Imperial Plots Roundtable Commentary: A Reply

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I am honoured and grateful to have such a distinguished group of colleagues discuss Imperial Plots. Thanks to Jarvis Brownlie for organizing the panel and to Lara Campbell, Valerie Korinek, Carolyn Podruchny, and Katherine McKenna for their thoughtful and astute comments and insights at the University of Regina meeting of the CHA. As she had already published a review of my book, Katherine did not submit her remarks to this forum, but she was a valuable panel participant.

I was pleased to see historian and former president of the CHA Lyle Dick in the audience as he reminded me that it was exactly 40 years earlier that we were working on the Motherwell Homestead National Historic Site in southeast Saskatchewan. That was my first introduction to homestead records and I was intrigued by the stories they contained, and the physical, social, and cultural landscapes sculpted out of the prairies through homestead laws. It was also my first foray into women’s history as I focused on material culture and the lives of the women of the Motherwell homestead. Often asked just when I started this project and how long I have worked on it, my answer would begin there, 40 years ago, although my curiosity about homesteading originated with my own family history in Manitoba. My dissertation, later published as Lost Harvests began my exploration of how Indigenous land was taken, carved up, and parcelled out on the Prairies, and how notions of what constituted a “farmer” were deployed to exclude First Nations people from the central economic driver of the region: land and agriculture. Imperial Plots is in many ways a bookend to my first book, exploring how most women were excluded, settler and Indigenous, and the ideas pressed into the service of this exclusion.

For the University of Manitoba Press, I was asked to list what I consider to be the most significant and distinguishing features of Imperial Plots. These are points I made: it places the history of the Canadian prairies in conversation with histories of gender, race and, colonialism in other colonial settings, yet it is grounded in the specifics of the Canadian West; it is the first study in this international field to consider the issue of settler colonial women’s access to land, adding a new gendered dimension to settler colonial studies; it expands understandings of how settler women were bound in “gendered pat-
terns of disadvantage and frustration” while they simultaneously held positions of power over Indigenous people; it examines the complex intersection of ethnicity, race, gender, and class in the heated debates on women, land, and agriculture on the Prairies, in Canada and Britain; it contributes to understanding Western Canada as a colony of the British Empire, with an assumed “traditional” gender order as the foundation; it draws attention to the importance of the proximity of the United States in crafting the Canadian West as a British colony, drawing comparisons with the access settler women had to land in the United States; it analyzes the “homesteads-for-some-women” campaign, spearheaded by British women for British women, to the exclusion of others — theirs would be imperial plots where British civilization would be sown along with their crops; it emphasizes how the issue of access to land was a key component of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the West; it establishes the racialized and gendered architecture of the homestead system and Dominion Land legislation that was the foundation of settler colonialism in Western Canada; it is the first study of Canada’s women homesteaders, mostly widows with children; it explores women’s work on the land in the West during World War I, pondering why women were mobilized for farm work in the United Kingdom, in the United States, and in Ontario, and not on the Prairies; it analyzes why Canada was such a hostile environment for women farmers, and why the Canadian government remained intransigent and skeptical over decades, deliberately ignoring, belittling, or minimizing the substantial and essential work of women on homesteads and farms; it examines the attention paid to celebrity women farmers of the West, in particular Georgina Binnie-Clark and “Jack” May; and, finally, it reveals and explores the many strategies and tactics women drew on to obtain and cultivate land of their own and brings to light many forgotten women farmers and ranchers.

As the list suggests, Imperial Plots is a long and sprawling book, and at least one reviewer has pronounced it far too long. And it was to be even longer; there is a lot of unused footage. It began as a borderlands and comparative United States-Canada project that had many more dimensions, including gendered analysis of the allotment of reservations in the United States, of Métis scrip in Canada, and the “Indian homestead” legislation of the United States. I have binders full of homestead and census data from one Montana borderlands county alone. In the borderlands community of Wood Mountain Saskatchewan I found far fewer numbers of women homesteaders.
These findings did not make their way into the book that had to be scaled back, and become more focused. I am explaining this in part in response to Carolyn, Betsy, and Jesse’s outstanding essay on women at the margins of my study — Hidatsa, Métis, and Ukrainian women farmers who persisted on the land and as farmers despite obstacles. It is true that the diverse range of women homesteaders/farmers were left on the cutting floor as I decided to focus on the imperial plots and plans of British settler women. In my Wood Mountain sample, most of the women homesteaders were from the United States, and others were from Canada, France, Norway, Ukraine, and Hungary. There were Icelandic and Mennonite women homesteaders in the West. I mention a few Métis women homesteaders in the book and discuss the likelihood that there are many more.

I hope the topic of diverse women as landowners and farmers, and their persistence well beyond the homestead era, will be taken up by enterprising historians, and the commentary by Carolyn, Jesse, and Elizabeth will be an inspiration and starting point. I also want to pass the torch to someone who will analyze the hundreds of women homesteaders in the Peace River Country of Alberta after 1930. And British Columbia was another world altogether, with its own gendered and racialized land laws that did permit greater opportunities for settler women than on the federally-run Prairies. I hope that this too might be studied by someone who finds land as fascinating and as important as I do.

*Imperial Plots* is, however, not so much a story of the decline of women landowners and farmers, but of them never being able to gain much ground — ever — and of government determination to increasingly restrict and narrow women’s eligibility. There are determined women in the book who weathered the slings and arrows, purchasing land, with some persisting for decades (such as Ethel Binnie-Clark, Georgina’s sister). Some homesteading widows created lasting family dynasties. But they are the exceptions. The more they fought for land, the more determined the opposition. This is the story of persistent and powerful opposition to women landowners and farmers, particularly when they threatened to farm grain on a large scale. Nettie Wiebe, Saskatchewan farmer, activist, and former president of the National Farmers Union wrote in 2017 that by the early-1990s, there was some progress in official agricultural statistics that began to reflect that women on family farms are indeed farmers and women’s names on sections of land were growing. But Wiebe observes that women’s
names on the maps are now disappearing, replaced by male investors and companies in the world of global capital.

While not a story of progress, or of decline, it is about settler women’s failure, aside from widows with children, to persuade others that they should be permitted the right to homestead. This was the outcome despite all the varied strategies they pursued, including their arguments that British women homesteaders would push out undesirable “foreign” males. Lara Campbell asks the prescient question why homesteads-for-women was a failure, while votes for (most) women succeeded. I could have addressed this more directly. I think the answer lies, in part, in the division of powers: the vote was a provincial matter, and homesteads were governed by the federal government. Petitions for voting rights had far more supporters than the homesteads-for-women petitions. Voting rights for women could assist Prairie settler-farmer organizations achieve their political and economic objectives, while homesteads-for-women was opposed or not endorsed. The prevailing views of women as incompetent farmers, combined with the fear of gender chaos exemplified in the United States, and a determination to craft and maintain a masculine West and a cherished gender order, were all thrown into the stew by opponents. The complete disregard of the homesteads-for-British-women petition by Canadian Federal Parliament led, I believe, to a decision to distance the votes campaign from homesteads-for-women, and to downplay, at least publicly, criticisms of “foreign” men and their unfitness for the vote.

I agree with Valerie’s comments that I should have engaged more with queer history, and I should have used the term queer in discussing farmers like Isobel “Jack” May. It was not reticence, but rather ignorance that led to this oversight. I certainly learned about archival challenges to queer history; we only have fragmentary and generally second-hand glimpses. Dressed in “male attire,” May was a great curiosity in Canada, Britain, and other settler colonies, but the massive press coverage of her is not to be relied upon. Consulting family and communities does not always clarify, as there remains a reluctance to speak of relatives or community members as queer. Since the book was published, I have realized that I was wrong to posit that May likely left Alberta after a year and a half, never to return, because she was made to feel an outcast, unwelcome in both masculine and feminine realms of rural Alberta. An intrepid researcher I met at a conference, Joan Heggie of Teesside University in Middlesborough, placed Jack
May under her microscope, learning that May returned to England late in 1912 to live the rest of her long life with a woman who had been an apprentice on her Alberta farm in the summer of 1912. They ran a dairy farm together in Somerset for decades, and then were residents of the same nursing home. Joan and I are together planning an article about Jack May.

I share with Valerie the concern that *Imperial Plots* will be stuffed in the silo of women’s history, and prairie history, of interest to only a small group of academic specialists. I hoped it might reach a wider audience. My goal was to show a wider readership at home and beyond that gender, race, and land are at the heart of the history of the Canadian West, and that the history of this region has much to offer historians and students of settler colonialism beyond the borders of Canada. As yet, however, there is little evidence of a wider audience at home or abroad. I hope I am wrong, and the contributors to this panel encourage me in this hope.

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Endnotes

1 Buffalo Bird Woman’s Hidatsa name is usually spelled Maxi’diwiac or Maxidiwiac, but Michael W. Stevens gives Mahidiweash as the first spelling; it more closely approximates the Hidatsa pronunciation in *Biographical Dictionary of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara* (New Town, ND: Fort Berthold Library, 2003). http://lib.fortbertholdcc.edu/Fort-Berthold/TATBIO.htm, <viewed 24 July 2015>. We have employed the spelling that Carter used in *Imperial Plots*. Carter discusses Maxi’diwiac on pp. 29, 31, 33–4, 36, and 382.


5 Hunt, *Indian Agriculture*, pp. 9–16.


9 See Wilson, *Buffalo Bird Woman’s Garden*, p. 25.

10 Ibid., pp. 6–8. American settlers called the lake “Devils Lake,” and established the Devils Lake Sioux Reservation (now the Spirit Lake Reservation) on its shores.

11 In the United States, a woman could marry after filing for her homestead but before proving up and gaining title, provided her husband was not also proving up on another homestead claim. For Carter’s discussion of women in both the United States and Canada losing access to farmsteads, see pp. 313, 316–7.


14 Ibid.; Wilson, *Waheenee*, pp. 66-8. Note that just as Maxi’diwiac considered her mother’s sisters her mothers, she considered all their children her brothers and sisters, and she considered the sister of her biological grandmother also her grandmother. See also MHS, Wilson Papers, Volume 11, p. 23


20 MHS, Wilson Papers, Volume 11, p. 258. Note that Wilson identified these two women through their relationships to their husbands and did not name Butterfly’s wife.

21 Ibid., p. 75.

22 Ibid., p. 66.


25 LAC, Census of Canada 1911, Prince Albert, Territories, SK, District 9, Page: 1; Family No: 5.


27 In this context, scrip was a payment of money or land in exchange for extinguishing Aboriginal rights for Métis by the Dominion of Canada. In contrast to the numbered treaties, Métis scrip was given on an individual, not collective, basis. Carter provides an excellent discussion of scrip in *Imperial Plots*, pp. 53–7. Nancy’s Grandfather Francois Arcand held lot 12 on Fig. 47 map by David Elrick in Diane Payment, “The Free People — Otipemisiwak: Batoche, Saskatchewan, 1870–1930,” (Ottawa: Ministry of the Environment, Canada, 1990): pp. 302–3; LAC, RG15-D-II-8-f, vol. 1398, Scrip number A 11625 – Certificate number C 871, “Arcand, Saint-Pierre (Son of Francois Arcand) — $160.”


29 Louis Arcand, Blanche Morrissette, and Yvonne Morrissette, interviewed by Jesse Thistle, Saskatoon, SK, June 23, 2014; LAC, Census of Canada 1911, Prince Albert, Territories, SK, District 9, Page: 1; Family No: 5.

30 Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan (hereafter PAS), Record Number: 3422 – 1928, File 100, No. 74, September 1928, Jeremie Morrissette and Nancy Arcand Record of Registration of Marriage.
Carter discusses the Pass System in *Imperial Plots*, p. 50, explaining that many First Nations women were often able to leave reserve to gather resources, trade handicrafts, and work as day labourers on farms.


PAS, Record Number: 3422 − 1928, File 100, No. 74, September 1928, Jeremie Morrissette and Nancy Arcand Record of Registration of Marriage.


Park Valley Historic Committee, *Wilderness to Neighbourhoods*, pp. 64−5.

Ibid., p. 62.

Ibid.


Blanche Morrissette and Yvonne Richer-Morrissette interviewed by Carolyn Podruchny and Jesse Thistle, North Battleford, SK, June 22, 2013.


Louis Arcand, Blanche Morrissette, and Yvonne Morrissette interviewed by Jesse Thistle, Saskatoon, SK, June 23, 2014.

D. N. Sprague and R. P. Frye, *The Genealogy of the First Metis Nation* (Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, 1983), Table 1, Table 2.


Ibid.

Blanche Morrissette and Yvonne Richer-Morrissette interviewed by Carolyn Podruchny and Jesse Thistle, North Battleford, SK, June 22, 2013.
52 Josephine Morrissette and Blanche Morrissette interviewed by Jesse Thistle, Edmonton, AB, June 27, 2014.
53 Ray Campbell interviewed by Jesse Thistle, Saskatoon, SK, June 23, 2014.
54 Josephine Morrissette and Blanche Morrissette interviewed by Jesse Thistle, Edmonton, AB, June 27, 2014.
55 Ray Campbell interviewed by Jesse Thistle, Saskatoon, SK, June 23, 2014.
56 Blanche Morrissette and Yvonne Richer-Morrissette interviewed by Carolyn Podruchny and Jesse Thistle, North Battleford, SK, June 22, 2013.
58 Andersen, Gaudry, and Adese, New Directions in Metis Peoplehood.


Leo Morrissette, Blanche Morrissette, and Yvonne Richer-Morrissette interviewed by Jesse Thistle, Wrixson, SK, June 25, 2014.

Ibid.

Bernadette Morrissette, Blanche Morrissette, and Yvonne Richer-Morrissette interviewed by Jesse Thistle, Debden, SK, June 21, 2014; Sprague and Frye, The Genealogy of the First Metis Nation, Table 1, Table 2; Gerhard Ens, “Dispossession or Adaptation?: Migration and the Persistence of the Red River Metis, 1835–1980” Historical Papers (of the Canadian Historical Association) 23, no. 1 (1980), pp. 120–44.

Bernadette Morrissette, Blanche Morrissette, and Yvonne Richer-Morrissette interviewed by Jesse Thistle, Debden, SK, June 21, 2014 and Marc DeGuerre, “Family Camera.”


Marc DeGuerre, “Family Camera.”


Vladimir J. Kaye (Kysilewsky) and Frances A. Swyripa, “Settlement and Colonization” in A Heritage in Transition: Essays in the History of Ukrainians in Canada, ed. Manoly R. Lupul, pp. 32–58 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982), p. 32. We note that many Poles also migrated into the Ukrainian block settlements, especially in families that intermarried.


78 The 1916 census of the Canadian prairies shows a Nick and Mary Chupka, in the district of Brandon, both age 37, originating from Austria (rulers of that region were constantly shifting), which is also part of family lore, and arriving in Manitoba in 1906 (rather than 1915 as the family remembers). The census lists daughter Fannie (2), which is probably Frances, and son Michael (9 months). The family’s language is listed as Polish; we are dubious that the census enumerator could distinguish Polish from Ukrainian. Nick is listed as a labourer for the CRP. See LAC, Census of the Prairie Provinces 1916, items 521914, 521905, 521868, and 521867.


81 See especially Carter’s chapter 5, “Answering the Call of Empire” in Imperial Plots, pp. 245-86.

82 All of the information about Frances Zatylny is based on family lore and conversations. We are particularly grateful to Carolyn’s parents, Thomas and Sonia Podruchny, as well as her uncles, Stan and Allan Podruchny, her Aunt Sonia Podruchny, her Aunt Betty Zatylny, and her sister Heather Podruchny for their assistance with this piece. Although we find the family in the 1916 census, they do not appear in the 1921 or 1926 censuses. Nor does the family appear in any immigration and citizenship records, or land grant records of the Canadian government. Note that several George Smiths show up in the 1921 census as living in the district of Neepawa (a town close by), aged 58, 32, 2, 40, 16, 37, 24, 45, 48, and 19. See LAC, Census of Canada 1921.


84 A George Horner, aged 62, shows up in the 1926 census in the District of Souris, immigrating from England in 1908, see item number
484671, LAC, Census of the Prairie Provinces 1926. The only remaining part of the village of Ozerna, Manitoba is the St. Nicholas Ukrainian Catholic Church and Cemetery, see http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/sites/stnicholasukrainiancatholic2.shtml < viewed 30 June 2019 >, and Saint Anthony’s Roman Catholic Cemetery, where Michael Podruchny, and Frances’s and Michael’s first two children are buried.

85 A local history from the region includes a chapter called “The Homemaker” that describes farming women’s labour in cooking, cleaning, sewing, and making cream and butter. See Our Roots: A History of Sandy Lake and District (Sandy Lake Historical Society, 1984).


87 Katherine Borland, “‘That’s not what I said’: A reprise of 25 years” in Beyond Woman’s Words, p. 34. We also take inspiration from Stacey Zembrzycki, According to Baba: A Collaborative Oral History of Sudbury’s Ukrainian Community (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014).


96 Recently, Saskatoon’s Western Development Museum initiated a plan to create a Saskatchewan LGBTQ2+ History Collection Project. This project will collect, archive, and display objects and ephemera related to the province’s sexual minority communities and people.


100 Sarah Carter, The Importance of Being Monogamous: Marriage and Nation Building in Western Canada to 1915 (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2008).


102 For examples of range of queer historical work, see Vicki L. Eaklor, Queer America: A People’s LGBT History of the United States (New York & London: The New Press, 2008); John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman,