

## Women on the Margins of *Imperial Plots*: Farming on Borrowed Land

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### *Abstract*

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### *Résumé*

*Plutôt que de discuter en détail des découvertes exposées par Carter dans Imperial Plots, cet essai se penche sur les vies de trois femmes vivant en marge des processus soulignés par Carter pour illustrer comment s'est exercée l'influence de la réduction du rôle des femmes et la façon dont les femmes ont résisté à cela et s'y sont adaptées. Les portraits que nous faisons de Maxi'diwiac (hidatsa), Nancy Arcand (métisse) et Frances Zatylny (ukrainienne-canadienne) montrent que si leurs pratiques agricoles (et leur vie en règle générale) se déroulaient dans les limites étroites imposées par le colonialisme, leur ferme était devenue leur principal lieu de résistance. Les descriptions détaillées que fait Carter des espaces racisés et genrés de la Prairie dévoilent le mécanisme du colonialisme et nous aident à comprendre comment les forces culturelles, sociales, économiques et politiques ont façonné les structures dans lesquelles pouvaient agir ces femmes. Mais bien que ces femmes aient entretenu des liens profonds avec leur terre par leur travail, elles n'ont pas pu en conserver la propriété.*

Sarah Carter's award-winning book *Imperial Plots* has many strengths. It is rooted in the deep past, focussed on individual women, and makes

sense of the complex iterations of colonialism. Her book provides a context to explain the dramatic changes in gender and economy on the prairies after Canadian Confederation, and the United States Homestead and Dawes Acts. She shows that these changes are not limited to the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, the geographic reconfiguration of land tenure, and the immigration of Europeans, but extended to constructions of gender that profoundly shaped economy and society. Specifically, the roles for women in agriculture narrowed considerably as colonization on the northern plains and prairies progressed.

Rather than providing a detailed discussion of the findings of Carter's *Imperial Plots*, this commentary explores the lives of three women at the edges of the processes Carter outlines in the book to illustrate the widespread influence of the narrowing of women's roles and how women resisted and adapted. Our portraits of Maxi'diwiac (Hidatsa), Nancy Arcand (Métis), and Frances Zatylny (Ukrainian-Canadian) show how their agricultural practices — and their lives more generally — were confined by colonialism, yet farming became their major site of resistance. One particularly instructive aspect of Carter's *Imperial Plots* is that she makes the book personal, and thus more powerful, by locating herself and her ancestors in the story. She is a stakeholder in the legacy of limiting women's roles in farming on the prairies. The authors are stakeholders too and we expect many readers can identify with farming women. Betsy Jameson has been a resident of Alberta since 1999 and a long-time scholar of women of the northern Plains: she even spoke about Maxi'diwiac during her job interview at the University of Calgary in 1998. Jesse Thistle is great-grandson to Nancy Arcand and her stories of farming are regularly shared in his family's oral traditions. All of Carolyn Podruchny's ancestors were farmers as far back as everyone can remember, and her grandmother, Frances Zatylny, is the subject of the third section of this essay. We all inherit this history, as it shaped the lives of all men and women living on the northern Plains and the rest of North America by marginalizing the role of women in agriculture.

### **Indigenous Women's Agriculture from Mainstream to Margins: Maxi'diwiac (Buffalo Bird Woman)**

Carter began and ended *Imperial Plots* with Maxi'diwiac, an Hidatsa woman known in English as Buffalo Bird Woman, who generated one of the most detailed and well-known accounts of Indigenous

women's agriculture.<sup>1</sup> Anthropologist and Presbyterian minister Gilbert L. Wilson recorded her history at the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation in North Dakota during the summers of 1906–1918, and published it in two volumes, *Buffalo Bird Woman's Garden*, first published as *Agriculture of the Hidatsa Indians: An Indian Interpretation* (1917), and *Wabeenee: An Indian Girl's Story* (1921).<sup>2</sup> Maxi'diwiac spoke through her son, Edward Goodbird, who translated for Wilson. Wilson, who clearly respected Maxi'diwiac, edited his field notes into narratives that offered thick descriptions of mid-nineteenth-century Hidatsa culture. They also, at times, reflected his own assumption that her "old ways" represented a dying culture making way for civilization. The most faithful translations from Wilson's field notes to the printed page concerned Maxi'diwiac's detailed accounts of women's agriculture.

Archaeological evidence suggests that Hidatsa women inherited agricultural traditions that had extended as far north as the edge of the parkland belt, bordering the Canadian Shield, north of present-day Winnipeg.<sup>3</sup> The immediate ancestors of the Hidatsa and other Indigenous people of the northern plains produced what anthropologists call the Plains Village Tradition of agricultural villages along rivers that provided water and rich bottomland soil for their crops. They grew the "Three Sisters" of corn, beans, and squash, domesticated some 10,000 years ago in southern Mexico, drawing as well from Indigenous farmers in the current southeastern United States, who domesticated sunflowers, marshelder, goosefoot, and squash roughly 5,000 years ago.<sup>4</sup>

These two agricultural complexes merged and spread to the Great Plains starting around 900, altering the economies of people who had for millennia lived by hunting and by gathering wild plants like prairie turnips and chokecherries. The development of domesticated crops allowed them to diversify their economies to include farming the major river valleys, as well as gathering and bison-hunting.<sup>5</sup> They built agricultural villages of roughly 200 people on river terraces, with semi-subterranean earthen lodges organized around ceremonial plazas, surrounded by protective ditches and wooden palisades. Various scholars have concluded that in some groups, hunting was a male activity; and in others, a collective enterprise that included women. They agree, however, that in most Indigenous Plains societies, women controlled agriculture, using the shoulder blades of bison to hoe their fields.<sup>6</sup>

Carter sets the stage of *Imperial Plots* with Indigenous women's roles in pre-colonial agriculture:

Agriculture long predated the arrival of Europeans on the northern Great Plains, and women were the farmers, raising corn, beans, squash, melons, pumpkins, and sunflowers. They excelled in the art of plant domestication, developing hardy, early maturing varieties of corn that could flourish even in the short growing season of the northern plains, and that could withstand hail and drought as well as early frost. (30–1)

The farming and gathering practices that Maxi'diwiac chronicled reflected these histories, the changes wrought by European trade goods, and more unsettling changes forged by American policy. She herself lived on the geographic margin of Carter's *Imperial Plots*, south of the 49th parallel, in present-day North Dakota. Born in 1839 or 1840, she entered a world already dramatically altered by European trade, animals, and microbes, and dated her own life from a disastrous smallpox epidemic brought by traders in 1837 that killed over half the Hidatsa and perhaps seven-eighths of the neighbouring Mandan. "I was born," she said, "in an earth lodge by the mouth of the Knife river, in what is now North Dakota, three years after the smallpox winter."<sup>7</sup>

She arrived at the end of one period of substantial change in Hidatsa economies and gender roles, 1787–1845, when three independent Hidatsa villages stood at the mouth of the Knife River. Horses from New Spain reached the Northern Plains during the eighteenth century; guns arrived with European traders. Together, they made it easier for men to kill many buffalo quickly, transforming the economies of tribes that had previously hunted collectively on foot. The burgeoning buffalo hide trade depleted the herds, intensified women's labour tanning hides to prepare them for market, and altered relationships between women and men.<sup>8</sup> The nineteenth-century Hidatsa economy combined hunting, which became a largely masculine pursuit, and agriculture, which remained the province of women.

Maxi'diwiac measured change in gardens--by their size and the introduction of new crops and new tools. Agricultural change was woven throughout the history Maxi'diwiac learned from her grandmother, who taught her that the Hidatsa emerged from Miniwakan, or Spirit Lake, in present-day North Dakota, and planted ground

beans and potatoes that they brought from their home under the water. The Hidatsa, she said, learned of corn and squashes from the Mandan, and ultimately joined them near the mouth of the Heart River. “I think,” Maxi’diwiac said, “this was hundreds of years ago.” When firewood grew scarce, they moved to the mouth of the Knife River. After the disastrous smallpox epidemic, the survivors moved up the Missouri River and built a joint village of Hidatsa, Mandan, and Arikara at Like-a-fishhook bend. Maxi’diwiac drew diagrams illustrating how the women of her family cultivated interspersed rows of beans, squash, and corn at Like-a-fishhook village, following ancient practices of growing and consuming these companion crops that provided complementary nourishment to the soil and complementary protein for humans.<sup>9</sup> “We lived in Like-a-fishhook village” she continued, “about forty years, or until 1885, when the government began to place families on allotments,” or private plots of land.<sup>10</sup>

This allocation of allotments was formalized through the Dawes Act of 1887, which divided tribal lands into individual allotments according to the grid system established by the United States Land Ordinance of 1795, implemented in both the United States Homestead Act of 1862 and the Canadian Dominion Lands Act of 1872. Although, as Carter details, Canada and the United States differed about which women could claim homesteads, they agreed that married women were not eligible.<sup>11</sup>

For Maxi’diwiac, these policies brought alienating changes to a world where women had owned the fields and worked them in matrilineal family groups, and a social organization that established female support and companionship. All the women of her family farmed together, and young girls guarded their corn from platforms they built in the fields. She told Wilson:

We reared platforms and cared for the corn in those days as we would care for a child, for we Indians loved our gardens just as parents loved their children . . . . The girls would sing love songs from the platforms of these stages. Two girls would usually sing together. The village gardens were laid out close to one another and a girl of one family would be joined by a girl of the family who owned the garden adjoining. Sometimes three, even four girls got on a platform and sang together . . . . Girls began to go on the garden stage to sing when they were about ten or twelve years of age and they continued so to do until the marriageable period.<sup>12</sup>

Hidatsa women built and owned the circular lodges that housed their families. They were not isolated on nuclear family farms, but erected their lodges in villages, and farmed along the river bottoms where the soil was easier to cultivate than on the dry plains.<sup>13</sup> Maxi'diwiac's mother died when she was six, but according to Hidatsa kinship, she regarded her mothers' sisters Red Blossom and Strikes-many-women also as her mothers. Following Hidatsa custom, they too had married her father, Small Ankle, and lived together in large lodges that housed their matrilineal family: the sisters, their children, husbands, and Maxi'diwiac's grandmothers, Turtle and Otter.<sup>14</sup> Hidatsa women were also linked through women's sodalities.<sup>15</sup> The social organization of their villages and fields reinforced mutually supportive networks of women linked by kinship, labour, friendship, and fundamental social institutions.

United States policy and laws attempted the connected goals of Indigenous assimilation and American westward expansion. The Homestead Act and Dawes Act disrupted Hidatsa social organization and marginalized women's agriculture. Like-a-Fishhook village became part of the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation, founded in 1870, where missionaries and government agents worked to teach the Hidatsa, Mandan, and Arikara the virtues of Christianity, private property, and patriarchal nuclear families. They forced the breakup of Like-a-Fishhook village and the dispersal of Indigenous families onto individual allotments owned, ideally, by male heads of households. The most fundamental change wrought in Hidatsa agriculture concerned land ownership. "It was the woman who always owned the garden," Maxi'diwiac told Wilson. "The man had no ownership in the garden whatever. If he put his wife away, the garden still belonged to her and the ownership went with her. If a woman died, her garden might go to her daughter or to some woman in the same family."<sup>16</sup>

When Maxi'widiac was 33 years old, government agents plowed two large fields on the plains adjoining Like-a-Fishhook Village and the Fort Berthold Indian agency. There they began to introduce the Hidatsa to new crops and new modes of cultivation. As missionaries and government personnel taught Hidatsa men to farm, Maxi'diwiac told Wilson: "White men knew nothing about our gardens. We knew all this I tell you, since the world began."<sup>17</sup> Her assessments of the new practices were measured and complex. She valued, and used, some tools, like iron hoes, but disliked iron kettles, and felt that the new fields were inferior to the old ones in the river bottoms. Whites, she



said, brought seeds for new crops like oats, wheat, watermelons, and onions, some of which she considered inferior, particularly turnips and big squashes. They also brought weeds, like thistle and mustard.<sup>18</sup>



Figure 1: Buffalo Bird Woman “Waheenee” in her garden on the Fort Berthold Reservation in the early 1900s. Photo courtesy of the North Dakota State Historical Society.

Government policies moved Maxi’diwiac from an earth lodge in a village, where she was surrounded by other women and kin, to an isolated square house on her son’s allotment. Her son learned English, converted to Christianity, became a minister, married only one woman, raised cattle, and entered a history that charted progress in human development “from savagery to civilization.”<sup>19</sup> Maxi’diwiac became increasingly separated from other women, her story increasingly marginalized in national histories. Even her expert farmer’s account of women’s agriculture was reinterpreted as “Agriculture of the Hidatsa Indians” (rather than Hidatsa women) and then through the more domesticated imagery of gardening, rather than farming.

Nonetheless, Maxi’diwiac and women like her continued to practice their own ways of agriculture to feed their families and to trade with neighbouring Indigenous peoples and newcomers. Wilson observed that “Examination of gardens on the reservations seems to corroborate Buffalo Woman’s [sic] arrangements of the planted crops, that is of beans being planted between the rows of corn and the division of the garden by intersecting rows of beans or squash. The garden of Leader (Lance Owner’s widow) and Butterfly’s wife have such an arrangement in part.”<sup>20</sup>



Certainly, Maxi'diwiac preferred the practices she learned from her mothers and grandmothers. "I think our old way of raising corn is better than the new way," she told Wilson in 1912. "Last year we had an agriculture fair on the reservation and the corn which I sent down to the fair took first prize. I raised this corn on new ground. This ground was plowed, but aside from that was cultivated with a hoe, exactly as in old times."<sup>21</sup> She adhered to Hidatsa values that had governed crop ownership. She told Wilson that in 1911 "a white man hired me to gather his corn in his field and husk it. I kept all the green ears for myself for that is my custom. I do not know whether the white man liked this or not or whether he thought this was stealing. I just followed my custom that I learned from my tribe. If he hired an Indian he must expect us to follow indian [sic] custom."<sup>22</sup>

Government policies and personnel strove to establish patriarchal families and make farming the province of men. Carter explains that this process of alienating Indigenous women from agriculture began with the earliest observers, who "wrestled with the fact that Plains women worked the land, owned their fields and their crops, and traded their surplus produce," and so reduced these practices to "gardening," a feminized activity, and therefore less important than "farming" (36–7). Maxi'diwiac and countless Indigenous women resisted outsiders by maintaining their own agricultural practices and the values that supported them. Their horticulture and the women themselves were marginalized or erased from national histories. As Brenda Child observed, "Indigenous agricultural practices were denigrated because women were the main farmers . . . which upset European and American sensibilities of the proper sexual division of labor."<sup>23</sup> Sarah Carter has helped recover Maxi'diwiac and other Indigenous women from the margins of history, illuminating the costs of national land policies that required the segregation of Indigenous peoples on reservations and reserves, and the "civilized" gender relationships that denied women's agriculture and women's power.

### The Persistence of Indigenous Farming Traditions: Kukoom Nancy Arcand and her Gardens in the Park Valley Homestead and Erin Ferry Road Allowance

A valued aspect of Carter's *Imperial Plots* is her continued attention to Indigenous peoples throughout the story. We learn how they became dispossessed and demoralized and we see how they were shut out of

the homestead system and commercial agriculture. Carter teaches us that settler women were complicit in the enterprise of dispossessing Indigenous peoples. They too coveted Indigenous land and resources and were land takers. Migrant women, including those who were British, were homesteaders, speculators, squatters, and purchasers of land, including land fraudulently surrendered on First Nations reserves, and they profited and benefited from the core mission of the colonial project that rested on a foundation of dispossession (17. See also 52, 208–9, 255). Here, we emphasize not change but continuity. In the face of colonialism, many Indigenous women, like Maxi'diwiac, continued to farm, preserving their traditions and food sovereignty.

One of these women was Nancy Arcand, a Métis descended from Nēhiyawak or Cree and French fur traders, whose family can be traced to the Red River Métis from the early 1800s. Branches of her family — Arcand, Montour, Page — left the Red River valley in the late 1860s and early 1870s following the transfer of Rupert's Land from the British Crown to the Dominion of Canada and settler hostilities there.<sup>24</sup> They came to settle in the parkland belt of Saskatchewan, the plains of Montana, and the foothills of Alberta. Nancy is the maternal grandmother of co-author Jesse Thistle.

Nancy Arcand was born in 1907 in the small Métis village of St. Louis, Saskatchewan to Cecile Montour and St. Pierre Arcand.<sup>25</sup> Nancy's mother Cecile died of tuberculosis in 1915, a disease common among dispossessed Métis following the hardships of post-1885-Northwest-Resistance Saskatchewan.<sup>26</sup> Nancy grew up farming in the road allowance community of Mattes, in the northern parkland belt of Saskatchewan, after her paternal family took scrip and left the St-Laurent-de-Grandin and Duck Lake regions in the early 1900s.<sup>27</sup> Road allowances were the space left on either side of roads and railways to facilitate repair and maintenance. Since this was Crown land, Métis people could easily settle here and they formed ribbon-like communities on the edges of roads and railways.<sup>28</sup> Nancy's family had about a half-acre of land after they relocated.<sup>29</sup>

Nancy married Jeremie Morrisette, a Métis who was born a registered band member of the Muskeg Lake Cree First Nation.<sup>30</sup> His family were the "half-breeds" signed into Treaty Six in 1876 by Chief Mistawasis, who was Jeremie's great grandfather.<sup>31</sup> In 1915 Jeremie left the reserve on the Pass System and never returned; his mother and father, Marianne Ledoux (Cree) and Geordie Morrisette (Métis), had already left reserve life, moving to the road allowance community

of Victoire, Saskatchewan down the road from Mattes, where Nancy and her family lived.<sup>32</sup> Marianne lost her Indian status after marrying Geordie due to the restrictive marriage clauses of the Indian Act that stripped First Nations women of status who married non-status men.<sup>33</sup> Marianne also fought in the 1885 Resistance against the primarily British-descended Canadians and was labelled a subversive, which may have contributed to her losing status.<sup>34</sup> Jeremie's mother Marianne contracted Nancy as domestic help in the mid-1920s; while performing her duties at her employer's home, Nancy met Jeremie. The couple married in Jeremie's maternal territory on 23 July 1928 in Aldina (Muskeg Lake 103 reserve), the home of Marianne's First Nations family.<sup>35</sup> The couple had eleven children. The first two died as infants, common at the time due to poverty and malnutrition.<sup>36</sup>

In early spring 1938, Nancy and Jeremie acquired a quarter section homestead, 160 acres, in Park Valley, at the northwest corner of Trippe Lake, and had the best years of their lives.<sup>37</sup> Carter found a few instances of Métis women homesteaders as well (159, 170–1). It is unclear how the couple secured their homestead, but it is reasonable to assume that Jeremie gave up his treaty status so he could own land as an enfranchised citizen, because "Indians" could not own property in Canada at the time.

The plot Jeremie and Nancy settled was not desirable. Local Debden historians described it as "a rather discouraging sight .... Trees, swamps and lakes everywhere with very little high land."<sup>38</sup> The Morrisette plot was not good for large-scale commercial farming or for personal subsistence, because the soil was acidic muskeg. The first year in Park Valley, Jeremie and local Métis men cleared the Morrisette acreage with horse, axe, and logging chain before they built a permanent shelter.<sup>39</sup> Bernadette Morrisette, the oldest surviving child of Jeremie and Nancy, recalled the hardship of the settlement phase at Park Valley: "[That] winter we lived in a tent all winter. Gosh ... I was about four or five years old. [I]t was a tent that mother made herself. She sewed the whole thing by hand. And when it was too cold, my Grandfather used to live about ten miles from here and he used to come and pick us up to take care of us."<sup>40</sup> Despite the cold, and the poor drainage prone to flooding and moisture, Nancy made the best of the land in spring 1940, planting a 200-foot-by-200-foot garden after Jeremie stumped the rest of the trees, plowed and furrowed the soil by horse, and her two children — Alcide and Bernadette — cleared rocks to make the soil ready for planting.<sup>41</sup> Nancy seeded the

garden herself and, according to descendants, she secured the seed by selling beaded crafts, moccasins, jackets, leggings, and other goods she produced over the winter from the skins of small game Jeremie trapped for meat. She also saved the winter ash every year and combined it with household waste for fertilizer.<sup>42</sup> A 2014 conversation with Nancy's daughters Yvonne, Blanche, and Bernadette recalled their mother's farming expertise:

Blanche: Do you remember Mom putting La Choix (in Michif). What was that La Choix? Des la Sand oux des la Choix. She would put it.

Bernadette: Yeah because on top of the cabinet the worms would eat it [biological waste].

Blanche: Ashes?

Bernadette: Ashes.

Jesse: What is it?

Blanche: They called it Le Shoo, it was a white stuff that they'd put all over on the garden and I was wondering was that ashes? What was it?

Yvonne: It was ashes.

Bernadette: What else could it be? They'd save the ashes all winter long from the stove and they'd put it in the barrel during the summer she'd use that.

Nancy was likely balancing the pH of the acidic muskeg by adding ashes every year, which was probably a practice she learned from her parents and grandparents.<sup>43</sup> Nancy's knowledge of farming, according to her children, came from her hard childhood where she was forced to be the primary family gardener at age 7 after the passing of her mother, and because her father was a well-known farmer and horse rancher who taught his skills to his children.<sup>44</sup> The Arcand family belonged to a long heritage of semi-agricultural bison hunters based at Red River dating back to the late 1700s — Nancy likely drew from this centuries-long agricultural tradition.<sup>45</sup> Arcand farming skills were likely passed down from the family's agricultural traditions in New France, and from Red River Métis trade connections to the southern agricultural Mandan and Hidatsa people in the 1700s. Many Métis farmed in the Red River valley to supplement their nourishment from bison hunting and trading of bison products. Their agricultural practices represented a blend of French and Indigenous methods.<sup>46</sup> Carter describes in detail many Qu'Appelle Métis from at least the

1860s engaged in “agriculture on an extensive and sophisticated scale” (56). Whatever the source, Nancy’s first year’s harvest at Park Valley included an abundance of “carrots, beets, potatoes mostly, and cucumbers ... onions ... and cabbage and turnips as big as your head.”<sup>47</sup>

Nancy was adept at dividing labour to maximize her one-acre plot in Park Valley.<sup>48</sup> After the winter frosts forced rocks to the surface, Nancy enlisted her children to pick the fields using a stoneboat sled designed to drag loads of rocks off small acreages. “We had our own farm in Park Valley,” recalls Yvonne, “and we had quite a big field and I remember we had to work out there on those stoneboats.”<sup>49</sup> It is uncertain whether Nancy or Jeremie constructed the sled; both had the carpentry skills to do so. Older girls had the job of tending to Nancy’s infants while the matriarch was out seeding, hoeing, weeding, and harvesting the field in the growing months of mid-April to early November. When Nancy and her children could not manage the workload, she asked neighboring Métis women to help in exchange for crops and vegetables.<sup>50</sup> The gendered barter exchange, the management of family labour, and the ownership of crops after harvests were common domains of Métis women in mid-century road allowance life, and it allowed for a rich diet supplemented by meat hunted by men.<sup>51</sup>

In a 2014 interview, Nancy’s daughter Josephine admired her mother’s work ethic and detailed how she dug the family cold storage singlehandedly. “My Mom would go and plant her potatoes,” she notes, “and I’m not kidding you, ... she dug a hole about half the size of this room (12 feet long x 15 feet wide x 10 feet deep — the room is twice this size) [for] storage [and] we fill[ed] it up with potatoes.” Josephine also stated that Nancy continued to breast-feed infants in between rounds of digging. “[P]oor Mom, I took [baby] Fefe and threw her at Mom in the [storage pit]. Mom just took her breast out and fed her [while] she was still talking to Beatrice!” Nancy’s multitasking skills were impressive, and according to another daughter, Blanche, she would go on to build an even larger storage cellar under the family home in the early 1950s that was “full of carrots and onions and potatoes and all that, but I was wondering what [she] did with all those potatoes because those fields were so big?”<sup>52</sup> Métis Ray Campbell, nephew and neighbor of Nancy, recalled the huge cellar Nancy built under the Morrisette household and how it was filled with row after row of potatoes, turnips, onions, cabbage, peas — “400 or 500 quarts of each staple.”<sup>53</sup> The surplus Nancy saved helped kin and neighbours in times of crisis. Josephine described how the Mor-

rissettes helped other Métis with produce through winter shortages: “You know what! When people came around in the winter they never said no ... people would come to us. We would give our food away. You can’t say no, there was a lot of hungry people all Michifs.”<sup>54</sup> Ray, too, remembered when Nancy fed his family during a crisis in the mid-1950s, and how the Morrissettes were known for their extensive Park Valley garden and for being generous.<sup>55</sup>

Nancy was also proficient in animal husbandry. Yvonne recalled that her mother kept “one cow, we had a few horses, a few pigs, a few chickens,” and goats.<sup>56</sup> The milk Nancy’s cow generated was not used for household consumption, noted Bernadette, but was sold to the local cheese factory about five miles away. Money from the cheese factory was then used to buy flour, sugar, and tea. The job of milking and purchasing provisions was held exclusively by Nancy. Perhaps she wanted to keep a close eye on her livestock and so she knew exactly how much income her sow was producing and she could control how much was spent.<sup>57</sup> Animal castrations, small surgeries, and birthing were performed by Jeremie or other local men, Métis and white, as was the breed pairing and selling of livestock, especially horses. Métis men and boys had almost exclusive enterprise on the equine and cattle trades of ranching and driving.<sup>58</sup> Women like Nancy, however, did build fencing enclosures with their husbands around gardens to keep livestock out of family plots. Blanche and Leo Morrissette, Nancy’s son, remembered their mother encasing their garden in yards of willow pickets and posts cut by the Morrissette men. It is unclear if daughters helped build garden fencing.<sup>59</sup>

The Métis were no strangers to losing their land. In describing the scrip system, Sarah Carter explains that Métis were divested of their scrip lands through fraudulent means, including forgery, impersonation, and land speculation in addition to land that was “surrendered” to governments through treaties and other legal agreements (56, 208–10). In the late 1950s, Nancy and Jeremie lost their Park Valley homestead. In the process of creating communal pastures for prairie settler farmers, officials from the Co-operative Common Federation (CCF), the ruling provincial party, repossessed the land of many Métis families for unpaid taxes, even though the Métis had no idea they were supposed to be paying them.<sup>60</sup> In a 2014 interview, Leo stated that in the 1950s, the family patriarch was charged with \$300 in back taxes that had accumulated since the late 1930s.<sup>61</sup> Written notices had been delivered to the homestead, according to descendants, but many older



Metis in Park Valley could not read (provincial and federal governments squabbled over the responsibility for Métis education dating back to 1905). Most Métis were never orally informed about tax fees on their homesteads.<sup>62</sup> Initially, Bernadette remembered, the CCF officials offered Jeremie the task of cutting roadside brush to pay off the large debt but his wife, Nancy, could not handle the devastating news and had a nervous breakdown. With no government support, the Morrissettes and other Métis families were pushed from their homesteads in the late 1950s and made to relocate, again, onto nearby road allowances.<sup>63</sup> Jeremie's sister, Alexina Arcand née Morrissette, helped the family move beside her road allowance in Erin Ferry, five miles northwest of Debden between old Highway 55 and the CNR railway. Yvonne recalled that the new highway between Debden and Big River, Saskatchewan was still under construction and that it was not paved "until much later." The quick displacement of the Morrissettes was enforced by RCMP in the "middle of winter," according to Yvonne, and "Pop put up the tent and built the house and we spent the winter in there and it was fine." Jeremie's winter hunting (of mainly rabbits) and the vegetables Nancy had stored in Park Valley were used to feed the family as well as seed her spring garden.<sup>64</sup>



Figure 2: Jeremie Morrissette and Nancy Arcand, c. 1960, photo courtesy of Jesse Thistle.



Erin Ferry road allowance life was marked by extreme poverty and land insecurity well into the 1980s, but Nancy's agricultural skills ensured a safe transition.<sup>65</sup> Leo was just a young boy when he helped his mother, along with Blanche and Yvonne, prepare the new, bigger garden in early March. He explained:

Leo: [the garden was] at least an acre. An acre a half maybe more sometimes. It had potatoes and other veggies, we even grew corn the odd time, corn grew up. Turnips, cabbages, lots of potatoes usually a few onions. I don't know why they ever grew that many onions.

Jesse: And whose work would that have been labour wise?

Leo: Mom did a lot of the work, the old man would go and till it with horse and plough with disc and harrows while mom was planting and seeding and hoeing and weeding and doing a lot of that kind of stuff.<sup>66</sup>

The transition back into road allowance life also marked a return to long distance mobility that came to dominate Morrissette life in the 1960s, more so than when the family owned property in Park Valley.<sup>67</sup> During this time Nancy's ancient agricultural practices show most, as she often joined Jeremie on the trapline for months at a time during the growing season, leaving her young daughters to tend to the garden and household, just as her ancestors would have done on the bi-annual bison hunts in Red River prior to 1869.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, seasonal mobility and road allowance "squatting" returned a measure of freedom to the family without regular government or RCMP interference.<sup>69</sup> Freedom, mobility, and independence were hallmarks of Métis life prior to Canadian interference after 1870.<sup>70</sup> Yvonne recalled the resurgence of "Metis mentality [on the road allowance] that the land is everybody's and wherever you are, you are .... We could go wherever we wanted!"<sup>71</sup> Bernadette also noted that Jeremie and Nancy believed that their road allowance "belonged to the Queen and she doesn't mind us being here," a thought that comforted the family "living in the royal land" through poverty and hardship between 1960 to 1990.<sup>72</sup> Afforded in large part through Nancy's gardening and animal husbandry skills, we see a continuity of Métis lifeways, interrupted only by brief period of homesteading and property ownership. The same pattern can be found among many Métis families, who occasionally owned a homestead between 1910 to 1960. The opposite is often believed — that the loss of the homestead properties for some Métis

was damaging to their cultural matrixes — but it may be that relocation back into road allowances represented a reassertion of sovereignty and independence where traditional hunting and agricultural skills were preserved and nurtured.

Like the women that Carter describes in *Imperial Plots*, throughout her life, Nancy was always thought of as the farmer in the family. Her husband helped with the farming duties when needed, but he was primarily a hunter, and when not hunting, he focused on building and repairing their homes, barns, and sheds. Nancy was also an excellent hunter, but the farm was her domain. She made clothing and beading that she sold to tourists in the summer months, and on the Erin Ferry road allowance this became most of the family's income. Nancy died in 1986 at a retirement home in Prince Albert. Nancy Arcand was a lot like Maxi'diwiac, maintaining her traditional practice of farming in the face of government dispossession of land, and the hardship and poverty that resulted. Agricultural knowledge from her ancestors persisted to her generation, and ironically it was in not owning land that Nancy and her family were best able to maintain their sovereignty.

### Negotiating Identity as a Farm Wife: The Case of Ukrainian-Canadian Frances Zatylny

Most of Carolyn's ancestors came to western Canada in the first decade of the twentieth century from Ukraine, but she is the first generation of her family not to grow up speaking Ukrainian. Her parents deliberately wanted her to be a modern North American. Her grandmother, too, wanted to blend into the English Canada being constructed by the British-descended élites. Carter describes the discrimination faced by "alien races" of immigrants on the Prairies when promoters of homesteads for British women "manipulated ideas about racial and ethnic 'others' in an effort to win elite support" (288).<sup>73</sup> The story of Frances Zatylny shows that some women on the margins did not challenge the narrow roles for women in farming.

Podruchny's immediate ancestors were the foreigners on the Prairies discussed by Carter, both unmaking and making the Prairies as a model of Britishness.<sup>74</sup> Her ancestors mostly came from Galicia, the region bordering northwestern Ukraine and southeastern Poland, and they moved to the Canadian Prairies at the turn of the twentieth century, transplanting their farming lifestyle to block settlements. In the late nineteenth century, Joseph Oleskiw, Professor of agriculture

at the Teachers' Seminary in Lviv, Ukraine, made an arrangement with Canada's Minister of the Interior for the mass migration of Ukrainian peasants to the prairies, allowing these immigrants to settle together contiguously (permitted by section 37 of the Dominion Lands Act), making it easier to support one another and maintain their language and cultural practices.<sup>75</sup> Between 1891 and 1914, 170,000 rural poor from Galicia and Bukovina, primarily Ukrainians and Poles, migrated to the Canadian prairies to take up farming.<sup>76</sup> These immigrants were attracted to the parkland belt, the transitional zone from the northern border of the prairies and the southern border of the boreal forest along the Canadian Shield. Despite the challenges of the unbroken land and uncleared bush, John C. Lehr explains that the plentiful wood and water of the parkland resembled their homelands in the steppes of the Carpathian Mountains, and Ukrainians were able to establish their accustomed close-knit village life.<sup>77</sup>

Frances Zatylny, nee Chupka, was born in 1914 as the eldest of five children. Her parents had come from Galicia (we think on the Poland side although the family spoke Ukrainian<sup>78</sup>) to Manitoba in 1913 to farm as part of Clifford Sifton's special program to fill up the Prairies with stalwart peasants in sheep-skin coats.<sup>79</sup> Accustomed to harsh weather and hard work, their labours and their block settlements led to robust, cohesive Ukrainian communities on the Prairies. These immigrants transplanted their language, institutions, and social practices, which included specific gendered ideas of men being in charge of the family farm and women supporting them. Ukrainians' ideas of patriarchy, matrimony, and monogamy matched those values of the British élite, which no doubt contributed to the construction of a specific gendered social order in which women were subordinate farm helpers rather than farmers and farm owners.<sup>80</sup> Like the British women whom Carter describes in *Imperial Plots*, Ukrainian peasants tried their best to answer "the call of empire," focussing their efforts on conforming to gendered (rather than racial) ideals.<sup>81</sup>

The Chupkas first settled outside Brandon, Manitoba, the journey cut short by the birth of Frances. Later, in 1921, they purchased a farm from George Smith, south of Riding Mountain National Park, close to Minnedosa, Manitoba.<sup>82</sup> In 1932, Frances married Michael Podruchny, who was a recent immigrant from Poland, following his neighbours and brothers to Manitoba. After the Great War, the Treaty of Riga divided most of Ukraine between Poland and Russia, with some parts going to Romania and Czechoslovakia. Emigration to

Canada, halted by the Great War, resumed in 1924 and the bulk of Ukrainian immigrants to Canada in this period came between 1927 and 1929.<sup>83</sup> Carolyn's family thinks Michael came in 1930. He found his brother John through newspaper advertisements, and soon after married the sister of John's wife, Kathleen (known as Kay). Two sisters marrying two brothers meant a tight alliance between families.

To start their lives together, Frances and Michael purchased a quarter section from George Albert Horner near the village of Ozerna (just south of Riding Mountain) and started to farm close to her parents.<sup>84</sup> Frances had five children, the first two dying as infants. The deceased were named Mary and John and the three surviving children were Thomas, Stanley, and Allan. Their names reflect Frances's and Michael's desire to integrate into a North American Anglo-society despite the draw of their Ukrainian-Canadian community. Frances was actually born Franka (and Kathleen born Ketlin) and changed her name, while Michael (Mikhailo) adopted his English name on migration (his brother John's original name was Ivan). Everybody in the family remembers the name of the man from whom they bought their farm, while forgetting the precise year Michael arrived in Canada.

Their quarter section was untouched and so they spent their early years breaking ground and very slowly expanded their farm to its limit: 100 arable acres. The surviving three boys helped on the farm as soon as they were able. Carolyn's father, Thomas, was the oldest, and remembers starting to work in the fields as early as 5 years old. The family kept a photograph of him as a toddler sitting in his father's lap on the seeder. (See p. 26.)

To this day Carolyn's father shudders when he remembers pulling out tree stumps and picking rocks to clear the fields for crops. Like the Morrisettes, his family used stone boats to haul rocks to the edges of fields.

To survive, the whole family needed to work together, and to diversify their farm. They had pigs, chickens, and eventually owned about a dozen cows. They started living in a sod house and Michael eventually built a wooden two-story house, which is still standing. Frances cooked, cleaned, milked the cows, separated milk from cream, fed the animals, and managed a large one-acre garden, and canned and pickled every fall. She helped in the field with stooking during the harvest. Michael's brothers helped one another on their farms, located close to one another, and they employed day labourers to help during harvest.



Figure 3: Michael Podruchny and son Thomas on seeder, 1939, photo courtesy of Carolyn Podruchny.

Their world was turned upside down in the spring of 1957 when Carolyn's grandfather was diagnosed with leukemia and died by September. Carolyn's father had already left the farm and just started his teaching career. Frances stayed on the farm for just one year with her two youngest sons before moving to Neepawa, Manitoba, to become a cook. The middle son, Stanley, 17 years old when his father died, took over the management of the farm. Stan wanted to stay on the farm and knew it had to expand to remain profitable. He asked his mother to purchase a nearby farm being sold by a neighbour, but she refused, so Stan abandoned the idea of remaining a farmer and instead went to apprentice as a mechanic while working the farm in the evenings and on weekends. Frances settled into small-town life and eventually sold her farm in 1967.



Figure 4: L to R; Frances Podruchny (later Zatylny), Stanley Podruchny, Allan Podruchny, Thomas Podruchny, c. 1945, in front of their new house, photo courtesy of Carolyn Podruchny.

The next year, 1968, at the age of 54, she met and married Steven Zatylny, who had a section (four quarter sections) near Basswood, Manitoba, and Frances returned to farm life. She wholeheartedly embraced the return, resuming her old life of household management, looking after livestock and a huge garden, and helping her husband turn the farm into a lucrative one. Steve, also recently widowed, had two boys (Clarence and Theodore) and a young daughter of four years named Betty. Although Frances was eager to return to a life as a farmer's wife, she was not keen to become a mother again, and only grudgingly kept Betty with the new family on the farm, putting her to work immediately. Clarence was already out on his own, and Theodore, who was still in high school, left because of conflict with Frances.



As Carolyn started speaking with family members about the time when Michael Podruchny died, she was initially concerned with who worked their fields. But she kept hearing stories of her grandmother's work in the garden, the laundry, the cooking, cleaning, and tending livestock. It seemed to her, from her twenty-first-century feminist perspective, that Ukrainian farmers' wives were farmers too. Yet they likely did not think of themselves as such. Frances's sons believe that she embraced her role as a farmer's wife, and did not consider herself a farmer, which explained why she did not stay on her first farm and work with her son Stan to expand it.<sup>85</sup>

These conversations bring to mind the classic feminist oral historian Katherine Borland, whose recounting of one of her grandmother's stories led to a major fight about memory and authority in constructing history, which she describes in the 1991 article "That's not what I said." Borland lays out the problem:

For feminists, the issue of interpretive authority is particularly problematic, for our work often involves a contradiction. On the one hand, we seek to empower the women we work with by revaluing their perspectives, their lives, and their art in a work that has systematically ignored or trivialized women's culture. On the other hand, we hold an explicitly political vision that our field collaborators, many of whom do not consider themselves feminists, may not recognize as valid.<sup>86</sup>

What do we do when our subjects disagree with us? When Carolyn labels her grandmother a farmer, she can hear her from beyond the grave scolding: "That's not what I would have said." And she can hear Frances's sons and their wives agreeing. Like Maxi'diwiac and Nancy Arcand, and the vast majority of the women Sarah Carter discusses in *Imperial Plots*, Carolyn's grandmother is deceased, so she has no control over the narrative we present here. Archival records, save for a sole (dubious) census entry, are non-existent. Frances's sons have diverging memories of their mother's life, and Carolyn has knitted together her best approximation of events. To add a layer of complexity, she is torn between her own views on how she would like to remember her grandmother, her relatives' memories and images of Frances, and her academic view of the early expressions of women's independence.

Family lore teaches Carolyn that Frances did not want to be a farmer, she wanted to be a farmer's wife. She would not work with



her son on their original farm, but eagerly embraced being a farmer's wife once more when she met her new husband. We suspect that social values and economic strategies shaped these decisions. It would be a hard path for a widow to farm with her son. Would people buy grain from a female-run farm? Would Frances and her son Stan be able to continue in regional work bees, seed clubs, and threshing gangs? Who would hire and manage the farm hands? She may have been uncomfortable with the realities of land ownership. She could not read or write, having dropped out of school at the age of 9 to help her parents on their farm. Frances grew up as an outsider to mainstream Canadian life, speaking Ukrainian, wearing Ukrainian clothing, and cooking Ukrainian food. Although she fit into the Ukrainian community of western Manitoba, she wanted to be mainstream and become affluent. Although she spoke Ukrainian with her children, she gave her children English names and only spoke English to her grandchildren. The proponents of women as farmers in Carter's *Imperial Plots* used fear of racialized immigrants, especially from Eastern Europe to exclude and marginalize women like Frances. As Frances became more prosperous with her second husband, she modernized her house and her wardrobe to avoid this discrimination. Steve and Frances sold their farm in 1985 and retired to Minnedosa where they bought a modern bungalow.

Twenty-five years after publishing "That's not what I said," Boreland reflects that everyone's identities, researchers and subjects alike, are constantly forming and shifting. She observes: "Researchers who gather life stories alternately describe the method as a means for narrators to fashion a coherent self out of disparate experiences, a reflexive opportunity for them to re-examine the past to fashion a more mature and agentive self-concept, or as presenting an inherent challenge to a subject's self-composure when the researcher's goals structure the line of questioning."<sup>87</sup> The focus is on the researcher learning as she goes. Dissonance is important to preserve the narrator's distinctive perspectives. Thus, narrators can hold conflicting attitudes toward the lives and worlds they describe and see elements not recognized by the subjects living through the times. Maybe Carolyn can call her grandmother a feminist after all?

Frances died in 2001, surrounded by her family, cooking and cleaning and providing for her children until the end of her life. She no doubt believed she had few options in the 1950s when her husband died. The policies Carter outlined in *Imperial Plots* shaped Frances's choices, which shaped the lives of her children and grandchildren.

## Conclusion

How did these three women, the Hidatsa farmer Maxi'diwiac, the Métis farmer Nancy Arcand, and the Ukrainian farmer's wife Frances Zatylny, suffer from colonialism? How does Sarah Carter's book *Imperial Plots* help us understand their lives and choices? Maxi'diwiac suffered from dispossession through the Dawes Act or General Allotment Act of 1887, when she was displaced from her farming village on the Missouri River to the Fort Berthold Reservation. She continued farming in her lifetime, no matter where she lived, but her children's children lost their connection to corn and stopped farming. Nancy Arcand continued Maxi'diwiac's legacy through farming and feeding her family. But she focussed on crops that did best in her environment, and she was restricted to small plots on road allowances. She was able to thrive on a quarter section but suffered a devastating loss when forced to move from her farm in Park Valley back to a road allowance. Her life was bracketed by extreme poverty at its beginning and end, and yet it was in this poverty on the road allowance that she was most able to preserve her cultural sovereignty. Frances Zatylny was born into a space that was defined by British values and she strove to adapt to this cultural space, using the tools from her Ukrainian background, especially patriarchal models of household governance and a gendered division of labour. She embraced the role of farmer's wife, which continued the values of the Ukrainian immigrants who came to the prairies, and conveniently fit the social roles promoted by the British élite.

Racialized and gendered cultural spaces on the prairies were complex indeed, but the force of colonization and its narrowing of roles for women powerfully shaped these spaces. Sarah Carter's book *Imperial Plots* uncovers the mechanism of colonialism on the prairies and helps us understand how cultural, social, economic, and political forces shaped the structures in which these women could operate. What we learn from the three women discussed in this essay is that we have more than a story of the decline of women's power. We have stories of persistence of women in farming. Despite Maxi'diwiac's dispossession, the loss of Nancy Arcand's quarter section, and the death of Frances's Zatylny's first husband, all three women on the margins of North American society kept farming through these hardships. And yet all of these women had trouble claiming land ownership. The policies Carter outlines in *Imperial Plots* explains how government policies

shaped social mores and laws that kept women subordinate, even as their families recognized their strength and skills.

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