

## Settlers, Suffrage, and Transnational Women's History in *Imperial Plots*

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Article abstract

*Sarah Carter's Imperial Plots: Women, Land, and the Spadework of Colonialism on the Canadian Prairies* sits at the intersection of women's history, histories of settler colonialism, and the history of the West. This reflection asks whether (and to what extent) national borders shape the way historians do transnational women's history and highlights how Western settler colonialism and ideas about gender, race, and political citizenship shaped access to land.

## Settlers, Suffrage, and Transnational Women's History in *Imperial Plots*

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### *Abstract*

*Sarah Carter's Imperial Plots: Women, Land, and the Spadework of Colonialism on the Canadian Prairies* sits at the intersection of women's history, histories of settler colonialism, and the history of the West. This reflection asks whether (and to what extent) national borders shape the way historians do transnational women's history and highlights how Western settler colonialism and ideas about gender, race, and political citizenship shaped access to land.

### *Résumé*

*L'ouvrage de Sarah Carter, Imperial Plots: Women, Land, and the Spadework of Colonialism on the Canadian Prairies, se situe au croisement de l'histoire des femmes, de l'histoire des colons et de l'histoire de l'Ouest. Ce livre cherche à savoir si (et dans quelle mesure) les frontières nationales influent sur la façon dont les historiens retracent l'histoire transnationale des femmes et souligne la façon dont le colonialisme occidental et les idées au sujet du genre, de la race et de la citoyenneté politique ont conditionné l'accès à la terre.*

Two of the first women we meet in Sarah Carter's *Imperial Plots: Women, Land, and the Spadework of Colonialism on the Canadian Prairies* are Mary (Kilgore) Grant, Sarah Carter's great-great-grandmother — who homesteaded land in Manitoba beginning in the 1870s — and Hidatsa farmer Maxi'diwiac — whose ancestors had long farmed the land of the Upper Missouri. But when people think of farming on the Great Plains, the images that come to mind are often of hardy male settlers cultivating the supposedly “empty” landscape into a productive agricultural space within the British Empire. Sarah Carter's masterful analysis of the colonization of the Canadian prairies upends these images by firmly grounding the story of prairie land settlement in women's history. With an intersectional focus incorporating race, ethnicity, class, settler colonialism, and Indigenous history, Carter has written a nuanced consideration of how settler women were excluded from power structures and access to land through gendered subordination while never losing sight of their complicity in the project of

Indigenous dispossession. Advocates of female farming often employed a robust set of imperialist ideals to argue that British women would bring “civilization” and femininity to the Prairie West, while critics complained that the physical labour of agriculture was an essentially masculine job which, if done by women, would “de-sex” them and make them too much like the foreign immigrant “others” who lived on the prairies. Carter balances the discussion of these larger political and legal forces at play in the West while highlighting the voices and individual life-stories of women farmers whenever possible. Readers come away with a rich understanding of how land — accessing it, working it, cultivating it, living on and with it — is a story that is both deeply personal and profoundly political. With a diverse set of sources that includes novels, immigration policy, property law, prescriptive literature, and census material, *Imperial Plots* contributes to a broad range of disciplinary fields: women’s history, environmental history, histories of settler colonialism, rural and agricultural history, social and political history, the history of the West.

Perhaps one of the greatest strengths of *Imperial Plots* is how it places Canadian women’s history within the transnational space of the British Empire and the North American West. Many scholars have evoked the “transnational turn” and incorporated this approach into their current research. But those who undertake transnational work know that it is difficult to do this kind of history well. It is much easier to develop broad conceptual and theoretical ideas in an introduction than to carefully and consistently weave them throughout a book. Nevertheless, Carter maintains a complex and sustained analysis of the intersection of the local, the regional, the national, and the imperial throughout, deliberately seeking to understand the “circulation of people and ideas” beyond national borders (p. 19). Her book does what it sets out to do — to tell this larger transnational narrative — and she never allows the reader to lose sight of the individuals at the centre of her stories.

One of the central arguments in *Imperial Plots* is that the intersection of Britishness, colonialism, and ideologies of gender help explain why settler women’s attempts to access homestead land in the West are largely stories of “dashed hopes” and failure. Carter draws on the theory and historiography of women’s participation in imperial projects within the British Empire and is careful to note that settler women of diverse backgrounds were complicit in what she calls “land hunger,” the endless gobbling up of the land from Indigenous peo-

ples living and farming in the West. She shows how settler women's bodies were expected to do the work of colonization with fewer of the privileges accorded to men, and how women from Britain in particular were desperately seeking to find a place for themselves and their aspirations in an era which accorded them little opportunity outside of heterosexual marriage. *Imperial Plots* painstakingly reveals the paradoxes of colonialism and patriarchy. Canadian immigration and land officials remained steadfastly opposed to allowing women to homestead because their femininity would be compromised, or because they might become independent and refuse to marry or bear children. Furthermore, officials feared that through farming, British women would become too much like the "others" of the Prairies: the European peasant women and Indigenous women whose physical labour was understood as unfeminine and uncivilized, and seen as an affront to Victorian gender and familial ideals.

Carter shows how this gendered framework rested on officials deliberately ignoring all of the evidence in front of them. They dismissed the long history of women's physical labour in the fields of Great Britain and Canada, refused to acknowledge that women were still doing hard physical labour even within the context of the married farming family, and ignored how the barriers between women's and men's work withered in the face of the labour of proving up a claim or making a farm profitable. By highlighting the minority of women who did receive homesteads or who were able to purchase land outright or through scrip, Carter demonstrates the difficulties of women's labour — the grasshopper infestations, poor equipment, and poor conditions just to name a few — but shows that even under harsh conditions, women were often more successful at proving up their land than were men.

All of the petitions, campaigns, and letter writing undertaken by farming advocates in Canada and Britain rested on the tactic of convincing officials that women could be strong, capable, and successful farmers. But it was almost impossible for those advocates to successfully prove women could do agricultural work given the rigid ideological stand of Canadian authorities. This refusal to see or value women's labour evokes the kind of political and ideological intransigence that historians have documented in the women's suffrage movement from the same era. Politicians repeatedly demanded that suffragists provide evidence that women wanted the vote and would use it responsibly. When provided with compelling evidence, antisuffragists simply

found new reasons for denying enfranchisement. Something similar seems to happen in the homesteads for British women campaign. Despite the backing of some powerful and elite supporters in Canada and England, almost every example of women's agricultural success was seen by male authorities as an exception to the general rule of women's physical incompetence. Officials were absolutely sure that allowing unmarried women or women without dependents to homestead was evidence not of just gender chaos but also of outright fraud. If women succeeded, it must be because they were not truly doing the "real" work of farming, or because they were conspiring with others to accumulate more land than they were entitled to. Trying to convince authorities otherwise was always destined to fail, because they were never willing to assess women's actual capabilities outside of a patriarchal lens.

What struck me as particularly compelling was how Carter framed the story of homesteading as a story of overall failure, showing how opportunities for women closed down rather than expanded over time. This was clearly the case for Indigenous women, whom Carter carefully highlights throughout the book. By starting the story prior to colonization, she shows that Indigenous women were successful agriculturalists whose labour was honoured, respected, and central to the economy. Their access to the land and all the accumulated knowledge gained by working productively with the land was increasingly restricted and constrained as opportunities for settler men and some women expanded. There was no easy story of progress for British women either; over time, Canadian authorities restricted and narrowed eligibility for homestead land, ultimately making only widows with dependent children eligible.

From the perspective of women who wanted to farm, and of the advocates who wished to expand the empire through the "spadework of colonialism" as Carter so eloquently puts it, this is indeed a story of failure. But if this story was told from the perspective of male settlers and the "western architects" of prairie colonization, then this is a story of success. Both groups wished to keep the most valuable resource — the land — in the hands of settler men. In what ways might the agricultural, cultural, social, and racial landscape of the Canadian West look different if there had been success on the terms of white settler women and their supporters?

I'd like to end this comment by posing several larger questions that bring together the themes of imperialism, transnationalism, the

West, and women's and gender history. First, it was during the height of the homestead for women campaigns that the suffrage movement was moving towards success in Western Canada. The two campaigns sometimes (though not always) overlapped, but we do see similarities in discourse around the idea of British entitlement. Both claimed that justice was not being done for settler women of British background, because immigrant men, largely from Eastern and Central Europe, could access land and political citizenship. Yet political enfranchisement for settler women succeeded while the desire to access land did not. Did the argument of British entitlement work better in one context than the other? Is the association of masculinity with hard physical labour more enduring than the association of manliness with political citizenship? Are women's bodies understood to be too fragile to succeed as farmers? These questions are worth exploring because one of the last women we meet in the book is Marianne Stamm — one of many women who even today are reluctant to identify as farmers and are still often labelled farmers' daughters or farmers' wives.

Circling back to the theme of transnational history, *Imperial Plots* demonstrates that even though the border between Canada and the United States was somewhat fluid, and even though western land surveyors adopted the American grid system, the United States acted as a kind of foil for Canadian authorities. Canadians held fast to the belief that American colonization had been a failure in terms of gender and insisted that Canada must and should be different from its southern neighbour. This partially separates Canadian discourses from western exceptionalist arguments, which leaned on notions of "frontier" equality of opportunity for white settler women. Is the story that Sarah Carter tells us about Western Canadian settler women's relationship to the land evidence in part of the power of Britishness to delineate national identities and borders? And if the border has such power, how might this shape the way historians do transnational work? *Imperial Plots* raises a range of important questions and beautifully demonstrates the rich outcome that result from situating Canadian women's and gender history in local, regional, national, and transnational contexts.

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