumping over rutted roads, making a living. An early independent business woman" (29).²⁶

In another instance, although it is not actually the settler woman driving, Nelson uses the space of her text to illustrate the power of geographic movement to confront traditional notions of female "decency" and "purity" in terms of a "dependence on males" (Carter, *Capturing* 8). In a chapter titled "Mama Makes Her Mark," Nelson writes about her mother's first time casting a political vote. On first reading, the events of this chapter appear to conform to a conservative image of the Prairie Woman, with Myrtle Alexander narratively positioned as the supposed butt of a clearly gendered joke that results from her supposed lack of political acuity; her absorption in the domestic sphere. In the days leading up to the election, Nelson's mother is constructed as struggling with what she feels is the impropriety of female enfranchisement. As seen in the following extended passage, behaviour is very clearly defined along the lines of gender:

... The men could talk of nothing else but the coming election. Mama was quite uninterested in this talk. She would sit quietly, darning a sock or crocheting a doily, offering no opinions and looking extremely bored. On the infrequent occasions when neighbour women visited, the talk was of cooking and sewing, babies and gardens. Mama seemed to feel that politics was somehow unlady-like. She fidgeted uncomfortably when the men's voices were raised in heated debate.

When Mrs. Wood sat in our front room and insisted on arguing with the men, Mama was quite disgusted. She was also unmoved

26 We can see Mrs. Krause's radical position in Ida Scharf Hopkins's memoir about homesteading life in the 1940s, *To the Peace River Country and On*, when the author assumes the masculine gender of company representatives throughout her narrative: for example, she says, "Watkins and Raliegh [sic] men were as much a part of the prairie as wheat. They were rival companies dealing in household products.... I don't think any farmer's wife had a preference for either companies' product. She bought from the one who came when she needed what he had to sell" (112–13). In *Prairie Dreams*, Adeline (Nan) Clark, too, talks about visits from "the Watkins man and the Raleigh man" (96–97).

when Papa kept reminding her that women now had the vote and that he expected her to go with him to the schoolhouse and make one more vote for “our man.” She agreed to do that, but only to please him, not from any personal conviction. (93)

The scene is set and the result seems inevitable. In the buggy on the way to the schoolhouse, says Nelson, “Papa had questioned [his wife] again,” had “coached her carefully,” saying “Remember, Myrtle, just put an X after the man’s name. You know the one to vote for. Just one X, that’s all.” (93). The deliberateness of these words suggests to the reader that only a complete incompetent could possibly do wrong. Given that the author’s mother has been consistently constructed as nothing less than “clever” and capable in her domestic role earlier in the text, we as readers feel assured when Nelson asserts the family’s belief that Myrtle had certainly “voted right” (93). Nevertheless, the truth is revealed a few days later at Sunday dinner when the author’s mother finally speaks for herself, seemingly ingenuously:

After election day, conversation went back to the topics of our workaday lives, but there was one comical incident on the Sunday that the Hansons came for dinner. At the table the talk turned again to the election. Papa said something about Mama’s voting and joked that she had a lot to do with winning. Mama was all smiles.

“Easiest thing I ever did,” she said, then added, “of course, the first X I made was for the wrong man. I was a little flustered, I suppose. But I stroked it out and finally got my X in the right place!” (95)

In an ironic reading of this seemingly nostalgic text, one encouraged by the author throughout the memoir, knowledge of Myrtle Alexander’s spoiled ballot immediately changes the meaning of the chapter title, for, as I prefer to read it, in response to the “expectations” of her husband, “Mama [Very Deliberately] Makes Her Mark.” In Nelson’s translation of contemporary events, this eminently capable woman, who previously could only “fidget uncomfortably” while

the men expressed their anger in “heated debate” and who only “seemed to feel that politics was ... unladylike,” first performs the political incompetence that has been attributed to her, then invokes the apparently unquestionable patriarchal language of “right” and “wrong” in order to render especially effective what I read as her geographic and bodily act of “confrontation” with conservative scripts. Just imagine what could happen were women themselves encouraged to drive a team of horses away from the family farm!

Beulah Baldwin makes space in *The Long Trail* to document the figure of a woman driving a wagon. Writing about her parents’ journey to the Peace River region of Alberta in 1913, Baldwin notes that the Freelands come upon an unusual sight for the time period:

Ahead, two outfits were travelling close together. A man handled the first rig while his wife drove the second one. Pulling over, the young man asked Dad for a cigarette, though he probably only wanted to break the monotony of the trail with a chat while resting the teams.

My parents looked with admiration at the young woman driving her team with apparent ease. When Mother commented on her courage, she admitted that she had not planned it, but an extra rig was needed to bring their farm equipment and winter supplies. Looking mischievously at her husband, she said, “A lot of men’s jobs aren’t any more difficult than women’s.” (55–56)

Driving a wagon on the homestead trail was not a “planned” event, but necessity ensures the woman’s participation in an activity beyond purely domestic definitions of women’s work, and that participation results in the woman’s knowledge that there is nothing very sacred about the spatial politics of labour along gender lines. Baldwin uses this moment to represent her mother’s own developing and unspoken understanding that settler women often had to exceed behavioural boundaries:

After they left, Mother could not help wondering how the young wife would manage the icy hills ahead, not realizing that the steep

river banks she had already encountered had been nearly as frightening. Pioneer women, Mother would learn, performed many tasks they would have thought themselves incapable of, and she would be no exception. (56)

In fact, much later in the text Baldwin documents Olive Freeland's own desire to participate beyond the rather confined domestic space in a scene which seems to repudiate notions of women's unwillingness to transgress cultural norms, along with their supposed "frailty and delicacy," and to equalize male and female abilities:

Dad needed no instructions for clearing the land – just his strong back and good right arm. Sharpening his axe, he went to work. Except for a grove of spruce to the north, his quarter was sparsely wooded. But even so, unexpected help was welcome. After nursing and bathing Junior, Mother put him down for his morning nap, telling Carlton and me to look after him. Then she donned her sun bonnet, her old moosehide gloves, and pulled Dad's old overalls over her skirt, ready to help on the land.

Crossing the meadow, she was deeply aware that the whole country was very quiet and open and free. This was why everyone they met was in such good spirits – like the country, their outlook had a fresh quality.

Mother surprised Dad with the amount of clearing she accomplished as she slowly and steadily hacked away at the underbrush and small trees with her sharp hatchet. She always preferred outside chores to housework and was enjoying herself. The air was like wine, the skies blue, and the sunshine would be with them until ten o'clock at night. When her arms and back tired, she switched to piling brush. Her favourite job, as it had a bit of excitement to it, was taking the reins and urging the team on, while Dad pried out the stumps with his crowbar. It was not long before a small field emerged, giving them a great sense of accomplishment. (199–200)

Certainly part of the power of this scene stems from the fact that Mrs. Freeland taps into the ideal of Western exceptionalism, which figured the prairies as a space that was “open and free” and thus allowed for play with cultural norms. What I like about this scene, however, is the narrative movement from the idealization of the author’s father as being physically well suited to the act of clearing the land to focus on the “unexpected help” of Olive Freeland, who is depicted as being equally well suited, physically and emotionally, to the work required for “a great sense of accomplishment.” At the same time, the author’s mother is depicted as a repudiation of binaries with her creative costume of sun bonnet and man’s overalls, and her attendance to the domestic work of childcare as well as farming. This scene does not depict the victimized image of “hauling a double load,” either, for Olive Freeland “crosses the meadow” of her own accord as a means to satisfy her labour preference.

For women settlers who had experienced extra-domestic, paid, war-time employment prior to their arrival in a prairie community, it quickly became apparent that “World War I had not had the broad effect on the reality of women’s lives for which it has sometimes been given credit” (Vipond 5), at least not immediately. As a result, women settlers such as Kathleen Strange, who emigrated to Alberta in 1920, and who openly confesses in *With the West in Her Eyes* that “domestic life had never had any great attraction” for her (31), found it necessary to push the boundaries of “decency” and “purity” as related to the subject of women’s work. Back home in England, Strange had worked in the “Ministry of Munitions,” where, as she states it, “at a comparatively early age, I had learned to stand on my own feet and to fight my own battles. I had encountered men and competed with them on an equal footing, and had gained an experience of life that has undoubtedly stood me in good stead during the years that have passed” (5). As with her decision to keep her bobbed haircut and to continue wearing “breeches” while riding, Strange seizes more than one occasion to be disobedient to cultural norms of femininity, and once again we see an image of the prairie woman positioned on a “precarious perch.” Feeling anxious about progress on the building of their new home, she offers one day to step outside of her domestic sphere:

Another time the work was held up because there was no one available to haul a load of lumber that had arrived at Fenn. "All right," I said, "I will go and haul it home for you!" They laughed at me but finally let me go.

At Fenn I enlisted the services of the elevator man and some other men who happened to be around to help me load the lumber onto my wagon. (54)

Once out upon the prairie landscape, Strange is quickly forced to acknowledge that she has perhaps exceeded her capabilities as a farm wife:

When it was all safely aboard I started for home. I managed nicely until I came to the hills. The first hill we went down, the horses, impelled by the loaded wagon behind them, started to gallop, and by the time we reached the bottom, I had practically lost control of them. I have always wondered why they do not put brakes on Canadian farm wagons, but I suppose it is for the good reason that an experienced driver knows how to "hold the horses in." At that time, however, I had neither the skill nor the strength to manage my team and I was very frightened indeed. (54-55)

The geography beyond the homestead continues to threaten her with defeat for, while the upward trend of the next hill slows down the uncontrolled progress of the horses, another challenge to her prowess soon occurs:

Now, however, another problem confronted me. We had been climbing for a few minutes when I noticed that I constantly had to allow the reins, or lines as they are called in the West, to slip through my fingers, until I seemed to be an extraordinarily long way from the horses. Looking downward I discovered that I was slowly but surely moving backward on the load of lumber! There was an increasingly widening space between the front end of the wagon and the ends of the boards up on which I was perched.

Suddenly I realized what was happening. Owing to the sharp incline upward, and to the fact that the boards had not been securely roped in, the entire load was slipping backwards. Presently, if we did not reach the top of the hill in time, it would slip right off on to the trail.

My hands were now nearing the ends of the lines, and there was nothing left for me to do but to jump down into the half-empty wagon box, lean over the front end, and concentrate all my attention on keeping the horses in hand. The boards, I decided, could take care of themselves.

Just before we reached the top of the hill, my load crashed off with a terrific clatter and was scattered all over the road. (55–56)

Unlike in the epigraph at the start of this chapter, when Sally Pinder determines to maintain both her perch and her sense of decency by letting the logs slip instead of herself, Strange rejects the helplessness of her situation and takes action. Although she does lose the load of lumber and becomes the subject of a “good laugh at [her] expense” (56) when she tells her family about her plight, the more important focus is that she does control the situation, she eventually makes it home safely, and the family home gets built. She also makes sure to advise her reader that the lost load of lumber did not happen as a result of any real incompetence on her part; rather, the precarious event happened because of the incompetence of the men who helped her at Fenn, for “the boards had not been securely roped in” (55).

At a later time, braced by the ultimate success gained in that first experience driving the wagon, Strange decides to once again exceed the normal course of events and strike out onto the landscape alone: noting that she had previously “*been driven by one of the men to Big Valley to get coal,*” the author writes that

One fall day, however, with a hint of winter in the air, I decided to take a wagon into Big Valley and bring back a load of coal for the farm myself. I had already driven a team several times. I had hauled lumber successfully from Fenn. So I felt confident that I could haul a load of coal. (92–93)

This time, Strange courts near disaster before she has even left town:

On this particular occasion I drove safely onto the platform, climbed down and held my horses while my wagon was weighed; then proceeded to pull up underneath the chute. I remained on the seat while the wagon was being loaded and held on to the horses. Soon the box was full and I signalled to the man to close the trap. For some reason or other, the trap refused to close, and the coal kept pouring down. In the excitement of the moment I did not have the sense to pull ahead, but just sat there, watching the coal pour down on to my already over-full wagon. Suddenly an extra large lump of coal came down the chute, bounced off the wagon, and struck the rump of one of the horses. The horses jumped forward, broke the wagon pole, and almost threw me from my perch. There might have been a serious runaway had not several miners sprung forward and seized the horses' heads. (93–94)

Once again, however, Strange ultimately manages to complete her self-appointed task, even despite some activity that thrusts her beyond the pale of female decency:

It took considerable time to shovel off the excess coal from my wagon and clear away the heap that had piled up on the ground around me. I also had to get my wagon pole repaired and the harness fixed. I listened to some of the most expressive and colourful language I have ever heard in my life while all this was being done. (94)

In both of the above situations, Strange wilfully undertakes her geographic and physical “confrontations” with domestic norms, and neither the threat of falling from her “precarious perch,” nor the less than supportive judgements

of men, deter her from inscribing her bodily resistance across the prairie landscape, across the memoir page.²⁷

Many of the childhood memoirs indicate that the position of the farmer's daughter is a case in point of the constantly shifting boundaries of "women's work." Under the traditional rules of the "domestic and rural idyll," the need for women to "know their place" was tantamount; indeed, "inculcation into appropriate attitudes and behaviour started in early childhood" (Davidoff et al. 165).²⁸ In *We Swept the Cornflakes Out the Door* (1980), Edith Hewson documents the moment when she and a sister came to "know their place" as being located in a different geographic and bodily space than that experienced by their older brother:

Spring came and with it, change. Edith and Amy sensed it most in Buster. He treated them with greater condescension, left them the filling of the woodbox, and spent more time in the barn helping with the "chores."

They yearned to assume his possessions, step into his shoes, and enjoy his privileges, a family promise that was constantly violated. His shoes were boy's shoes which they couldn't wear, his privileges widened because his preferred habitat was the barn, and his acquired possessions, its produce thereof. (109–10)

However, the less than idyllic situation of the Canadian prairies meant that "the labor needs of the homestead placed great responsibility on children and also made age and gender restrictions impractical. Where there were sons, daughters worked in household production; where there were no sons, daughters worked in the fields" (Bennett and Kohl 97).²⁹ As the example from

27 For more examples of women driving wagons, see also Roberts 163 and Thomson 72.

28 For examples of such "inculcation," see Ebbers 49, 65; Hicks 10; Johannson 44–46; Nelson 14–16; Raber 30, 89, 118; and Schroeder 58.

29 Certainly the figure of the prairie daughter as farmhand is common enough in the literature of the period, as seen in Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh*: "Niels saw to his surprise the girl [Ellen Amundsen], clad like a man in sheep-skin and big overshoes,

Hewson's text illustrates, however, this is not to suggest that girls and young women were always reluctant to step outside the domestic sphere into the vast landscape of the prairies; on the contrary, many of the memoirists examined here use the temporally safe distance and space of the memoir to assert women's performance of men's work as a crucial part of their personal contribution to land settlement. For example, as Georgina Thomson and her sister Chaddy discover in *Crocus and Meadowlark Country* in the first decade of the twentieth century, farmer's daughters were often expected to assist "neighbors in times of crisis" (Bennett and Kohl 101):

Father and Louis [Roy] worked together quite a bit, sharing machinery and labor, and sometimes Father shared us with Louis, sending us down to plant potatoes for him behind the plough and to pick them up in the fall. Louis always brought us out a lunch in midmorning or afternoon and paid us a little for our work. Very small change meant a lot to a homesteader's kids in those days. (41)

While it may not seem positive that the two sisters fit into the category of "machinery and labor" in their physical capacity as temporary farmhands, the work they perform does in some small measure become a space of liberation in the form of monetary reward, or public recognition, for one's efforts and

crossing the yard to the stable where she began to harness a team of horses. They were big, powerful brutes, young and unruly. But she handled them with calm assurance and unflinching courage as she led them out on the yard" (21–22). However, this situation is not presented as ideal, especially when the girl in question becomes questionable: for example, as Niels Lindstedt compares two female farmhands,

whereas Ellen, when she donned her working clothes, had changed from a virgin, cool and distant, into a being that was almost sexless, Olga preserved her whole femininity. The nonchalance of her bearing also stood in strange contrast to the intense determination with which Ellen went after her work. About Olga's movements there was hesitation, an almost lazy deliberation very different from the competent lack of hurry in Ellen. Besides, Ellen ignored the men at their work; Olga stopped, looking on, and chatted with Nelson about his plans. (38)

contribution. At home, however, their contribution is unpaid and expected as a matter of course: “Not having any school to attend gave Chaddy and me a lot of time to fool around with our own interests and fun, but as time went on and the farm developed more, we were called on to do more around the place” (69). Some jobs were better than others, but then that qualification depended largely on the point of view of the women involved:

Work we did not enjoy so well was picking stones. Father had by chance filed on a stony homestead, and before the land could be ploughed, as many stones as possible had to be removed. I was always a bit of a feminist and I had a strong feeling that picking stones was not a girl’s work. Father had other ideas and so we all had to rally round, that is, all except Bee. She was a good cook and housekeeper and so was allowed to stay in and get the meals. Mother would rather be outside anyway. She always thought cooking was an awful waste of time, as you worked so hard only to have everything gobbled up in a hurry, and then you had to start all over again. (71)

Later in her text, when speaking critically of men’s ideas of appropriate work for women, she repeats her father’s phrasing and suggests that “farmers from Eastern Canada and from Britain, however, were for the most part less chivalrous and expected their women to *rally round* and do all sorts of jobs around the place” (100; emphasis added). Thomson has repeatedly pointed out her sister Bee’s disdain for outside work, an attitude that is liberating for the author’s mother, who obviously understood that a woman’s domestic production was certainly crucial to the operation of the family farm, but that sometimes women wanted more of a return on their labour investment than mere consumption.

As the eldest daughter in her family, Nell Parsons takes pride and joy in the work that she performs on her father’s homestead in the first decade of the twentieth century, as when the family is constructing their first prairie home: as she writes in *Upon a Sagebrush Harp*,

I helped Papa put on the sheathing. He called me “his boy,” for Cecil was too young to be of any help. It was an exciting day when he allowed me to help with the roofing paper on that part of the roof which extended over the bedroom half of the building.

That was as far as the half roll of roofing paper brought from Iowa would reach. In Iowa all houses had been accomplished facts. Here I thrilled to the reality of learning how roofs and walls came into being. (18)

Importantly, the author’s physical positioning in this task provides her with an awareness of the intimate structure of the domestic sphere as a human construction rather than an “accomplished fact” beyond transgression. As in Thomson’s memoir, Parsons also notes that the performance of chores not traditionally delineated as women’s work held the liberatory potential of monetary (and gustatory) rewards:

Later that summer I had a chance to earn more money. A farmer west of us had a mustard infested field of wheat. He hired Rena, myself, and Stella Mitchell to pull the yellow mustard. He paid us the princely sum of fifteen cents a day.

It took us six days, working from eight in the morning until five in the afternoon, to cover that thirty-acre field. There was time out for noon dinner at the farmer’s bountiful table. We had canned tomatoes every day and several eggs. Each meal, dessert was a generous dish of fruit, with cake! (97)

Similar to Parsons, in *Prairie Dreams* Nan Clark’s main character, Ruth, who, every summer morning, “escaped out the back door to join the wonderful farm activity” (50), takes pride in helping her father with farm chores: for example, writing about planting potatoes Clark notes that

Ruth rode the horse and guided it up and down the garden. Father held the small, one-furrowed plough which turned the soil and left a ditch for the seed potatoes. Ruth, aware of her importance, rode

the big farm horse proudly, so high above Father, that even the fence seemed a long way down. She was relieved to be lifted down while the horse rested, and they set the potato pieces evenly in the moist black soil. Again, Ruth rode the horse, as the plough turned yet another furrow to cover the seed. It was triple companionship, as the three worked and rested together. (51–52)

After fall threshing, when the family had “settle[d] back to family routine,” Ruth engaged in another farm chore that, as with Thomson and Parsons before her, had monetary rewards:

Next day, beyond the cleared fields of golden stubble, Ruth searched for the “sets.” The sets were hers to gather, clean and sell. These were the piles of wheat which, escaping the spout, were heaped on the ground, one by each straw stack. She carefully shoveled them into the sacks for Father to haul home. There, with help from Jim, she cleaned them in the fanning mill, so as to remove chaff and weeds. Gathering the sets was the final reward for a long season of faithful work. These plump sacks of grain were saleable merchandise, all hers. Ruth revelled in her sense of independence, of worth, and the respect she gained for work well done. (93)

When Sylvia Bannert’s family emigrated to Canada in 1911 after the death of the author’s father, much of the work on the Cooper family’s farm near Truax, Saskatchewan, no matter what type, was necessarily performed by the then eleven-year-old author. As Bannert writes in *Rut Hog or Die*, her lack of formal schooling did not mean that she possessed no knowledge:

I got work in Avonlea for a while. One lady asked why I didn’t go to school. I said, “Where? There is no school in the hills.”

“Surely you could work for your board and go to school.”

“Yes, I have tried that. I worked for a lady for my board and school supplies. I got up at five in the morning, milked the cow, cleaned the barn, got breakfast for seven of us, did the dishes,

ran the six blocks to school, back at lunch, did the dishes, back to school, hurried home, worked till ten at night. They also had four children I had to help look after. What time did I have for school? Then they did not want to buy my writing paper. I was so far behind the other children, I felt ashamed. So I will just grow up dumb.”

“My dear child, I see what you mean!”

I thanked her for feeling sorry for me. Anyway, I could milk a cow, hitch up a team of horses, clean a barn, wash clothes, make bread, cook a meal, mind the babies and help take care of the sick. I was not unhappy with what I knew. (74–75)

Unlike so many of the memoirists gathered for this study, Bannert’s family is definitely unable to pretend to middle-class notions of femininity; rather, basic survival needs mean that the family is in a much more constantly precarious financial position and that the women of the family are required to consistently “haul a double load.” Indeed, the breadth of Bannert’s knowledge regarding the running of a farm, the fact that she “could do a boy’s work as well as a girl’s” (78), meant that her family’s well-being was largely dependent upon her presence: “It was hard for Mother when I was away. She could not hitch up a horse. There were so many things for which she depended on me” (75). Here we see that, in some exceptional cases, the settler woman necessarily displayed a “dependence” on female labour rather than upon the protection of men. Importantly, Bannert’s extra-domestic work in childhood translates into a wider behavioural definition of appropriate women’s work when she later marries a farmer. As Bannert remembers, domestic and farm work/space often overlapped: “I did a man’s work out in the field. The baby was good and I would put him on a blanket while I stoked wheat” (121–22).

This overlapping of self-identification as both farmhand and domestic worker also occurs in Myrtle E.J. Hicks’s *The Bridges I Have Crossed* (1973), a memoir of homesteading life in Manitoba in the first two decades of the twentieth century. As Hicks remembers about her teen years, starting when she was sixteen years old, “the fall of 1914 the grain was rusted badly, so I was helping Dad to take off the crop. We had been taking turns. I would drive

the four horses on the binder and Dad would stook. Then we would change vice-versa” (11). As she goes on, we see that for young girls and women the expectation was that they could work quite fluidly, moving from working as a farmhand under certain conditions, then transitioning to more traditional domestic work in other conditions. Representing the exchange between these two roles in the memoir text often presents an opportunity for critique by close narrative comparison:

I helped Dad with the harvest two years. As soon as the wheat was cut, if the other grain wasn't ready, we would stack the sheaves. With a team on a wagon with a rack on it, we would drive from one stook to the other. I would build the loads and Dad would throw on the sheaves. When a good big load was on, we would drive up beside where the stack was built. I would throw the sheaves onto the stack and Dad would build it. He always built oblong stacks and so high. Mother would bring us out lunch around 4 o'clock and we would work until eight or maybe longer if it looked like rain and we were finishing off a stack. When threshing started, I would go from one neighbour to the next helping to feed the men as soon as we at home had had our turn. We put in long hours but there was lots of fun too. The gangs would have their caboose for sleeping in but ate in the house. Any neighbours that were helping went home after supper and were not there for breakfast. There would be an average of ten to fourteen for breakfast. Of course you served potatoes, meat of some kind, porridge, three or four slices of toast, coffee and tea. At noon you would feed between twenty and twenty-five men. It would depend if they were hauling the grain to the elevator if more men were needed. Then lunch at 3:30 p.m. – pie, sandwich or hot biscuits or cake. Supper ranged from 7 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. It depended upon how the weather looked. If it looked like rain they would stay and finish what stacks were started. So you see us women didn't get finished very early. (12)

Hicks's ability to transgress spatial boundaries makes her especially valuable, as we see when she meets her future husband, the brother of a girlfriend, and her father, who is "dependent" upon her as a source of labour, becomes possessive: "My folks were interested in Lila but it was the last thing in Dad's mind that his girl would go out with Charley, or anyone else. He needed my help and that was that" (16).³⁰

That, however, is not simply that, for in their representations of women's bodies chasing bears, fighting fires, running races, straddling horses, driving wagons and working in the fields, the memoirists examined here provide us with a narrative space in which to confront the domestic ideal that persisted throughout the different phases of western settlement. As we can see from the memoirs, lived experience of prairie life often resulted in the prairie woman needing and/or wanting to perform her disobedience to, her transgression of, the boundaries of appropriate femininity. Within the temporally safe space of the memoir, then, these authors demonstrate the precarious nature, the constantly shifting boundaries, of what it meant to be a "decent woman" in prairie society. For those early women settlers whose stories are written by daughters and grand-daughters, the pressure to conform to domestic ideals came largely from within, but that internal monitor of "decent" behaviour often had to be ignored when prairie isolation demanded the prairie woman's participation in activities beyond the pale of cultural norms. Extra-domestic activities thus became a necessity, and sometimes even a guilty pleasure. For those women writing about their own experiences, both as children and as adult women, the pressure to conform to domestic ideals came largely from without: indeed, even as late as the post-World War II period, Katherine Magill felt the necessity, "as in ancient Rome," to "conform with local standards and habits," to keep secret any transgressions of the farm wife role, to "bury" them, "deep. Not even relating them to the family" (14). In both cases, looking back across the gulf of time, the vast geography of the prairies and of the memoir text become narrative vehicles allowing for a more dynamic representation of the prairie woman's vital role in western settlement.

30 For more examples of girls and young women working as farmhands, see also Anderson 31–32; Hiemstra 287; Hopkins 87–88; Inglis 11, 40; Johannson 149–50; McClung 116; and Raber 108.