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Article abstract

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“Bachelor Girl Farmers” and the Queer Challenges to Western Heteronormativity

V.J. KORINEK

Abstract

Korinek’s article assesses the contribution of Imperial Plots to the writing of queer western histories, particularly women’s histories. The “single” English women who strike out for the west, individually and in pairs, challenge our preconceived notions of the presumed heterosexuality of all prairie settlers. Furthermore, Korinek argues that Carter’s research insights in this award-winning volume deserve to have a wide audience beyond the fields of gender histories, ideally integrated into scholarly and popular histories of the Canadian prairies and Canadian social histories.

Résumé

L’article de Korinek évalue la contribution d’Imperial Plots à l’écriture de l’histoire des gais dans l’Ouest, en particulier de l’histoire des femmes. Les Anglaises « célibataires » qui partaient pour l’Ouest, seules ou à deux, remettent en question nos idées préconçues voulant que tous les colons eussent été hétérosexuels. En outre, Korinek soutient que les résultats de la recherche de Carter, dans son ouvrage primé, méritent d’avoir une audience plus large que celle du champ de l’histoire du genre, et que, dans l’idéal, ce livre devrait être intégré à l’histoire, vulgarisée autant que scientifique, de la Prairie et de l’histoire sociale canadienne.

Re-reading Sarah Carter’s brilliant *Imperial Plots* for this CHA roundtable, I was reminded of how much I wished this book had existed in 1996, when I moved to Saskatoon to accept a position as a Canadian historian at the University of Saskatchewan. Part of my teaching assignment that year consisted of two 300-level seminars: Prairie Settlement in term 1 and Prairie Protest in term 2. As a modern Canadian historian, specializing in popular culture, gender, and post-WW II histories, those Prairie seminars were well outside my area of expertise. Born and educated in Toronto, with deep roots in the Niagara region where my maternal grandparents lived, the Prairies was an entirely foreign place — but job-in-hand, I looked forward to what I imagined as a two-year prairie sojourn.

That first year of teaching was a trial by fire. My comprehensive fields had not prepared me for the possibility of teaching Canadian history from a Prairies perspective. Fortunately, I was told that teaching Prairie settlement would be a one-time assignment, and so the permanent instructor gifted me his outline and readings, and archly told me to hang on for the ride. This class occasioned a frantic, and, at times, hilarious attempt to learn western history at warp speed. When I wasn't reading the books and articles for classes, I was touring museums, fascinated by the region's histories — settler and Indigenous — and by the histories my students shared, sometimes apocryphally, in the seminar. The slimmest week of readings was devoted to Prairie women, and this proved to be my introduction to the experiences of settler women in the West. Two books stood out, Susan Jackel's 1982 *A Flannel Shirt and Liberty* and Georgina Binnie-Clark's 1914 *Wheat and Women*, which the University of Toronto Press had re-released in 1979.⁸⁸ Regretfully, I taught the class a year too soon. Carter's *Capturing Women* appeared the next year, although I did discover and read *Lost Harvests*, beginning my career of shadowing Sarah and avidly consuming her publications.⁸⁹

Wheat and Women, while interesting, led to the far more curious book by Binnie-Clark, her 1910 publication *A Summer on a Canadian Prairie*.⁹⁰ I was captivated by Binnie-Clark's humour, her resolve to succeed as an independent single woman farmer, and by her love for the West. Above all, I was fascinated by her unconventionality, her clear disdain for the notion of heterosexual marriage and what to my eye was a person Martha Vicinus might claim as "lesbian-like" for her views on marriage, her clothing choices, and her constant invocation of the goal of "independence."⁹¹ While Binnie-Clark's imperialist views make her a complicated character, as were many English settlers who came to the Prairies, it was her sexual unconventionality that sparked my interest — and got me thinking critically about the possibilities of reinvention in western Canada.

How wonderful, then, to pick up *Imperial Plots*, a year ago, while on sabbatical, and to become reacquainted with Binnie-Clark and others, and with Carter's deft analysis of her life, her contemporaries, and Binnie-Clark's advocacy for homesteads for women. Here, finally, was the book I wanted to read in my first autumn of Prairie settlement. In fact, having devoured *Imperial Plots* over the course of two days, I actually wrote Sarah a fan-email — a first for me — because I was so impressed by her engaging scholarship and the histories finally being

told. So, it was serendipitous when I was invited to join this roundtable to critically evaluate and enlarge the discussion about the histories of sexuality, gender, and resistance portrayed in this prize-winning monograph.

Imperial Plots historicizes women like Binnie-Clark, and others such as “Jack” May, originally named Isabel, the “bachelor girl farmer” from England. May’s decision to wear “male attire” and to purchase a ready built farm in Sedgewick, Alberta, in 1911–1912, adjacent to the farm purchased by her female partner Louisa Wittrick, caused a press sensation around the world. Or Lady Ernestine Hunt, an Alberta Horse Rancher, described in press reports as a “modern feminine Don Quixote” (219). Or Marion Cran, a South African by birth, who became a popular English writer and emigration promotor. In her 1908 book *A Woman in Canada*, Cran encouraged Englishwomen to recognize the “opportunity” available in Canada, writing:

let them come out in twos and threes, unless any single woman has sufficient capital, and (just as important) courage for a lonely life; let them settle within marketable driving distance of cities as Saskatoon, Regina, Edmonton and Calgary and they will find awaiting them every facility for a life of independence and certain ultimate success in the grandest climate in the world. The brilliant bracing air, the bustle of industry, and of hope which pervade the prairies are beyond my powers to describe (135).

Such sentiments may have been popular fodder for emigration literature aimed at the so-called “surplus women.” It is also likely that they served as items of interest in newspapers, driving circulation with their voyeuristic, travelogue fascination with these eccentric, unconventional souls who opted for life in the bracing air of the prairies. Once in the West, the women rankled at the discrimination they found there — from the government, some of their fellow settlers, and from society none of whom really wanted to embrace their version of independence. Eventually, the most they could hope for was to be left alone.

Imperial Plots incisively critiques the Canadian government’s restriction of homestead lands nearly exclusively to male farmers and of the myriad ways that legislation, practice, and community values enforced the importance of heterosexual settler families. Settler women had to know their place was in the home and the garden. Their role was

to play Western Eve to Agrarian Adam, producing endless children, handling the domestic drudgery, and serving as helpmates to their farmer husbands. Prairie cemeteries are filled with the graves of many of these young women, who often died young, either in childbirth, or from the cumulative effect of exhaustion from the work expected of them in the West. Transforming the West from Indigenous to settler spaces involved the right sort of settlement — heterosexual, Euro-Canadian families producing legions of farm children. Imperial design demanded that settler women were not independent, or uncouth enough to think they should do “men’s work” in the fields. Those who did not emigrate as family units were encouraged to plan for short careers as domestic helpers before they married one of the many male bachelor farmers supposedly pining for wives.

Imperial Plots is the feminist, women’s history rejoinder to the small but significant strain of western settlement literature that focuses on the single men who ventured to claim those homesteads in the Canadian and American West. Terry Chapman, Peter Boag, Cecilia Danysk, Adele Perry, and Lyle Dick have written persuasively about the homosocial opportunities the West presented, particularly prior to the region joining Confederation and becoming “settled.”⁹² Most recently, this world has been reimaged in a wonderfully engaging historical novel by Patrick Gale, which offers readers a fictional portrait of one English queer settler, the writer’s own great-grandfather, Harry Cane.⁹³ Not all of those men who came to homestead the West were interested or destined for marriage, and via legal, criminal, and less often family histories, historians have uncovered queer male experiences. While criminal court records can provide evidence of the unlucky men caught in compromising circumstances they cannot fully explain their motivations and lived experiences. Queer women’s experiences have been even harder to locate given that women’s same-sex activity was not criminalized. Which is not to say it went unpunished, it has just been far harder, historically, to locate — and so historians have hesitated, until recently, to claim spaces for queer women in the Canadian West.⁹⁴ And our evidence base amounts to the proverbial needles in haystacks.

Imperial Plots makes a start at historicizing the worlds of queer women, following anthologies, such as *One Step Over the Line*, that offered diverse perspectives of western women’s experiences and encouraged more sustained research into a broader range of women’s histories of the West.⁹⁵ Thanks to exhaustive archival research over

many, many years, Carter has stitched together fragments and snippets of local, regional, and national press coverage of a small but important handful of single immigrant women. Their journalism, books, and coverage of their exploits offer us an important glimpse into the queer female experience. Not that Carter employs the term “queer,” but she has, drawing upon other national contexts, offered expanded readings of these women, claiming that some likely were lesbian couples, which is further than any other historians have been prepared to venture. This is an important claim in its own right, but also for the space and encouragement it now provides to future researchers, and to museum professionals, grappling with how to explain the photographs of “odd” women in their collection, and to make an argument that goes beyond the term “eccentric.”⁹⁶

Those familiar with histories of sexuality will know that the word *queer*, once a term of derision and condemnation, has been reclaimed by academics and contemporary activists as a useful term to describe the world that existed before gay and lesbian liberation.⁹⁷ Same-sex experiences have existed throughout time, but how we understand that activity, and what it meant to those who engaged in such activities, were varied. Here, Carter sensitively and carefully links Binnie-Clark with pockets of lesbian writers and artists in London — suggestive, at the very least, of Binnie-Clark’s familiarity with those worlds, if not proof positive of her inclusion in them. And Carter makes a case, often implicitly, for how their experiences certainly did include female partnerships and an unconventional range of gendered presentations and views — the wearing of men’s clothing, the desire for independence, and, above all, their opposition to marriage, which are important to accentuate and explain, not to minimize and ignore, as has too often been the case. Thinking queerly of Prairie settlement, as I have argued elsewhere, offers us useful ways to reframe part of the attraction of western immigration and settlement.⁹⁸ Those women sought spaces to move away from families and friends, to resist the conventional life of marriage and child-rearing, and to shake off the derogatory labels of “spinsters” and “surplus women.” Instead, they chose the identity of “farmer.” In their eyes, farming promised economic self-sufficiency and space to live. That space could enable more personal choices about with whom one lived and, potentially, whom one loved. For these women, the term “farmer” meant self-reliant, strong, modern, and independent. Carter introduces us to “Jack” May who lived with a female partner. May’s partner, Louisa Wittrick, chose a more fem-

ine presentation, and focused on domestic work on their adjacent farms. When May returned to England, Wittrick married a male homesteader. Here, Carter reminds us that Wittrick's motivations for this choice are not self-evident, other than the obvious one of survival and companionship. Binnie-Clark dressed respectably on her English lecture tours, but on her farm, she was famous for her uniform of britches, leggings, and a large floppy hat. Other settlers remembered her as "eccentric" for her clothing choices, but also for her views about farming, women's roles, and for her kind-heartedness to farm animals, particularly horses, which she treated more like pets than farm animals. Colin R. Johnson's *Just Queer Folks* includes a lengthy section devoted to the concept and term "eccentric" in rural and small-town America, and how that term allowed queer people space and permission to coexist in those communities.⁹⁹ Carter's critique of the scorn they faced from suspicious neighbours and community members as well as the attitudes of the Canadian government towards these women is further proof of their marginalization. Society's perspectives were enforced by the "curiously strong prejudices" of the Canadian government against independent women. Little wonder so many abandoned the project and returned to England if they had the financial ability to do so.

In the realm of gender and sexual histories, this book is extremely significant in a host of ways. Building upon Carter's 2008 book *The Importance of Being Monogamous*, which focusses on the centrality of the imposition of Euro-Canadian marriage laws in the region, *Imperial Plots* explores how the legal and social constructions of the category "farmer" were gendered and sexualized.¹⁰⁰ Restricting farming to men, making it impossible for single women to farm on the same terms as men was no accident — it was purposeful. Government, railroads, and land speculators all had a vested interest in respectable, heterosexual settlement, and the riches that would accrue from those models. Unconventional women, like Binnie-Clark and Marion Cran, might write about the opportunities for women, and might strive to encourage single English women to emigrate to Canada, but the government was completely opposed to such schemes. Naïvely, the women tried to demonstrate how capable they were, but the deck was squarely stacked against them. What mattered was the inculcation of appropriate gender and sexual norms. Trousers-wearing, independent women were scorned, cast as eccentrics or worse. Carter's rich portraits of their attempts to challenge hetero-normative norms of dress and life, their publications and letters home, lecture tours, and time spent actually

living and farming in the West, provide a wonderful portrait of their resistance to the status quo, and in so doing, a more comprehensive portrait of the colonial, settler project in the West.

While I am clearly enamoured with this publication, and impressed by the detailed research Carter has assembled over many years of archival research, I have two criticisms to make. These are more about the field, but they are important to the broader questions raised by the book. First, while there is much to praise here, I do think the book would have been strengthened if it had more explicitly engaged with literature on queer histories, and utilized the concept of queerness to complicate the women's resistance to the status quo and the potential challenge women posed to the heteronormativity of the region.¹⁰¹ Carter has broken through the reticence that has precluded frank discussion of these women's histories and unconventionality, but it could likely be pushed further to underscore how threatening their sexuality was, not merely their gendered unconventionality. This leads me to my larger point: the tendency of Canadian history to shy away from histories of queer sexualities. Unlike other national histories, with richer portraits of queer lives, communities, and urban cultures, Canadian history lags behind the American and British literature.¹⁰² It reflects a persistent conservative streak in our profession, our funding agency (neither gender nor sexuality appears in a drop-down list of genres of historical research for Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Insight Grants), and our failure to hire sexuality specialists within Canadian history departments. By contrast, history departments in England have a significant number of contemporary queer historians, particularly of England and Europe. In the United States, history of sexualities has perhaps an even more prominent role in the field as a subset of gendered histories, and an ever-expanding area of American historical specialization.

My second critique concerns the field of Western Canadian history. It is my sincere hope that the research insights of *Imperial Plots* will be integrated into the academic and popular consciousness of the Prairies. The fissures and silos within the field which have tended to view gender, women's, and sexual histories of the West as suitable for specialized classes in those topics, less so the Prairie survey courses and more general histories of the region, misses the tremendous opportunities to open this regional history to larger interest and significance. Will *Imperial Plots* be featured in Prairie Settlement classes? Will its insights find their ways into regional and local museums? Will it suc-

ceed in getting people to rethink the romanticized notion that the West was more “advanced,” because this region saw the first gains for Euro-Canadian women’s suffrage in Canada? Naturally, only time will tell. The tremendous positive exposure *Imperial Plots* has received, the awards and publicity, the exceedingly high calibre of the research, and Carter’s prominence within the field are all encouraging signs that this award-winning research will be disseminated broadly. It is imperative that its insights be integrated into university and high school curricula, that it be added to comprehensive fields, and that it form a backdrop to larger histories of the region. Sexuality and gender historians need to move from the margins into the mainstream in Prairie history if we are to rewrite the West for the twenty-first century and to fully engage twenty-first century audiences.

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