‘I Must Record the Grit of My Little Wife Millie’:
Experience, Representation, and Rural Women in Early 20th Century
British Columbia

by

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B.A., University of Northern British Columbia, 2003

Thesis Submitted In Partial Fulfillment Of
The Requirements For The Degree Of
Master Of Arts
in
History

The University Of Northern British Columbia

June 2006

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Abstract

This study examines the historical experiences and narrative representations of early 20th century women in north-central British Columbia. First, using empirical strategies, it determines the diversity of women's gender roles, their contributions to family survival, and their leadership functions in creating rural societies. Then, drawing on Helen Buss's multi-generational deconstructive model, it analyzes the local historical record, demonstrating how, although women's collective voices are over-represented, an androcentric narrative tradition predominates. Conversely, reading the sources from a consciously feminist position also reveals a number of subversive narrative strategies that allowed rural women to quietly exploit their accomplishments, without challenging the social power of men. Finally, the tensions and discontinuities between experiences and representations of rural women are shown to reflect issues of genre, persisting social tensions between rural men and women, and women's personal desires to both conform to and resist traditional expectations of femininity.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ii
Table of Contents iii
List of Tables and Figures iv
Acknowledgement v
Introduction 1

Chapter One EXPERIENCE AND IDENTITY: 24
Through Grandmother’s Eyes, the Journey Begins

Chapter Two DISCOURSE AND IDENTITY: 55
Mothering the Texts: The Conforming ‘Ground Noise’ of the Local Historical Record 56

Chapter Three Sisterly (De)liberations: Beneath the Surface 72
of Local Discourse

Chapter Four One Daughter’s Reckoning: 97
Realities, Ideologies and Rural Women

Bibliography 109


LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Map of North-Central British Columbia</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>British Columbia Population Census Data Div. 8 1921-1941</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Adult Female Population by Racial Origin</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Gender Ratios 1911 – 1941</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Marital Status of Females – British Columbia</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Marital Status of Females by Province 1911 – 1941</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I owe a debt of gratitude to many people for making this thesis possible, including the History Department of the University of Northern British Columbia and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for granting me the scholarships that enabled me to conduct my research and complete this work. I also offer my sincerest appreciation and thanks to my advisor and mentor, Mary-Ellen Kelm, for her knowledge, support, criticism, and patience in allowing me the time and space to do it my way. I am equally grateful to Theresa Healy for her encouragement and insightful comments; and to Ted Binnema, for agreeing to be on my committee and immerse himself in feminist language. To the staff at the libraries, museums, and archives in Hazelton, Smithers, Telkwa, Houston, Burns Lake, Fraser Lake, Vanderhoof and Prince George, I also owe much thanks for the administrative assistance and research guidance. Last, but not least, I offer my deepest appreciation to my family, friends and especially, fellow graduate student Julie Andow, for their unwavering support.

I dedicate this thesis to three very special rural women in my life: my grandmother Ivy Middleton; my mother, Bessie Whitehead; and my sister, Sandy Stickney. By recovering the voices of other rural women, I am hopeful that their lives too will not be forgotten.
Introduction

In her life, character and spirit she combined the beauty of the lily and the fragrance of the rose....with a sweet simplicity of faith, inoffensive candour, unshakable confidence, fervent spirit and honest practice....Motherhood to her was life's most sacred privilege, its highest honor, its supreme obligation....Home was her pride and delight, her husband her ideal.

- "Mrs. Hankinson is Laid to Rest," The Interior News, 3 Dec. 1924

During my undergraduate studies, I had the privilege of interviewing my ninety-four year old grandmother. To provide a context for her life experiences, I examined early 20th century newspapers representing the Bulkley Valley. In doing so, I came across the above eulogy, which unsettled me. The images it presented did not conform to my knowledge and understanding of rural women, my perceptions being rooted in memories of my six foot, 180 lb. grandmother in her faded housedress, digging the garden, milking cows, mending fences, and driving tractors. Instead of sweet simplicity and inoffensive candor, I admired the rural women I knew for their independence, physical and emotional strength, pragmatism, and familial power. The conflict between my images of rural women and those of the historical documents like Mrs. Hankinson's obituary sparked my interest. I wanted to understand the relationship between the material realities of early 20th century rural women's lives and the ideological representation of them in local historical records. Because I represent the fourth generation of women in my family to live in north-central British Columbia, this study also represents a personal quest aimed at achieving a broader understanding of the female models I have drawn on throughout my own life for self-realization and development. Along the way, my perceptions of rural women (including my female ancestors) have been shaped and informed by
many factors, including the scholarship of provincial, national, and international feminist historians, and by feminist theories from a variety of fields including history, geography, psychology, and literature, all of which serve to locate this study within an interdisciplinary framework.

Geographically, this investigation concentrates on the Bulkley Valley, Lakes District, and Nechako Valley regions of British Columbia, that being the settled areas between and including the communities of Hazelton and Prince George. (See Figure 1) Temporally, it pertains primarily to the first four decades of the 20th century, which represents this area's concentrated period of early white settlement. By choosing these concise spatial and temporal parameters and utilizing local sources generated by and about early 20th century immigrants, this inquiry focuses on women of British and western European backgrounds because they are the dominant voices in the local historical record. Although these sources represent the ethnic majority of non-Native women living in this geographical area during the early 20th century, they clearly do not represent the substantial First Nations Carrier population inhabiting the area before, during and after this period.¹ The minimal presence of Carrier women in local discourse is telling in itself. It suggests that in spite of significant interactions between Natives and non-Natives, north-central British Columbia's communities came to be narrowly defined by 'whiteness.'² Thanks to the scholarly

¹ The Natives of north-central British Columbia are commonly known as Carrier peoples, a term which unites them linguistically.
² By 'whiteness,' I am referring to imperial discourse, in which Anglo-Saxons occupied positions of racial privilege. See Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
efforts of anthropologist Jo-Anne Fiske and others, studies of the region’s Carrier women’s early 20th century experiences are available elsewhere.\(^3\)

One of the biggest problems feminist researchers encounter when studying women’s pasts is the paucity of traditional archival sources pertaining to women. During the past three decades, scholars have attempted to overcome this difficulty by developing innovative and revisionist research techniques, new feminist theories, and expanded notions of acceptable historical evidence. British Columbia’s historiography reflects these methodological developments, as late twentieth century scholars made significant strides towards placing the province’s women into the historical record.\(^4\) However, their efforts thus far have emphasized urban women and the southwest corner of the province.\(^5\) This study, at its very basic academic level, is an initial attempt to fill this notable gap in the province’s feminist historical record.


A critique of British Columbia’s scholarship highlights not only its urban and limited geographical focus, but also how historians of the past often chose to uncover women’s lives by using the “add and stir” approach, which means they recorded women’s experiences, but offered no in-depth analysis of what those experiences meant.⁶ This does not negate the importance of their work, however, for as this study also demonstrates, reclaiming women’s experiences is often a necessary first step in feminist historiography. Nonetheless, today’s scholars suggest that women’s experiences are more than just portraits.⁷ As Joan Scott explained, since “meaning preceded experience,” women’s experiences must serve not as the “origin of our explanation,” but as the subject of it.⁸

By stressing the need to explain, and not just name women’s experiences, Scott emphasized the relevance of historical context, culture and change in determining social identities. Significant to these discussions was her assertion that gender, race, ethnicity and class are culturally constructed features of human identity, and that as such, they are also fluid, interconnected categories of social difference that represent relationships of power.⁹ For example, as British emigrants, the female subjects discussed here held privileged positions relative to race, ethnicity and class, but as women were subordinated by gender. This shift in feminist thinking away from universalized notions of female oppression represented

a "sobering corrective to the essentialist tendencies of feminist politics." It reinforced the connections between theory and history, as historians began to search for social differences to discern hierarchies of power and a diversity of truths about women's lives. The acceptance of identity as a multi-faceted social construct, along with the expansion of acceptable historical sources, such as oral methodologies, also amplified the importance of the historical discourse itself. As a result, interdisciplinary discussions, including psychoanalysis and post-structural theoretical debates pertaining to issues of voice, language, representation, subjectivity, and objectivity are becoming common in all social science research. By focusing on the diversities and differences of rural women's experiences and analyzing the discourses embedded in the sources themselves, this inquiry meets the expectations of contemporary feminist scholarship.

Rural Women in Historical Context

Adele Perry's work, entitled *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871*, serves as an excellent model of feminist history in this province. The author combines an analysis of gender, class, race, sexuality and imperialism with post-structural theories of language and discourse to suggest that British Columbia's uniqueness to the rest of Canada can be found in its "edge of empire" colonial relationship with Britain. She argues that the demographic imbalance between Natives and Europeans, and between European men and women, allowed colonial residents to challenge imperial norms, by creating a male

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10 Ibid. "Intro.", 5.
11 Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001). Although this study peripherally includes Barkerville, its primary geographical focus is Vancouver Island and the southwest corner of the province.
homo-social culture and by encouraging mixed-race relationships. Further, although reformers sought the emigration of British women as a solution to such “social problems”, their efforts were hindered because of geography, isolation, Native resistance, and the female emigrants themselves, who were unwilling to act as “civilizers” to colonial society. According to Perry, these factors represented a unique transitional time which ended with British Columbia’s entry into Confederation in 1871. However, I believe her thesis can be extended into the 20th century, for the same geographical and demographic factors led to similar social practices and opportunities for women to deviate from conventional gender norms during the early settlement period in north-central British Columbia.

R.W. Sandwell’s 1997 edited collection, Beyond the City Limits: Rural History in British Columbia, also provides a context for understanding British Columbia’s rural history. In fact, as Sandwell points out, this anthology represents the only major scholarly effort aimed at filling the geographical gap in the provincial historical record that has “hindered the emergence of a broadly shared rural consciousness” and neglected the historical importance of agriculture.12 These omissions are no small matter because there are more than a thousand rural communities in British Columbia and because agriculture rivaled forestry as the economic mainstay of the province well into the 1920s.13 Sandwell’s work moves definitions of “rural” beyond low population density and defines the “most coherent characteristics” of early 20th century rural British Columbia as:

flexibility and variability; occupational plurality; [skewed] gender [ratios];

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13 Sandwell, 7.
seasonal geographic mobility; intermittent participation in the waged labour market or in the marketing of produce; partial reliance on subsistence hunting and gathering activities; and land-based, family-centred social formations.\textsuperscript{14}

These attributes of rural are broader than that found in the abundant scholarship on the prairie provinces, which associates rural almost exclusively with an agrarian, subsistence lifestyle, and accordingly, identifies women within “unpaid, subsistence and reproductive labour” inside the home and “income-generating” farm labour outside the home.\textsuperscript{15} This thesis will advance the study of rural women by testing Sandwell’s paradigm of rural and moving beyond the existing prairie literature.

Looking outside the province to North American rural studies more generally, we find that feminist scholars have assimilated British scholarship, much as mainstream women’s history has, by drawing on “separate spheres,” an analytical model grounded in middle-class life, to argue that rural life either contributed to women’s oppression or offered them autonomy.\textsuperscript{16} “Separate spheres” refers to the apparent narrowing of acceptable gender roles which took place in late 18\textsuperscript{th} and early 19\textsuperscript{th} century Britain, when women became associated with the private domestic sphere of home and men with public economic, political and social spheres. These restricting gender ideologies paralleled rapid social changes occurring in Britain, due to urbanization, industrial capitalism and evangelical religious movements. The term

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. 11.
“middle-class” characterizes the third level of social hierarchy created by capitalism, in which business administrators and managers were defined as separate from labouring sectors and upper-class capitalists and gentry. Middle-class attributes of femininity came to include purity, passivity, morality, submissiveness, and dependence, while masculinity represented patriarchal dominance, self-sacrifice, independence and hard work.\(^{17}\)

As British scholarship also points out, many women resisted these emerging middle-class ideologies. In fact, it was the tensions that arose from them that inspired the feminist movement in late 19\(^{th}\) and early 20\(^{th}\) century Britain.\(^{18}\) E.J. Hobsbawm referred to this period as the “age of empire” for women in Britain, because during these years women made significant strides towards improving their educational and professional status.\(^{19}\) However, a growing demographic imbalance ensured that many women would never fulfill their middle class obligations to marry and raise children. Between 1891 and 1911 alone, the British census recorded a rise in the number of surplus women (over men) from 600,000 to 1.25 million.\(^{20}\)

Meanwhile, men outnumbered women in British Columbia in the same period by two to one. Emigration to the colonies, including British Columbia, was a practical solution proposed by both British and Canadian governments to alleviate the demographic imbalances in both countries. These historical events link British feminist scholarship to North American studies, providing a basis for understanding

\(^{17}\) Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class*, 2\(^{nd}\) ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 98. See also esp. Ch. 3.


the cultural tensions and ideologies emigrant men and women brought with them and the shifts in gender identities that resulted from their early settlement experiences.

By drawing on the separate spheres frameworks to argue for women's oppression or autonomy, rural feminist scholars have also perpetuated deeply rooted stereotypes of rural women as 'reluctant emigrants' or 'cheerful helpmates.' The term 'reluctant emigrant' suggests that women came to Canada unwillingly and had great difficulty adjusting to rural life, while 'cheerful helpmate' implies that they adjusted, by assuming roles that "enabled men to succeed" and by handling "crises with competence and without complaint." In Canada, these ideologies date back to the 19th century texts of Susanna Moodie, Catherine Parr Traill, Anna Jamieson and other early writers, whose imperialistic representations were directed to "back home" audiences. However, like mainstream historians, rural scholars of recent years have begun to question these essentialist frameworks, by suggesting that they ignore the diversities of women's experiences and the differences between them.

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Nonetheless, while recognizing the importance of diversity and difference, it seems to me that inequalities in gender relationships and the division of labour deriving from separate spheres ideologies persist as long as women continue to be associated primarily with the domestic sphere of raising children, food preparation, house-cleaning, and health care.\textsuperscript{25} Furthermore, as this study shows, women themselves continue to draw on the language of domesticity to define themselves, in spite of their apparent non-traditional experiences. We must also acknowledge that women’s voices reflect dominant white, androcentric worldviews. As Sarah Carter so aptly observed, “women are not always free to project their own images or identities, nor are they free to author their own texts fully.”\textsuperscript{26} Therefore, scholarly inquiries such as this, which draw attention to the contradictions and tensions between women’s experiences and their discursive representations, are crucial to the emancipation of women’s voices.

Kathryn McPherson described new scholarly trends that have shifted the emphasis towards diversity and difference in investigations of rural women’s experiences and how these changes, including oral methodologies and the linguistic turn towards the discourse itself, are beginning to alter cultural ideologies of rural women..\textsuperscript{27} For example, recent investigations by Emma Curtin and Aileen Moffatt represent scholarly attempts to revise the meta-narrative of rural women’s early

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{25} Leonore Davidoff, “Gender and the ‘Great Divide’: Public and Private in British Gender History,” in \textit{Journal of Women’s History} 15:1 (2003), 12,16.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Sarah A. Carter, \textit{Capturing Women, The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery in Canada’s Prairie West} (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997), xv.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Kathryn McPherson, “Was the ‘Frontier’ Good for Women? Historical Approaches to Women and Agricultural Settlement in the Prairie West, 1870-1925,” in \textit{Atlantis} 25:1 (Fall/Winter 2000), 75-86.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
settlement experiences. Curtin’s study synthesizes British ideologies of womanhood, imperial propaganda, the role of emigration societies, and oral methodologies to suggest that the early 20th century experiences of “gentlewomen” in Alberta “reveal a wide middle ground between [the] two stereotypical poles” of “simpering, reluctant emigrants” and “independent superhuman women on an imperial civilizing mission.” Moffatt’s study, also based on oral methods, similarly argues that women in early 20th century Saskatchewan combined British ideologies with the realities of their early settlement experiences to construct identities that were “distinctly rural and western Canadian” and “uniquely experienced in rural Saskatchewan.” Like most rural studies, these authors’ notions of the ‘Canadian West’ exclude British Columbia. Although this omission helps to explain the rural gap in the province’s historical record, my research suggests that British Columbia’s rural women do have a place within this scholarship, for the “unique” experiences of emigrant women on the prairies are remarkably similar to that of many women in north-central British Columbia. On the other hand, the lives of women defined less by agrarian subsistence than by occupational plurality also deserve to be recognized as “edge of the empire” and “uniquely experienced” in rural British Columbia.

While recent historical studies provide an important basis for understanding north-central British Columbia’s women, they are, for the most part, based on self-


29 Emma Jane Curtin, Intro.

30 Aileen Moffatt, 11.

31 For other examples of rural feminist scholarship that does not consider British Columbia part of the ‘western frontier,’ see R.G. Moyles and Doug Owram, Imperial Dreams and Colonial Realities: British Views of Canada, 1880-1914 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988); Susan Jackel, ed. A Flannel Shirt and Liberty; and Eliane Silverman, The Last Best West.
generated oral methodologies and explorations of experience, but not the discourse itself.\textsuperscript{32} By reaching outside the discipline, I found two literary analyses of prairie women's narratives, by S. Leigh Matthews and Lillian Tuttosi, which provided a context for understanding the sub-conscious and subversive narrative voices of rural women of north-central B.C. For example, in her exploration of early 20\textsuperscript{th} century prairie women's published memoirs, Matthews proposes that the texts are best read as folklore or genres "on the margins" that allow women to participate from within and beyond mainstream cultural systems.\textsuperscript{33} Similarly, Tuttosi's deconstructive reading of Saskatchewan women's life-narratives suggests that women consciously and unconsciously create a "palimpsest" or underpainting in their texts, which protects them from the "public gaze."\textsuperscript{34} My inquiry also attempts to add to this work, by combining the historical and the literary and including not only oral voices, but all of the narrative forms found in the local historical record.

\textbf{Rural Women and Theoretical Perspectives}

\textbf{a) Feminist Materialism}

In order to establish a theoretical framework for this study, I have taken as a starting position, the terms "experience" and "identity," which are the focal points of my inquiry. Experience, according to Ruth Roach Pierson, can be defined as that which is "constituted in part by positions occupied and tasks performed, and also by

\textsuperscript{32} For similar studies, see Charlotte Van de Vorst, \textit{Making Ends Meet: Farm Women's Work in Manitoba} (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2002); Monda Halpern, \textit{And On That Farm He Had a Wife: Ontario Farm Women and Feminism, 1900-1970} (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 2001); and Sheila McManus, "Gender(ed) Tensions in the Work and Politics of Alberta Farm Women, 1905-1929."

\textsuperscript{33} S. Leigh Matthews, "Bound to Improve": Canadian Women's Prairie Memoirs and Intersections of Culture, History and Identity," (Ph.D., University of Calgary, 2001).

the discourses dominating and shaping the social/historical context.” Similarly, feminist theorist Teresa de Lauretis defines identity as the locus of external and internal social positions determined by historical process, i.e. gender, race, ethnicity, class, geography etc, which humans “come to assume subjectively and discursively in the form of political consciousness.” Ultimately, these definitions stress how our identities are determined not only materially by our lived experiences, but by the language and culture that surrounds us as well. As such, an appropriate theoretical position for this study must speak to the significance of the material, the discursive, and the subjective in creating experiences, thereby allowing room for diversity, difference, agency, and the capacity for change. A feminist materialist perspective is most compatible to these objectives. Unlike Marxist theories or conventional historical materialism, which focuses on material realities only, a feminist materialism perspective proposes a reality that represents both materiality and thought. By ‘thought,’ I am suggesting a shared feminist consciousness, whereby one seeks to know reality, not as individual or subjective ideas, but as a collective ‘woman.’ For example, by applying feminist insights to the material and discursive levels of north-central British Columbia’s local historical record, I am attempting to establish a new understanding of rural women’s political realm. As de Lauretis stated, a feminist awareness of women’s oppression (as suggested here by the repressed voices of

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37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 122.
rural women in the local historical record) redefines the oppression itself.\textsuperscript{39} It speaks to women's capacity for resistance, agency and change, and thus, to the very basis of contemporary feminism. From a feminist perspective then, the discursive component of this inquiry serves two purposes: first, it reveals the gender politics embedded in the discourse; and second, in doing so it changes the meaning of the texts themselves.\textsuperscript{40}

\textbf{b) Post-Structural Perspectives}

As suggested earlier, women's absence in traditional archival records has forced feminist scholars to redefine the meaning of historical evidence, by including local histories, oral histories, memoirs, letters, diaries, reminiscences, and autobiographies in their research agendas. For example, it is only from within these sources that the voices of early 20\textsuperscript{th} century rural women of north-central British Columbia can be found. Including them in our studies has also created the need for theoretical and self-critical approaches that allow us to prove the academic validity of our data and our rights to speak of and for other women.

Post structural theories, including linguistic and deconstructionist perspectives, are particularly relevant to inquiries like this that use non-contemporary materials, because they emphasize the importance of language, narrative form, context, and ethical issues related to the sources. More specifically, they draw attention to notions of subjectivity and objectivity and the way that language and discourse becomes embedded in our consciousness and shapes our

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 140.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 141.
identities, including gender.\textsuperscript{41} Equally important is the post-structural understanding that discourse can construct reality through acts of human agency. By writing themselves into the historical record, rural women of north-central British Columbia are exercising agency and constructing discursive realities, by acknowledging that “men are not the centre of the world, but men \textit{and} women are.”\textsuperscript{42} On the other hand, these women’s narratives are informed by dominant androcentric language and cultural traditions that encourage the misrepresentation of their gender identities. For example, in spite of their primary roles on family farms, rural women do not describe themselves as “farmers,” because the word connotes a male image. Instead, they describe themselves as “helpers” to male farmers. While on the surface, this language confirms and reinforces their subservient roles, it can also be read as a subversive feminist narrative strategy used by women to emphasize the diversity of their experiences and thereby subtly resist the androcentric language from which they speak.

Psychoanalytical and Foucauldian perspectives on memory, truth and power are also useful for interpreting oral and written narratives that are produced long after the experiences represented in them. For example, memory theory posits that the mediation of human experiences takes place soon after events and dictates how those experiences are remembered and recalled later.\textsuperscript{43} In turn, as Jan Vansina explained, oral histories and personal narratives represent the totalizing power of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{42} Gerder Lerner, as cited in Geraldine Moane, \textit{Gender and Colonialism} (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 130. (emphasis added)
\item \textsuperscript{43} Paul Thompson, “Believe It or Not: Rethinking the Historical Interpretation of Memory,” in \textit{Memory and History: Essays on Recalling and Interpreting Experience}, eds. Jaclyn Jeffrey and Glenace Edwall (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1994), 3.
\end{itemize}
human memory in action. They are not random thoughts but “part of an organized whole of memories that tend to project a consistent image of the narrator, and in many cases, a justification of his or her life.” This is not to suggest, however, that these sources are devoid of myth or reflect only ‘truths.’ As Paul Thompson stated, “reality is less tidy than myth,” and the key is to consider both possibilities, while also recognizing that the act of forgetting often reflects boundaries between public and private and between collective and individual identities. This explains why rural women do not include the oppressive, darker side of their experiences in their narratives, for they are private and thus, contrary to what is acceptable in public. As such, these memories are excluded from the community’s collective discourse. Nonetheless, although it is necessary to identify the silences, myths, and contradictions we find within non-contemporary sources, the ultimate objective must be to use material evidence and personal memory to interpret change over time. As such, an appropriate research agenda for this inquiry is one which combines these post-structural insights with a well-grounded feminist materialist perspective.

Methodologies

The absence of rural women from British Columbia’s traditional historical record creates a challenge for feminist researchers like me who want to move beyond just naming women’s experiences. Adopting theoretical and methodological approaches that include both heuristic and hermeneutic principles of inquiry is one way of addressing the rural gap, while also conforming to scholarly expectations.

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46 Paul Thompson, “Believe It or Not,” 11. By ‘non-contemporary’ I am referring to those sources which appear primary but for the time delay in writing them.
which require focusing on the diversities and differences of rural women’s experiences, the nuances of language, and the subjective role of the researcher. By ‘heuristic’, I am referring to traditional empirical epistemologies that accept the authority of experience as evidence and focus on “trying to comprehend or understand meanings of human experience as it is lived.” By ’hermeneutic,’ I am referring to the discursive component of this inquiry and the “interpretative process that seeks to bring understanding and disclosure of phenomena through language” or, in other words, studies women’s voices “with a view towards...find[ing] intended or expressed meanings.” This approach is also fitting for studies that draw heavily on non-conventional sources, because each genre offers different ‘truths’ and requires unique narrative strategies for both writing and reading them. Most significantly, I find Helen Buss’s metaphorical multigenerational deconstructive model, which she refers to as a “(m)othering of the texts,” appropriate for this investigation. The metaphor implies a three-part relationship, in which the reader becomes ‘mother’, ‘sister’ and ‘daughter’ to the texts. I propose the addition of a fourth ‘grandmother’ reading position, which can be applied to the experiential analysis of rural women. Ultimately, these symbolic

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48 Joan Sangster, “Telling Our Stories,” 231.
49 Susann M. Laverty, 9.
reading positions imply incrementally increasing the depth, complexity, and biases in one's critical reading of the texts, which changes the interpretation of them, thereby emphasizing the many analytical possibilities for understanding rural women and the role of gender in cultural production. Because I am a fourth generational rural woman of this region, this method is also a suitable metaphor for my own subjective relationship to this inquiry.51 Reading and analyzing the sources from these four different interpretative positions draws attention to my own subjectivities, the subjectivities within the discourse, and the underlying narrative strategies that rural women have adopted to mediate genre limitations and overcome dominant cultural ideologies. On every interpretative level Buss recommends a “phenomenological” reading of the sources, which means reading “not from above,” but from “within.” This is achieved by “enter[ing] into the same spirit of discovery as the writer did while writing,” which allows the reader to “grasp the object wholly and know that [he or she] grasp[s] it wholly”52 This overall gendered empathy, combined with Buss’s suggested multi-generational distancing, informs and creates diversity in the interpretation of these sources.

Finally, while these post-structural techniques are useful for analyzing the discourses embedded in local histories, I am also guided by Pierson’s cautionary advice to exercise “epistemic humility,” and thus to remember that rural women in north-central British Columbia were not passive objects. As authors and subjects they must be respected as individuals who have actively chosen to represent particular experiences and identities. As a feminist researcher, gender is of primary

51 In other words, it parallels my own identity and its links to the women represented in these texts.
52 Helen Buss, Mapping Our Selves, 161.
importance to me, but it is not the force of identity that all rural women emphasize in the construction of their lives. To this end, an appropriate feminist research agenda must also include strategies of reflexivity.

**Self-Reflexivity**

A hermeneutical approach, as Susann Laverty explained, speaks not only to the interpretative analysis of our sources, but also to the need for a self-reflective understanding of the "dialectical" relationship between the researcher and the interpretation. In other words, this implied recognition of the relationship between the story and the teller suggests that when all is said and done, we, as researchers, "merely represent, rather than mirror reality." As such, self-critical reflexivity necessarily allows us to bring issues of subjectivity to the surface of our inquiries. By reflexivity, I am referring to how "a person seeking to understand something has a bond with the subject matter that comes into language through the traditionary text and has, or acquires, a connection with the tradition from which it speaks." For example, I am very aware of my own privileged biographical, social and historical location within this research and how my ideological perceptions of early 20th century rural women's identities inform my work. Rosemarie Anderson offers an appropriate model for reconciling the objective and subjective in inquiries such as this, for she proposes 'caring' in a "disciplined, intentional way":

...a compassionate knowing brings a softness to the way we ask our questions, set our hypotheses, devise our instruments, conduct our

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54 Susann M. Laverty, 10.
56 Susann M. Laverty, 10.
investigations, analyze our data, construct our theories, and speak to our readers or audience. Cross-verified in both the mechanics of conventional objective science and in the more unconventional intuitive sense of the researcher, both objective and subjective knowing can contribute jointly to our understanding.57

In summary, by drawing on these methodological and theoretical perspectives in order to focus on the complexities of rural women's lives and analyze the sources from multiple interpretative levels, and by reflecting on my own biases, assumptions, and proximity to my subjects, and by paying attention to the "dialectic" between my understanding of the research process, my interpretive framework, and my sources, I believe I can offer some valuable scholarly insights into understanding the experiences and identities of early 20th century rural women in north-central British Columbia.58

Several themes represent key findings of this study. Most importantly, by emphasizing the diversities and differences of women's experiences and social identities, this work implicitly rejects the existence of a monolithic 'rural woman' in early 20th century north-central British Columbia. Overall, it makes clear that there are many contradictions and tensions between the realities and ideologies of rural women within the local historical record. An analysis of the material level of women's experiences indicates that low population densities, geographical isolation from urban influences, skewed sex ratios, and an undeveloped material environment influenced a reconfiguration of gender roles, whereby conventional notions of women and femininity shifted to reflect the diversities of women's economic activities, their inter-personal relationships, and their leadership roles within rural

58 Susann M. Laverty, 21.
societies. However, an analysis of the discourse itself shows that these shifts in rural women’s identities have not been ideologically translated into the local historical record. Instead of reflecting the realities of rural women’s lives, local sources emphasize a dominant pioneer cultural script, in which women are primarily defined within traditional roles of domesticity and separate spheres, which, in turn, creates paradigms of male dominance and female subordination. On the other hand, reading the sources from a consciously feminist deconstructive position also reveals a narrative resistance to these restricting ideologies of rural women. Finally, in attempting to reconcile or situate these complexities within the discourse, I argue that they reflect limitations of local genres and persisting social tensions, in power relationships between rural women and men, and in rural women’s personal desires to both resist and accept cultural expectations of masculinity and femininity.

The following chapter, which focuses on the material realities of rural women’s experiences, represents the beginning of the metaphorical multigenerational method I have chosen for this study. From the interpretative reading position of a grandmother, it uses gender and geography as its first analytical focus to discuss issues related to rural women’s emigration circumstances, demographics, conditions of settlement and initial adjustments to a new environment. Rural women’s economic activities are also examined, focusing on the connections between gender and rural women’s paid and unpaid work. In the final section of the chapter, issues of gender and social identities in rural communities are explored, including women’s roles in reform and building rural societies. Collectively, this analysis of women’s experiences suggests that early 20th century north-central
British Columbia offered opportunities for many newly emigrated women to transcend traditional social boundaries and make measurable gains in their agency, independence and autonomy.

Chapters Two and Three focus on the discourse itself, with an aim towards understanding the connections between the lived experiences of rural women and the ideological construction of them in the local historical record. Building on the previous chapter's multi-generational analytical concepts, the sources are analyzed from the metaphorical interpretative positions of a mother (Chapter Two) and a sister (Chapter Three), emphasizing the narrative layers of the texts and the strategies rural women have adopted to both accept and reject cultural norms of 'woman' and femininity. Most importantly, these two chapters demonstrate rural women's refusal to accept oppressive identities, by illuminating instead their active resistance to the power hierarchies that previously denied them a history.

The final chapter of this inquiry, written from the interpretative position of a visionary daughter, attempts to situate the tensions between realities and ideologies of rural women's early 20th century experiences. It argues that the differences between them reflect problems related to the function and purpose of local genres and rural women's conflicting personal desires, in which they are torn between wanting to represent collective, conforming images of self and to individually resist the ideologies that narrowly define them.
Chapter One

Experience and Identity

Through Grandmother’s Eyes, the Journey Begins

*There is no sweeter meat than that which clings to our bones.*
- Walt Whitman

In accordance with the metaphorical multi-generational methodology outlined in the introduction, this analysis begins from the position of a grandmother. She is in the final stage of her life, where she must reconcile her life experiences, find them meaningful, and renew her sense of identity, as connected to the people she has known, the places she has been, and things she has done. To aid her reminiscing, the reading grandmother turns to journals, diaries, newspapers, letters, local and oral histories, autobiographies, and unpublished memoirs, which tell the story of her past and that of those around her.

As this grandmother undoubtedly determines, north-central British Columbia’s local historical records are invaluable for the insights they offer into understanding the unique geographical features of the area, the demographic patterns of settlement, women’s economic experiences, their contributions to rural communities, and their inter-personal relationships with others. By focusing on these themes and local sources, this analysis of rural women’s experiences suggests that the first four decades of the 20th century in north-central British Columbia represented a unique time period, when geographical and demographical factors provided the opportunity for social change and the blurring of gender boundaries which had previously

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separated men and women. Instead of affirming stereotypes that suggest rural women were “reluctant emigrants” or “cheerful helpmates,” it reveals their assertiveness and independence, as employed in their emigration circumstances, the diversities of their gender roles, and their significant contributions to family survival and community development.

**Gender and Geography**

In 1917, thirty three year old Oakla Dotson married John Collier and gave up an urban lifestyle and a successful career as an opera singer and soloist in New York, to become a pioneer homesteader on a large, remote ranch in the Ootsa Lake area. Soon after arriving, she gave birth, but six weeks later, while returning from a trip to Burns Lake for supplies, the buggy she was traveling in overturned, killing her infant child. Soon after, Oakla’s marriage died, as well. She stayed in the region and overcame her personal tragedies by immersing herself in politics and local economic activities, including mineral explorations in the area. While pursuing this particular interest, Oakla discovered several oil formations and a new mineral called “Collinsite,” which attracted much publicity in the United States and elsewhere, and ultimately led to further economic development and settlement in this part of the province. These activities also led Oakla to her second husband, Mr. Emmons, the president of a large oil company in Montana. In 1925, she left north-central British Columbia to make her home with him. Soon after, she gave birth to another child, but, as fate would have it, when this baby was six weeks old, tragedy struck again, and this time, Oakla perished.60

Oakla Emmons’s experiences exemplify the tragic realities of early 20th century rural life, but just as importantly they draw attention to the links between geography and gender and how shifting one sometimes meant shifting the other. In other words, focusing on the interplay of geography and gender emphasizes how rural women’s early 20th century experiences were unique to a specific time and place, and influenced not only by gender, race, ethnicity and class, but also by

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geography and demographics, which both diminished and increased their social powers.

a) Demographic Patterns of Early Settlement

Until the early 20th century, European settlement in north-central British Columbia was minimal and centred on fur trading post interests, augmented by a handful of prospectors, trappers and survey workers who lived sporadically throughout the region. Emigration to the area began in earnest around 1906, as a result of boosterism and land speculation associated with the building of the Grand Trunk Pacific railroad, which connected Eastern Canada to Prince Rupert. By 1941, the census recorded 11,000 Europeans and 2,600 Natives living in the region. Some of the newcomers lived in Prince George, which emerged as the railroad's divisional centre and the regional capital, with 2,000 residents, while others made their home in Vanderhoof, Burns Lake, Smithers and Hazelton, the only other towns in the region with populations exceeding two hundred. Still others settled in the tiny hamlets of Fort Fraser, Fraser Lake, Endako, Decker Lake, Topley, Houston, and Telkwa, which sprung up during railroad construction. Ultimately, however, as census records indicate, the majority of emigrants lived on acreages, in farming clusters scattered throughout the region. (Table 1)

In addition to the building of the railroad, several important trends characterize this area's settlement period, some of which are similar to the rest of the province, but unique when compared to the rest of Canada.

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61 Boosterism refers to the “exaggerated proclamation of the worth of a place.” Paul Koroscil, *British Columbia: Settlement History* (Burnaby: Simon Fraser University Press, 2000), 30. Railroad construction between Prince Rupert and Prince George took place between 1910 and 1914, however, the federal government’s announcement of its impending construction attracted speculators and settlers before then.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subdivision A – Nechako-Fraser</th>
<th>1921</th>
<th>1931</th>
<th>1941</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unorganized Parts</td>
<td>3249</td>
<td>5188</td>
<td>5253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian Reserves</td>
<td>1066</td>
<td>2627</td>
<td>3089</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince George</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subdivision E – Skeena-Bulkley</td>
<td>3982</td>
<td>5081</td>
<td>4862</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unorganized Parts</td>
<td>2744</td>
<td>2602</td>
<td>2254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian Reserves</td>
<td>1238</td>
<td>1480</td>
<td>1849</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smithers</td>
<td>999</td>
<td>999</td>
<td>759</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subdivision F – Nechako,Upper</td>
<td>3379</td>
<td>3083</td>
<td>3546</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unorganized Parts</td>
<td>2854</td>
<td>1920</td>
<td>2351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian Reserves</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>656</td>
<td>627</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burns Lake</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanderhoof</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTALS</strong></td>
<td>10610</td>
<td>13352</td>
<td>13661</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of Canada, 1941, Vol. 1, Table 1

Table 1

First, like the rest of the province, north-central British Columbia attracted a higher percentage of British emigrants than other parts of Canada. (Table 2) By 1941, 75% of the province’s female population was of British origin, as compared to a national average of 53%. As Jean Barman pointed out, the higher rates of British emigrants in British Columbia can be linked to the province’s colonial past or its “overt British ethos,” which guaranteed newcomers a good measure of cultural continuity. In addition, provincial officials primarily targeted British citizens in their immigration programs, particularly the middle-class, by offering them special incentives to come here. Immigration efforts in the prairie provinces, on the other

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63 One of the government’s emigration schemes was the Soldier Settlement Board, which specifically focused on the Bulkley and Nechako Valleys as its primary settlement areas. For details, see Paul Koroscil, “Soldiers, Settlement and Development in British Columbia, 1915-1930,” in BC Studies 54 (Summer 1982), 63-87.
hand, targeted the farming classes in central Europe. As a consequence, the majority of emigrant women living in north-central British Columbia during the early 20th century appear to have urban British backgrounds. Although it is difficult to determine their class identities, their administrative skills and business acumen suggests they were well educated.

| ADULT FEMALE POPULATION BY RACIAL ORIGIN | 1941 |  
|-----------------------------------------|-----|---|
|                                         | Total Females | British Origin | %  
| Canada                                 | 4,026,867 | 2,148,729 | 53.0 |
| Alberta                                | 256,857  | 138,258  | 53.8 |
| Saskatchewan                           | 286,579  | 136,708  | 47.7 |
| BC                                     | 296,364  | 223,060  | 75.3 |

Source: Census of Canada, 1941, Vol.4, Table 3

Table 2

Second, the skewed gender ratios that characterizes the province’s past is also reflected in the demographic profile of the north. (Table 3) For example, although male-female ratios were nearly equal in Canada by 1921, they were still 127:100 in British Columbia, and 171:100 in the north-central region of the province.

| GENDER RATIOS 1911 – 1941 | # of Males to 100 Females (all ages) |  
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
|                            | 1911 | 1921 | 1931 | 1941 |
| Canada                     | 118  | 109  | 107  | 106  |
| Alberta                    | 149  | 123  | 121  | 115  |
| Saskatchewan               | 145  | 120  | 119  | 114  |
| BC                         | 179  | 127  | 125  | 114  |
| BC – Div.8                 | n/a  | 171  | 156  | 142  |

Source: Census of Canada, 1941 Vol. 2, Table 19; and Census of Canada, 1921 Vol.2 Table 2

Table 3

65 Provincial historians disagree on matters of class among British emigrants. For example, Cole Harris has stated that the majority were middle-class, while Jean Barman has also suggested they were of modest means. See Cole Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), 223; and Jean Barman, “The West Beyond the West: The Demography of Settlement,” 10.
Even at the end of the study period, the gender imbalance in the north remained significant, with just 34% of the population being female.

Third, and perhaps most surprising, given their scarcity, marital rates of females in north-central British Columbia were lower than provincial averages. (Table 4 & 5) Conversely, many scholars have emphasized how the proportion of adult women in British Columbia who were married was always higher than the Canadian average. As such, the scholarly argument has been that skewed sex ratios restricted women's opportunities for independence and placed added pressure on them to marry.\textsuperscript{66}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Status of Females – British Columbia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As Percentage of Total Females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Div. 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Div. 8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

However, this notion becomes less valid when we consider that for most of the study period, Alberta and Saskatchewan’s sex ratios were less disparate than B.C.’s, yet marital rates were higher and further, that in all years between 1891 and 1941, British Columbia recorded significantly higher rates of widowed and divorced women than these two provinces and indeed, the rest of Canada, as well.

Marital Status of Adult Females 1911 - 1941
Number and Percentage Distribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Single</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Widowed</th>
<th>Divorced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BC -</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>95,984</td>
<td>28.3%</td>
<td>64.9%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>156,942</td>
<td>25.5%</td>
<td>66.0%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>224,486</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
<td>62.2%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>296,364</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
<td>63.0%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alberta</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>91,567</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
<td>68.7%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>159,137</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
<td>69.3%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>213,257</td>
<td>29.0%</td>
<td>64.6%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>256,857</td>
<td>28.5%</td>
<td>64.2%</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sask.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>118,476</td>
<td>25.5%</td>
<td>69.7%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>195,659</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
<td>69.7%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>260,806</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
<td>63.2%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>286,579</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
<td>62.0%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>2,210,276</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
<td>56.9%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>2,760,425</td>
<td>32.1%</td>
<td>59.2%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>3,379,483</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
<td>57.4%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>4,026,876</td>
<td>33.0%</td>
<td>58.0%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5

Ultimately, these statistics contradict notions of marriage as the driving force behind female emigration to British Columbia. Alternatively, as immigration propaganda and local sources suggest, women also immigrated to north-central regions of the province to pursue land ownership and financial independence. As one 1909 British newspaper asserted, "No girl should seek the new land with marriage shining ahead as the chief star. Let her work and career be foremost in her thought."\(^{67}\) Surprisingly enough, north-central British Columbia offered several advantages for women who hoped to increase their independence.

\(^{67}\) February 1909, *Imperial Colonist*, as cited in Emma Jane Curtin, "Daughters of Empire, 57.
b) Rural Women and Land Ownership

British Columbia was one of the first provinces in Canada to extend property rights to married women, and the only province to offer homestead land to single women through its pre-emption program.68 Elsewhere in Canada, provincial laws and the Dominion Lands Act restricted land ownership, including pre-emptions, to household heads, and thus, only men and widowed or divorced women were eligible.69 As a result of British Columbia’s land policies, the province has a unique history of female land ownership.70

Georgina Roberts, Elizabeth McGregor, Bernice Martin, and Mrs. H.C. Jones were among those women who took advantage of the province’s land policies and speculation opportunities during the region’s railroad construction period. Roberts and McGregor both purchased huge tracts of land in the Fort George area prior to 1909 and although it appears that neither of them settled in the area, they both recorded huge profits when selling their lands.71 Bernice Martin, the young wife of a Grand Trunk Pacific railroad contractor, demonstrated similar financial astuteness, when in 1912, she wrote to her father in Wisconsin from her little tent in Decker Lake, pleading for yet another loan, so she could add to the profits she had earlier

70 See Peter Baskerville, “Women and Investment in Late 19th Century Urban Canada: Victoria and Hamilton, 1880-1901,” in *The Canadian Historical Review* 80:2 (June 1999), 191-218. In a comparative study of land ownership in Hamilton, Ontario and Victoria, British Columbia, Baskerville found that in spite of similar land policies, the rates of female land ownership were much higher in Victoria, and that in fact, owning land and borrowing money did not appear to be influenced by gender, at all.
 amassed by speculating in land in Prince Rupert. This time, Martin hoped to invest in the newly announced “government-approved GTP townsite of Fort George,” by participating in the $100,000 pool being organized by railroad employees. Martin’s letters clearly indicate that she was making financial decisions independent of her husband. Around the same time and just a little further down the railroad line, near Hazelton, Mrs. H.C. Jones also asserted her economic independence and business acumen, by purchasing sixteen sections of coal lands adjacent to Driftwood Creek. While local records indicate that many of the region’s female land-owners, like Jones, were married, these notions may in fact be misleading, because as provincial studies show, although married women represented the majority of female landowners, in reality many were financially independent and living apart from their husbands. For example, although Olive Fredrickson was legally married in 1928 when she purchased land in the Nechako Valley, she had been living independent of her husband for several years.

Turning from land speculation to homesteading reveals further diversity in the marital status of female land-owners in the region. Records indicate that married women often pre-empted land in order to increase their husband’s holdings or to tie up nearby land parcels until the family decided which area was the most suitable for homesteading. For example, shortly after the family’s arrival in the Francois Lake

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72 Letters of Bernice Medberry Martin 1912-1914, Bulkley Valley Museum, Smithers.
73 Omineca Herald, 3 May 1912. A section of land equals 640 acres.
74 See Baskerville, “Women and Investment,” 191-218. Baskerville found that although 67% of female landowners in Victoria at the turn of the century were married, 40% of these women lived apart from their husbands. See also Buddie, “Women, Family and Entrepreneurship,” 270. Buddie similarly found that more than half of the province’s self-employed married women did not live with or depend financially on their husbands. For homestead land records representing the region, see Land Settlement Board, 1916-1967, BC Archives, GR 0929, Boxes 60-72; and Crown Land Pre-Emption Records, GR 0112, Vol. 9-26, 56-59, 119-128, 216-219.
area in 1910, Mr. Jeffrey registered seven pre-emptions, one each for himself, his wife and their five children.\textsuperscript{76} Single women, like Florrie Evans, also took advantage of the fact that in British Columbia a "girl need only be over eighteen and self-supporting to pre-empt a quarter of land."\textsuperscript{77} Evans recalled the advice given to single women emigrating to the province:

The Canadian Department of the Interior did caution emigrating women from Britain to earn their own living for a while before taking a husband. They cautioned the young woman to remember that in many cases where a farmer on a homestead wanted a wife it meant she was to have all the drudgery and worry of a farm...and get no wages for her effort.\textsuperscript{78}

After registering her pre-emption in the Nechako Valley in 1912, Evans assumed primary responsibility for clearing her land and fulfilling the necessary requirements for full ownership. That she took pride in these accomplishments is evidenced by her memoirs, written sixty years later, where she continued to refer to the family homestead as "her" land.\textsuperscript{79} Although Evans did marry a year after arriving in the region, other single women heeded the advice of the government and chose to maintain their independence. Cassie MacMillan, who immigrated to the Bulkley Valley in 1905 and shortly thereafter registered one of the area's first pre-emptions, was one of them. Miss Cain, who staked her claim at Ootsa Lake, was another. Both women remained single and full-time farmers for the rest of their lives.\textsuperscript{80}

Farming was not easy for a man or woman on their own, however, and although

\textsuperscript{76} Wiggs O'Neill, "A Lifetime in British Columbia and Early Days," unpub. n.d., 137, Bulkley Valley Museum, Smithers.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 32.
\textsuperscript{79} "Florrie Evans Memoirs," Nechako Valley Historical Society Collection, Nechako Valley Museum, Vanderhoof.
MacMillan and Cain had youth on their sides, the majority of single female farmers did not. According to the 1931 census, 71% of British Columbia’s independent female homesteaders were older widowed women, some of whom were running family farms previously owned by their husbands, and others who purchased or preempted land after their husbands had died.\textsuperscript{81} Mrs. Watson, for example, was widowed and seventy years old when she purchased six hundred acres in the Francois Lake area in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{82} Similarly, Margaret Christian, was a middle-aged widow when she purchased six hundred acres of farm land near Endako in 1920.\textsuperscript{83} In summary, the local historical record suggests that many women, of all ages and marital status, were attracted to north-central British Columbia because it offered land ownership possibilities. While others came primarily to work or to pursue strategic or traditional marital opportunities, it appears that most female emigrants expected to assume new roles and responsibilities that would shift their identities as women.

\textbf{Gender and Economic Identity}

\textit{Edna and Tom Tyner arrived in Fort George with their four small children during the summer of 1913 and within days, Edna had turned their little tent cabin into a comfortable home, canned hundreds of jars of wild berries, and established a ready market for her homemade bread and ironing skills. During the following seven years, Edna gave birth to three more children and the family moved seven times. For several years they lived in town, while Tom worked away from home, either harvesting on the prairies, trapping, or on his pre-emption at Shelley. Eventually Edna gave up waiting for her own homestead, and borrowed money from her parents in Ontario to rent a farm on the Nechako River, and later, one at Mud River. Tom continued to be absent much of the time and family survival remained Edna’s}\n
\textsuperscript{81} Melanie Buddie, "Women, Family and Entrepreneurship," 300-01. Buddie reported that in 1931, 71% of the female farmers in the province were widows, while 14% were single females and 14.6% were married. However, as she also noted, the married female farmers were in all likelihood not living with their husbands, as census takers were instructed to record all farmers’ wives as unemployed.

\textsuperscript{82} Pat Turkki, \textit{Burns Lake and District: A History Formal and Informal} (Burns Lake: Burns Lake Historical Society, 1973), 247.

\textsuperscript{83} \textit{Deeper Roots and Greener Valleys} (Fraser Lake: Fraser Lake and District Historical Society, 1986), 160.
responsibility. She learned to further exploit her domestic skills by cooking, knitting and sewing for bachelors, doing housework for pay, taking in foster children, and selling bread, water, wood, milk, potatoes, flowers, and soap. Edna outshone her husband with her financial astuteness and farm management skills, which included digging her own well and building her own fireplace.\(^{84}\)

North-central British Columbia offered a diversity of experiences for women like Edna during the early settlement period that extended far beyond traditional domestic roles. Nowhere are these diversities more apparent than in women's economic activities. Indeed, rural women's participation in all levels of local economies is remarkable and further exemplifies the role of geography and demographics in the construction of rural women's identities.

As Edna Tyner's experiences suggest, there were no firmly drawn lines between rural farming and small town life in early 20\(^{th}\) century north-central British Columbia, except perhaps enhanced mobility and economic opportunities. For women living in town, life bore a remarkable similarity to women on farms, except the pigs, cows and chickens were fewer in number and in the back yard instead of the back forty, and home, especially during the early years of settlement, was a tent, rather than a log cabin. Regardless of where they lived, the domestic roles of the majority of rural women in the region included hauling water from the nearby river, chopping and gathering wood for heating and cooking, scrubbing clothes on a wash board, cultivating large vegetable gardens, milking cows, feeding pigs and chickens, as well as the more traditional responsibilities of household management. On farming acreages, women's roles were even more demanding, as they oversaw much larger egg, butter and milk productions, which they sold to nearby markets, thereby providing a significant portion of the family's cash income. For example, in

\(^{84}\) Edna A.W. Tyner Diary, 1912-1922, Fraser-Fort George Museum, Prince George.
addition to all her many domestic responsibilities, Carolina Dahlgren, of Fraser Lake, contributed more to the family economy with her five hundred chickens than her husband did cutting ties full-time for the railroad.85

For the majority of newly emigrated women to this region, the necessary adjustments to their gender identities were significant. In addition to animal husbandry skills, these women recall having men teach them carpentry skills, so that they could work alongside them in building their homes and barns. They also learned to ride horses, butcher farm animals, fall trees, clear land, and plow, plant, rake and haul hay. Florrie Evans recalled with pride how she cleared her own land, using nothing more than a pick-axe, a rake, and a shovel.86 Some women also learned to mend fences, while others, like Helen Campbell, were taught to shoot guns, so they could supplement the family larder and protect themselves from bears, cougars and other wild animals.87 Many women were also relied upon to serve as country doctors and midwives. Dorothy Forde delivered most of the babies in the Francois Lake area during the early settlement period, and she “kept a good stock of medicine” for other medical emergencies.88 While Forde had no previous training, Terry Hoops was a registered nurse, which meant that she took on “all the doctoring” in the Telkwa area for many years.89 Lydia Saunders, a teacher by profession, also traveled throughout the Lakes District on horseback, delivering babies.90 For one Francois Lake family, fixing the engine of the old Model T Ford was another role.

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85 Deeper Roots and Greener Valleys, 266.
88 Pioneer Women, 27.
89 Ibid., 35.
90 Jean Reynolds Interview, Lakes District Historical Society Collection, Lakes District Museum, Burns Lake.
assumed by a woman. According to her grand-daughter, Mrs. Guss enjoyed
"hoist[ing] the motor out of the car and set[ting] it up in the work shed."91 Although
mechanical skills were not part of every rural women's repertoire, the majority
assumed the other roles described, and often, with very little assistance from men.

In addition to outside farming chores, household and childcare
responsibilities, many rural women further contributed to household economies by
pursuing financial opportunities in the public sphere. For example, while Dorothy
Forde's husband worked full-time as a fire warden, justice of the peace and a
freighter, she was left to manage their isolated farm in the Francois Lake area alone,
and in addition to making and shipping 100 pounds of butter a week to Smithers, she
started a library, served as the area's midwife and country doctor, and ran the local
post-office.92 Florrie Evans also found seasonal work off the farm, as a cook in one
of the many tie-hacking camps scattered throughout the region, while Jean Paulson
and Lucy Dewulf chose to work alongside men as tie-hackers themselves.93 Mrs.
Henkel, on the other hand, independently owned and operated two guiding and
hunting lodges near Francois Lake, while her husband worked as a ferryman and a
rancher.94 Margaret Christian's entrepreneurial skills were equally notable. In
addition to purchasing six hundred acres of farm land near Endako in 1920, she
owned a general store in Endako [and] bought and sold furs for the Hudson's Bay
Company and managed the local post office.95

91 Guss Family Interview, Lakes District Historical Society Collection.
92 Pioneer Women, 26-7.
93 "Florrie Evans Memoirs," Nechako Valley Historical Society Collection; "Telling Their Stories," Omineca
Express, 22 October 1997, B-15; Jean Paulson Interview, Lakes District Historical Society Collection; and
Lucy Dewulf Interview, Nechako Valley Historical Society Collection.
94 "Francois Lake Lodge Doubles Accommodation for Guests" The Observer, 19 April 1928.
95 Deeper Roots and Greener Valleys, 160.
Women living within rural towns also found opportunities to expand their domestic roles and increase their financial independence by owning rooming-houses or ladies dress shops, working alongside their husbands in family-owned enterprises, or operating them on their own, while their male partners worked elsewhere. For example, Barney Mulvaney's wife managed their hotel in Burns Lake for many years, while he ran a full-time pack train outfit back and forth to Hazelton. Single women, on the other hand, dominated the teaching, health and service-related professions. Between 1915 and 1930 alone, there were more than six hundred teachers employed in north-central British Columbia, of which 83.5% were female, and 92.5% were single. Turn-over rates, at just over a year, were extremely high, primarily because the women were young and expected to endure extremely difficult teaching and living conditions. Most boarded with local families, which meant they had little or no privacy, often sharing a bed with one of their pupils. The teacher's duties also extended far beyond educating children, and included organizing most of the community's social events.

Mary Williams, one of the region's early teachers, kept a diary during the three years she taught at Mud River, near Prince George, in which she detailed her frustrations at having to sleep with the Miller child, endure the sexual harassment

96 Paul Stortz and J. Donald Wilson, “Education on the Frontier: Schools, Teachers and Community Influence in North-Central British Columbia,” in Histoire Sociale 26:52 (November 1993), 265-290. These statistics represent the area between Terrace and Vanderhoof. The number of teachers in the study region would have been even higher, as the area between and including Prince George and Vanderhoof was more heavily populated than that between Hazelton and Terrace. See also Jack Mould, Stump Farms and Broadaxes (Saanichton: Hancock House, 1976), 111. As Mould reports, within a 100 mile radius of Smithers alone, there were 28 schools.

97 In Burns Lake, one female teacher shared a bed with the mother of the house. See Pat Turkki, Burns Lake, 167.
and constant attention of men, and act as a model of adult feminine morality. In one
entry, the eighteen-year old wrote:

I wish I could go home where I would not always have to be on the
lookout to not do something a school teacher oughtn't to do...I just want
to go home and be a kid for awhile...I am so sick of being a grown up
young lady.98

Mildred McQuillan, who taught at Orange Valley near Fraser Lake during the
same period, recorded similar complaints. Her diary also exposes tensions within
rural communities during this period, as neighbours squabbled over the school's
location and who would have the privilege of boarding the teacher.99 The teacher's
rent money was clearly a welcome supplement to rural family incomes and
McQuillan was outraged by the amount she was expected to pay her host family.

Hospitals in Prince George, Smithers, Telkwa, Burns Lake, Francois Lake
and Hazelton also employed many single women as nurses, hospital
superintendents, support staff, and, in one case at least, even as doctors. Dr. Maysil
Williams was not only young, single, and female, but the first physician to serve the
Francois Lake hospital, which operated between 1919 and 1928.100 For the first
three decades of the 20th century, the Hazelton hospital also functioned as a
provincial training school for nurses, during which time it employed and trained more
than one hundred and fifty young women.101

Finally, although most single women in the region worked for wages, some
deviated from employment norms, by becoming self-employed, as prostitutes.

Prostitution may not have been a respectable occupation, but it was clearly

98 Mary Carolina Greenwood (nee Williams) Diaries, 1922-1925, BC Archives, MS 0261.
99 Mildred McQuillan Diary 1927, BC Archives, MS 1252.
lucrative.\textsuperscript{102} Census takers seemed reluctant to record these women’s economic activities; however, informal sources do confirm their presence throughout the region and their prominence as a social and economic concern, particularly in Hazelton and Prince George. In both towns, activities related to prostitution incited moral officials to have local laws created, which forced the women to relocate outside of town limits.\textsuperscript{103} In Hazelton, these actions ultimately created a new town:

Since their trade was largely with the construction men who craved companionship, [the prostitutes] managed to part a lot of them from a payroll that had previously been spent in Hazelton. As a result, Three Mile flourished. I understand that it is now known by the more dignified name of New Hazelton.\textsuperscript{104}

Lucrative as it was, prostitution seemed to be a temporary economic strategy, in which geographical isolation and disparate gender ratios offered unique opportunities for women to exploit their femininity. For example, Blanche, a Hazelton prostitute, “had a little daughter in Seattle who thought her mother was a dressmaker,” and as the woman explained, “another couple of hundred in the bank and that’s what I’ll be and I hope she never knows the difference.”\textsuperscript{105} Much like the region’s school teachers, the prostitutes often ended their careers by marrying and “raising families of good citizens.”\textsuperscript{106} In summary, north-central British Columbia’s local historical records provides many examples of rural women, both married and


\textsuperscript{104} Blaine Boyd, “The Coming of the Steel.”

\textsuperscript{105} Eva MacLean, \textit{The Far Land}, 44.

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 126.
single, on farms and in small towns, who combined farming and domestic-related economic activities with work in the public sphere.

The contributions that rural women in this region made to household economies reflect provincial trends, whereby, unlike the prairies, farming was never more than marginal. Cole Harris maintained, for example, that by 1940, full-time employment off the farm was the norm for all rural males in British Columbia, which meant that women and children were often left to run family farms on their own.\footnote{Cole Harris, \textit{The Resettlement of British Columbia}, 227.}

However, in the north-central region it seems that women's paid labour contributions were also required. Their occupational pluralities also contradict Melanie Buddie's assertion that “farming was virtually the only entrepreneurial occupation available [to women] in rural areas.”\footnote{Melanie Buddie, “The Business of Women: Female Entrepreneurship in British Columbia, 1901-1941,” in \textit{Journal of the West} 43:2 (2004), 50, 51.}

However, in Buddie's defense, many of rural women's economic activities, including the income they generated from the farm, do not appear in census records, upon which her study was based. As Buddie herself noted, married women were assumed to be unemployed; therefore, unless they independently owned businesses or farms, all of their work went unrecorded.

Further, even when their husbands lived and worked full-time elsewhere, census takers were directed to consider the men as the head of the household.\footnote{Ibid, 48.} As such, formal statistics not only negate women's economic, administrative, educational and health-related contributions to rural societies, but they also misrepresent the actual number of female farmers there were in rural areas. Nonetheless, even with the gendered omissions in census data, statistics indicate that women's participation in
the labour force in this region and elsewhere in the province is yet another unique feature of British Columbia's history.110

By drawing on the 1911 census data, I offer, as a final case in point, an analysis of the demographic and economic activities of the emigrant female population of Hazelton, which, at that time, was north-central British Columbia's most established non-Native community. According to census details, eighty-eight women and 462 men lived in Hazelton during 1911, while an additional 450, predominantly male, lived in nearby railroad construction camps.111 While fifty-one of the town's women reported being married, six were clearly financially independent and living on their own. Therefore, I have considered them as single, which makes the ratio of married and single women to be approximately equal.112 In terms of employment, all but two of the single females recorded occupations.113 Among the married women, only seven reported being employed; however, because an additional nine were wives of retail and hotel owners, I have considered them to be engaged in these economic activities, as well.114 Thus, the adjusted female employment rates are 95% for single women and 35% for married women.115

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110 See for example, Melanie Buddle, “The Business of Women,” 44-53. Buddle's quantitative study of female employment indicates that, in spite of skewed gender roles, provincial rates of female employment between 1901 and 1941, particularly for married women, were much higher than elsewhere in Canada.

111 Census of Canada, 1911. Enumeration data for Comox-Atlin Electoral District 8, North Bulkley Valley, Enumeration Districts 9 and 36. The Getanmaax Reserve, adjacent to Hazelton is not included in this data.

112 As a point of interest, just 21 of Hazelton’s married women recorded children living with them.

113 While one of the unemployed single females was the 17 year old daughter of the local physician, the other was the 22 year old sister of a male household head. In all likelihood, she was occupied as his housekeeper.

114 Evidence from other sources suggests that these women would have worked alongside their husbands, as was the norm. See, for example, Buddle, “The Business of Women,”; and Sylvia Van Kirk, “A Vital Presence: Women in the Cariboo Gold Rush, 1862-1875,” in British Columbia Reconsidered, ed. Gillian Creese and Veronica Strong-Boag (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1992), 22.

115 These rates are significantly higher than provincial norms, which were 65% for single women and 18% for married women, and higher than national norms, which were 80% and 8%, respectively. See Melanie Buddle, “The Business of Women,” 46.
The single women were predominately wage-earners, engaged as nurses, teachers, stenographers, domestics, hospital matron, house-keepers, and waitresses. There were also five who were self-employed, three as dress-makers, and one each as a rooming-house owner and a hotel-keeper. Finally, the census taker recorded occupations for an additional eight single women, which were subsequently crossed out. This apparent act of censorship on the recorder’s part, when combined with local evidence that confirms the presence of prostitutes in Hazelton during this period, suggests that these eight women were likely prostitutes. The married women all held entrepreneurial positions, as hotel-keepers, restaurant owners, ladies wear store owners, and dress-makers.

To summarize, this statistical data follows provincial trends related to single and married women’s economic activities, whereby single women primarily worked for wages and married women engaged in entrepreneurial activities. It also confirms the region’s extremely disparate gender ratios, higher rates of single women as compared to provincial norms, and higher rates of female employment, as compared to both provincial and national norms. It also draws attention to the limitations of census records, for although it includes the entrepreneurial activities of independent women, it ignores the economic activities of those working in family-owned businesses.

As the preceding evidence suggests, geographical isolation and demographic imbalances in early 20th century north-central British Columbia challenged

116 The latter two women, aged thirty-five and forty-one, were the oldest single women in the community, which might explain their deviation from employment norms.
118 See Melanie Buddie, “The Business of Women.”
patriarchal traditions by providing rural women with unprecedented opportunities to increase their independence, autonomy, freedom and choice, through land ownership and participation in local economies. An examination of rural women’s social identities further supports the links between gender, geography, and demography in determining diversity and difference in women’s social status and power.

**Gender and Social Identity**

**Rural Women’s Relationships with Men**

Sandy Jenkins produced a cigar box full of ladies pictures, some just busts and some full length. He said to me, ‘Will ye no give me a hand to pick mesel out a female?’ He had been writing to some matrimonial club for a wife. ‘Well, Sandy,’ I said, ‘we will look over the full length ones. If you want a mate for your farm, you want to see all of her and not just get a pretty face. You want a good husky woman who can do some work. I picked out a big husky one with good big feet. ‘Now Sandy,’ I said, ‘this one would be my idea of what you want.’ He looked the amazon over and said, ‘I ken ye are about right. I’ll write the lassie.’

Like many other areas in western Canada, north-central British Columbia’s local historical records indicate that many females immigrated to the region as mail-order or war brides. Considering the many responsibilities assumed by women on early 20th century farms, it is not surprising that male homesteaders like Sandy Jenkins went to such great lengths to find wives. Clearly, women were needed not only for companionship and reproduction, but for successful farming, as well. Extremely disparate gender roles, combined with geographical remoteness, forced men to resort to non-traditional methods of finding a wife. For example, many found

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120 While several women elsewhere in the region reported coming as ‘mail-order’ brides, they appeared to represent the majority of marriages in the farming settlement areas of Ootsa Lake and Francois Lake. See for example, Jean Clark Giesbrecht, *Heritage Lost,* and John Glen, Sr., *Where the Rivers Meet: The Story of the Settlement of the Bulkley Valley* (Duncan: New Rapier Press Ltd., 1977); and Wiggs O’Neill, “A Lifetime in British Columbia and Early Days.”
their marital partners by advertising in local newspapers or national agricultural publications. However, as the experiences of Tommy McKinley, a middle-aged homesteader in the Ootsa Lake area attest, this was not an approach without risk. As custom dictated, McKinley sent his prospective mail-order bride money so she could travel from Kansas to marry him. Everything proceeded according to plan until she arrived at the Francois Lake ferry landing a day earlier than expected and was forced to seek accommodation with a nearby bachelor. By the time McKinley showed up the following day, she had committed to marrying her new host.\textsuperscript{121}

While both of these men’s marital strategies seem rather desperate, rural women’s reasons for marrying were often more pragmatic than romantic, as well.

Mildred Cassidy’s courtship was very brief. As she recalled, her husband proposed the day they met, not because he was smitten with her, but because “he was desperate for a housekeeper.” For her part, she responded by asking if he drank and whether he was a Catholic or a Protestant. When he confirmed that he was a Protestant, and although he liked to drink, he would never do so “at the expense of children,” she “let that ride” and married him.\textsuperscript{122} In a similar vein, Margaret Gardner received three proposals for marriage soon after her arrival in the Francois Lake area, two of which took place on the same day. She accepted the offer which met her criteria for marriage, which meant he owned a home and had a thousand dollars in the bank.\textsuperscript{123} While Cassidy and Gardner’s courtships were

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 131. McKinley’s subsequent attempts to procure a wife were similarly unsuccessful. A few years later, my great-grandmother, Annie Middleton, emigrated from England as his mail-order bride and although they did marry, the marriage ended within a year.

\textsuperscript{122} Mildred Cassidy Interview, Lakes District Historical Society Collection.

\textsuperscript{123} Margaret Gardner, Wooden Sidewalks: From the Metropolitan City of Zurich to the British Columbia Hinterland (Prince George: Repository Press, 1983), 26, 27.
almost non-existent, this was not the case for all rural women. Nan Capewell remained single for several years after emigrating from Britain to the Bulkley Valley, during which time she worked in the Aldermere Hotel, near Telkwa. After a traditional courtship, she based her decision to marry Joe Bourgon not on love, but on her advancing age (she was thirty-four), her desire to farm, and his promise of a new house. These and other examples support Eliane Silverman's argument that early 20th century frontier marriages were an economic arrangement, "designed for survival, for productivity, and for reproduction," and not necessarily, for romantic fulfillment. As such, women had to be pragmatic in their marital choices.

Rural women's relationships with men outside of marriage also reflect a remarkable amount of autonomy. For example, Mary Williams was just eighteen years old when she began her teaching career in the Mud River area, yet her diary indicates a great deal of assertiveness in her relationships with men. In addition to recording her intense frustration with the constant attention of nearby bachelors, Williams makes references to initiating and maintaining letter-writing relationships with at least six males she had 'met' via the "Primrose Page" of an agricultural publication. In her face-to-face relationships with older men in the region, she also defied the subordinate roles expected of her youth and gender, for as her diary indicates, she expended a great deal of time and energy engaged in political, religious, and ethnic debates with the married men living around her. The social experiences of this young woman certainly contradict the historiographical

126 Mary Greenwood (Williams) Diary, BC Archives.
suggestion that Canadian women, during the late 19th and early 20th century, “were taught by men and other women to be docile, submissive wives, mothers and hostesses.”

Emotional and social ties between women and men outside of marriage are also implied by the local historical record’s many examples of friendships between married women and bachelors and by the incredible lengths that men and women went to in order to have social contact with one another. Newspapers recorded each and every social event and movement of men and women in and out of the region. The mobility of women, as well as the frequency of large gatherings and dances, even in the most isolated farming areas, is surprising. For example, in spite of the many responsibilities related to running a large farm on his own, Jock McMillan, a Vanderhoof bachelor, found time to socialize with more than two hundred individuals in a one year period, many of whom were married women he escorted to dances, picnics, meetings and to visits with other married women. He also retrieved doctors for his female neighbours, showed great concern for them in child-birth, and carefully recorded the arrival and growth of their children. Clearly, in this region it was socially acceptable for bachelors to develop strong emotional bonds with other men and with married women. For one single man, it was even okay to invite unescorted married women to stay in his home. During the early decades of the early 20th century, Charley Barrett, a wealthy homesteader in the Houston area, treated many married women to week long vacations at his “Home


Ranch," where he engaged them in shooting, riding horses, dancing and playing bridge.\textsuperscript{129} Admittedly, these social opportunities were not available to all rural women, but they do suggest that gender imbalances did not severely restrict women's social experiences or sustain inequalities in their power relationships with men.

Having said that, relationships between rural men and women were not always autonomous or based on mutual support. For example, skewed demographic ratios and active participation in household economies did not guarantee women equality within their marriages. Ivy Middleton spent most of her ninety-seven years in the Bulkley Valley, where she raised nine children and assumed primary responsibility for all chores related to owning a farm, while her husband enjoyed a thirty-year career with the local railroad company. In spite of her many contributions to family survival, Ivy's marriage was defined by patriarchal dominance, for she had little say in financial or other important decision-making matters and was frequently made to feel inferior to her husband.\textsuperscript{130} Her neighbour and friend, Nan Bourgon, endured a similarly oppressive relationship with her husband.\textsuperscript{131} For women like Ivy and Nan, relationships with other women and volunteer work in the community often offered alternative ways of achieving social autonomy.

\textbf{Rural Women and Social Activism}

\textit{In Fort Fraser, twelve women began meeting in January of 1921, under the name of “Our Club,” and the motto, “for the common good.” Their first objective was to build a suitable town hall. Mrs. Tannock calculated the costs at approximately six}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{129} Bernice Martin Letters, Bulkley Valley Museum, Smithers.
\textsuperscript{130} Ivy Middleton, Interview with author (grand-daughter), 28 November, 1998, Terrace, B.C.
\textsuperscript{131} Nan Bourgon, \textit{Rubber Boots for Dancing}, 56-59.
\end{footnotesize}
thousand dollars and Mrs. Slavin donated a town lot. The women then began organizing fund-raising events and canvassing the town for donations of labour, money and materials, and eight months later, they held the official opening of their hall. Six months after that, they were debt free. For the following sixty-six years, these twelve women and their successors owned and maintained this hall, which was the lifeblood and centre of all community events in Fort Fraser. In 1987, the building was torn down and replaced, this time under the direction of a new municipal committee.132

For the women of Fort Fraser and indeed, for the majority of immigrant women living in north-central British Columbia during the early 20th century, life represented a return to the agrarian lifestyles of their grandmothers and great-grandmothers, with respect to their undeveloped material surroundings and their economic activities, which focused primarily on subsistence and survival. Undoubtedly, these women longed for the household conveniences, health care, education, and other social institutions and activities they had previously known, and local historical records suggest that they did not wait for men to attain them.

All of the region’s early newspapers give credit to the efforts of the Ladies Aid, Hospital Boards, Red Cross, Women’s Church Auxiliaries, Women’s Institute, and similar female-only groups, for their substantial fund-raising efforts, leadership, organization and control of community social events. Among these groups the Women’s Institute stands out for raising the profile of rural women, not only in this region, but throughout Canada.133 Under the umbrella of the WI, the women of north-central British Columbia lobbied on behalf of all women and supported the

132 Lenore Rudland, Fort Fraser, 208-229.
133 British Columbia Women’s Institute, Modern Pioneers: 1909-1959 (Vancouver: Evergreen Press, 1959). (also known by the acronym WI) The WI was initiated in 1897, by Adelaide Hoodless, a rural Ontario woman, who was incited to action after her baby died from drinking contaminated milk. By 1916, it had become an international movement and the second largest organization in Canada, with nine hundred branches and more than thirty thousand members across the nation. By 1921, nearly half of the families in British Columbia were represented in the organization. Its scope was broad and included domestic, health, culture, education, social and political concerns.
causes of their urban counterparts, but more importantly, they directed incredible
amounts of time and energy towards improving rural living conditions and acquiring
cultural, social, health and educational amenities and services. The efforts and the
results of their labours cannot be understated. These women raised most, if not all,
of the monies needed to build and maintain community halls and acquire doctors,
nurses, and dentists. They organized dances, picnics, barbecues, concerts, fall
fairs, and community sports events and petitioned for schools, and then when they
got them, they outfitted them with kitchens, sports equipment, pianos, and books.
They fought for mail service, roads, electricity and water, set up bursaries for rural
children to attend university, and sponsored Girl Guide and Boy Scout groups, teen
and drama clubs, and special classes in their schools. They planted flowers and
trees, fenced and did all of the maintenance in their local cemeteries and, most
important to this study, they wrote local histories. They also sent sick children to
cities for medical care, supported needy families and gathered food, bandages and
other supplies for soldiers at war. In several communities, women were gathering
for these purposes before they had even heard of the Women's Institute.

The founding members of the Round Lake Women’s Club, formed in 1920,
clearly included some “feminists under the skin,” for its mandate was not only to
advance the “social and educational condition of the community,” but also to improve

134 British Columbia Women’s Institute, Modern Pioneers, 89-94. See also Telkwa Women’s Institute Records,
BC Archives, MS 0150; Houston Women’s Institute Records, MS 0526; Quick Women’s Institute Records, MS
1421 and MS 1342; Southside Women’s Institute Records, MS 1639; Fraser Lake Women’s Institute Records,
MS 1504; and Elnora C. Smith, ed. Marks on the Forest Floor, 49-54; Lenore Rudland, Fort Fraser, 207-228;
Deeper Roots and Greener Valleys, 132-140; Carol J. Dennison, “Women’s Institutes in British Columbia:
Housewives ‘For Home and Country’” (M.A., University of Victoria, 1983); and Alexandra Zacharias, “British
Columbia Women’s Institute in the Early Years: Times to Remember,” in In Her Own Right: Selected Essays
on Women’s History in British Columbia, eds. Barbara Latham and Cathy Kess (Victoria: Camosun College,
1980), 55-78.
their “knowledge of women’s legal standing, parliamentary law” and to elevate themselves “to a better knowledge of what [was] going on in the woman’s world everywhere.” Nonetheless, much like the women of Fort Fraser, their first major project was a community hall and within a year, they too celebrated their hall’s opening. As founding member Nan Bourgon asserted, “that hall was our biggest blessing.” While political and social issues brought these women together, it was health care needs that inspired the women of Houston towards activism. A local resident confirms their success by stating, “only after the Houston Women’s Institute was formed was any real progress made in getting medical services for the community.” All local histories give accolades to the Women’s Institute for their efforts and contributions towards community development, and therefore, by assumption, to the social power and influence of rural women. As one Fraser Lake pioneer wrote, “the Women’s Institute was really the backbone of Fraser Lake.”

While acknowledging the power and influence of the WI in British Columbia and the role it played in improving rural life, Carol Dennison suggested that men accepted their wives participation in this group because its mandate was based on domestic ideology. In other words, the community and nation were viewed by society as an extension of home, and women’s roles in both were the same. However, as the saying goes, “the personal is political,” and rural women in north-

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136 Nan Bourgon, *Rubber Boots*, 82. Round Lake is a farming settlement, in the Bulkley Valley. More than 80 years later, this hall continues to serve as the center for community events.
138 *Deeper Roots and Greener Valleys*, 281.
central British Columbia, like their counterparts elsewhere, clearly manipulated traditional ideologies of domesticity and separate spheres in order to achieve more far-reaching social change without creating gender conflict. Presumably, the backgrounds of these women also influenced their community involvement and activism. As Susan Jackel suggested, women with British middle-class backgrounds would have been very “conscious of the interdependence of education, economic independence and social mobility,” and of the power of female solidarity and activism. By organizing and participating in women’s groups like the WI, these women were able to instill a culture of female solidarity and activism in other rural women.

The minutes and records of regional branches of the Women’s Institute confirm that when women gathered they used their collective power to their political advantage. They not only discussed politics, but sent hundreds of petitions and resolutions to their organization’s national leaders, to school boards, and to governments. Historians elsewhere have noted this relationship between women’s groups (including the Women’s Institute) and the provincial government, particularly after the Liberals came to power in 1916, when important legislative changes resulted from women’s petitions for suffrage, prohibition, university courses, dower rights, and guardianship and maintenance laws. As Chris Clarkson stated, social reform in British Columbia was “essentially a feminist enterprise.” That the actions of women in north-central British Columbia made a difference is also

140 Susan Jackel, ed. Flannel Shirt and Liberty, xxiv.
142 Ibid., 286.
suggested by Michael Cramer, who studied women's suffrage campaigns in the province and determined that, in spite of the efforts of Helen MacGill and urban women, "rural ridings were more favorable to the [suffrage] question" and it was from the rural vote that the cause was won.\footnote{Michael H. Cramer, "Public and Political: Documents of the Woman's Suffrage Campaign in British Columbia, 1871-1917: The View from Victoria," in \textit{British Columbia Reconsidered: Essays on Women}, ed. Crease et al (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1992), 67.} Clearly, the Women's Institute and other female-only groups provided a venue for many women in this region to pursue philanthropic and charitable activities and put their organizational, fund-raising and political skills to use. In turn, these women were able to increase their independence and autonomy by assuming prominent roles in a variety of rural community-building activities.

In summary, the local historical record suggests that the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century represented a unique moment for newly emigrated women when geography, demographics and gender came together to provide them with unprecedented opportunities to redefine themselves as women. Like the women on the prairies, a return to agrarian semi-subsistence lifestyles required a reconfiguration of gender roles, in which conventional notions of femininity shifted to reflect the diversities of their rural experiences. Social change also resulted from their experiences as landowners, entrepreneurs, wage-earners, and social, economic and political players in the creation of rural societies, all of which similarly helped to shift gender ideologies and increase women's social power and influence.

In the next two chapters, the connections between rural women's lived experiences and the narrative representation of them within local historical records are explored. Focusing on the discourse itself and on issues of genre, voice,
language and power, these chapters emphasize the discordant relationship between the realities and ideologies of rural women.
Chapter Two

Discourse and Identity

Some women wept at the continual hard work. Others found loneliness much more difficult to bear. A great majority of the women, however, cheered and helped their men and in so doing, raised their own morale.

- Vanderhoof, The Town that Wouldn't Wait.

In the previous chapter, the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century experiences of rural women in north-central British Columbia emerged from the local historical record, revealing the material level of their lives and the roles that gender, geography and demographics played in producing diversity and difference in women's spatially constructed identities.\textsuperscript{144} Equally important to the construction of identity, however, is the ideological representation of women within these sources because, as Joan Scott and many others have argued, gender and identity are not only materially or spatially constructed, but socially constructed, as well. Accordingly, these next two chapters focus on the sources themselves, in order to determine the connections between the material and discursive levels of rural women's early 20\textsuperscript{th} century identities. In doing so, they also draw attention to the power of language and the many ways that it can alter and influence our understanding of rural women, without changing the material realities of their experiences. For example, reading the texts from one interpretative position suggests rural women's complicity with the androcentric narrative tradition, while reading them from another exposes strategies of resistance against this cultural script. Further, this complicity and resistance can occur in texts simultaneously. Most importantly, by focusing on the discourse, these two chapters emphasize the politics of self representation or how narrators of local sources have

\textsuperscript{144} By spatially, I am referring to the roles of geography and the physical environment in the construction of identities.
oppressed and empowered rural women according to their subjective needs, and how we, as authors and readers, have the power to do the same.

In accordance with the multi-generational methodologies outlined earlier, this chapter begins with an analysis of local sources based on the reading position of a "mother." This interpretative perspective is of one who is responsible, nurturing and capable of a "consciousness that understands it is in intercourse with a subject that is not absent, but not yet formed."\textsuperscript{145} In other words, instead of paying attention to the details of experience, the reader "listens to the ground noise of settler society" to get a sense of the dominant images of rural women created by the local historical record.\textsuperscript{146} This deconstructive reading is also one which pragmatically focuses on genre, voice, context, language and gender, or like a mother, is concerned first, with who is speaking, to whom they are speaking, and for what purpose.

**Mothering the Texts: The Conforming ‘Ground Noise’ of the Local Historical Record**

*The function of any written text is to reproduce ideology.*

- Mary Poovey

### a) Genre and Voice

To begin, the motherly reader determines that, regardless of who writes, local histories tend to merge with the dominant discourse. The gender of the author appears to be less important than the gender of the discourse, for even women produce androcentric narratives that hide their importance on the rural landscape. Having said that, it is significant that all but two of the nearly twenty collective or ‘official’ community histories representing north-central British Columbia were written


by a female author or editor or by a committee comprised primarily of women.\textsuperscript{147} In addition, rural women's voices represent the majority in local oral history and family memoir collections. These statistics suggest that rural women of this region wanted to be included in the historical record, that they were not willing to wait for scholars to put them there, and that they have demonstrated assertiveness and agency by dominating these particular genres. Further, as Gerder Lerner noted, the act of writing themselves into the historical record, in itself, implies emancipation, liberation, and psychological or social change, because in doing so these women are proclaiming that "men are not the centre of the world, but men and women are."\textsuperscript{148}

On the other hand, although rural women dominate as authors and narrators of collective local histories, oral histories and unpublished memoirs, they are notably under-represented as independent authors of published autobiographical texts. While more than twenty autobiographical works represent the early settlement experiences of people in this region, just six are written by women.\textsuperscript{149} These statistics suggest that rural women are, by and large, limited to the collective voice of woman, which as Judy Long suggested, results in generalizations and essentializing images of women.\textsuperscript{150} Even though oral histories and unpublished memoirs offer first-person female voices, they do not tend to be venues for private expression.

\textsuperscript{147} See the bibliography at the end of this work.
\textsuperscript{148} Gerder Lerner, as cited in Geraldine Moane, \textit{Gender and Colonialism} (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 130.
\textsuperscript{149} See the attached bibliography. Within the category of autobiography are several texts that could be considered local histories, but because they have single authors and are written from the speaking position of 'I,' I have considered them as autobiographical. Further, only four of the six female-written autobiographical texts are analyzed here in detail. Jessie Sugden's narrative is brief and specific only to her childhood, while that of Margaret Gardner only minimally focuses on her experiences in north-central British Columbia.
They are public or, at least, semi-public texts in the sense that rural women, as their narrators, knew that their stories would serve as the foundation for 'official' local histories and therefore, that they must conform to the expected cultural script. The paradox is that somehow producing a public text suppresses female voices and the private world of women, yet writing a public text is, assumably, a transgressive act in itself. This distinction between public and private in the production of local history and how it is okay for women to document the public history of their communities but not their private lives is suggested, for example, by an oral interview featuring Mrs. Van Dyke. While Van Dyke, who emigrated from London to Prince George in 1919 as a mail-order bride, was forthcoming with many of her life experiences, she refused to answer when asked what difficulties she had adjusting to her marriage.\footnote{Mrs. Van Dyke Interview, Carbutt Collection, Prince George Library.} Like other rural women, she understood that it was not her private experiences as an individual or a woman, but her status as an emigrant that allowed her a narrative voice.\footnote{Janet Floyd, 
\textit{Writing the Pioneer Woman} (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 15.} These factors draw further attention to the links between genre, voice, and the ideological representation of rural women and how they represent dynamics of power, access and legitimacy.\footnote{Judy Long, 
\textit{Telling Women's Lives}, 7.}

In addition to the aforementioned concerns, several other interpretative challenges influence the scholarly analysis of local records. First, there is the issue of memory. Even local histories, because they draw heavily on oral interviews and submitted family memoirs, have problems related to memory. Human memory can
be fallible, ego-distorting, and contradictory.\textsuperscript{154} For example, within their narratives many rural women explicitly state that married women in the region never worked outside of the home, yet they contradict themselves by offering examples of such labour. As individuals grow and change, so do their memories and cultural beliefs, which increases the potential for constructing mythical pasts. Nonetheless, local sources represent much more than random memories. In their totality, for example, they offer a memory-based quantitative approach aimed at understanding historical change.\textsuperscript{155} In their consistencies and through verification with other records, each non-contemporary voice gains validity and contributes to a broader social context. As Luisa Passerini suggested, "all autobiographical memory is true; it is up to the interpreter to discover in which sense, where, for which purpose."\textsuperscript{156} Evidence also suggests that rural women and men, as narrators and authors, have not taken their roles as historians lightly. All local histories utilized in this study include references to primary materials, such as journals, diaries, newspapers, village records, school board minutes, church registers, Hudson’s Bay Company records, and provincial and national archival records.

There is also the issue of subjectivity. Most of the narrative voices found within local discourse share a “unique rhetorical stance” with their texts, because they represent the subjects themselves, who are serving tripartite roles as the eye

\textsuperscript{155} By quantitative, I am referring to the diversities, differences, continuities and patterns of rural women’s lives that are revealed by examining many local sources, i.e. oral interviews, local histories, memoirs, etc., as opposed to a qualitative case study of one or a small group of women.
witness, the participant and the historian. For instance, Lenore Rudland, author of *Fort Fraser (Where the Hell's that?)*, was born in Fort Fraser during the early settlement period, thus her 'official' local history offers personal insights and a subjective bias not common to traditional historiography. Oral history collections add a further layer of subjectivity to local discourse, because they include the knowledge, biases and agenda of interviewers, who hold similar positions of power in which they can manipulate the stories of rural women. The conflicting agendas of interviewer and subject are evident, for example, in an interview featuring Prince George pioneer Margaret Morgan. While Morgan clearly attempted to focus on the diversities of her experiences as a single woman, her interviewer kept interrupting her and shifting the focus away from Morgan towards her husband and the community. This subjective influencing power of the interviewer (and the androcentric focus) is found in most oral histories, as is the emphasis on community identity over that of the individuals themselves.

The local historical record also reflects the experiences, thoughts and perceptions of individuals who are in the final stages of their life. As such, the narrators of these texts often view them as venues for conducting life reviews and for leaving a material record of their existence. According to psychoanalytical theorist Eric Erikson, the coping, surviving self depends upon a positive construction of identity. This also helps to explain why local discourse rarely includes the

157 Marcus Billson, as cited in Helen M. Buss, *'Repossessing the World': Reading Memoirs by Contemporary Women* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2002), 32. Indeed, this complicated subject position of the authors replicates and validates my own narrative position.


oppressive, controversial, or adversarial aspects of human experience. Further, this "sword of censorship," as Sheldon Stromquist noted, can be connected to the intended audience of these works:

...judgement is immediate. [They are] not judged by standards of scholarship, but whether [they] conform to the unconsciously transmitted and fragmented legacy that they know or imagine as the community's history, and by whether their relatives are favorably mentioned.\(^{160}\)

It is because of this subjectivity that local histories, which are fundamentally constructed from oral histories and family memoirs, are considered in this inquiry as primary sources.

In addition to sharing interpretative issues related to memory and subjectivity, local genres also share a common purpose and meaning, in which, as Stromquist suggested, they primarily function to affirm connection and belonging to a place, a community identity, and a dominant pioneer cultural script. As models of regional imperialism, they also offer nostalgic, androcentric ideologies of rural society that replicate the middle-class values of Anglo-European society. Elizabeth Furniss referred to this primary function of local discourse as the "frontier cultural complex," suggesting that it perpetuates myths and stereotypes similar to Richard Slotkin's frontier thesis.\(^{161}\) The myth begins with the European emigrant (predominately male) making the long hard journey into the free, remote, but wild and dangerous wilderness of North America. This continental move forces the emigrant to regress to culturally, morally and materially primitive living conditions. Then, after many


courageous, heroic (predominately male) struggles with nature and "unknown and hostile Indians," he conquers nature, and through acts of benevolence, the Natives, as well. As Furniss notes, this dominant pioneer script "renders invisible the complexity of historical interactions" and, more importantly, it ignores the diversity and differences within and between social groups, including gender.\textsuperscript{162}

While it is necessary to identify and be critically vigilant of the interpretative challenges related to the local historical record, it is also important to recognize its positive attributes. As Buss asserted, "it is precisely because of their subjectivity, their rootedness in time, place and personal experiences, and their perspective ridden character that we value" these sources.\textsuperscript{163} In other words, it is here, "at the level of the locality that the lives of ordinary British Columbians emerge most vividly from the obscurity of the past."\textsuperscript{164} It is also within these texts that we can find rural women's voices, and in their everyday experiences, perceive how their lives and identities are being constructed. Most importantly, it is here that rural women modify the traditional script by capitalizing on their identities as emigrants in order to secure their place in the historical record. Writing themselves in represents an important historiographical shift, because these women, by bringing "female gendering to bear" on the previous male-centred scripts, alter the pioneer story.\textsuperscript{165}

\textbf{b) Context: Themes, Language and Gender}

The gendered stereotypes that predominate in this region's local histories are grounded in notions of rural identity as defined by isolation, subsistence, gender

\textsuperscript{162} Elizabeth Furniss, 18.
\textsuperscript{163} Helen Buss, \textit{Mapping Our Selves}, 28.
\textsuperscript{165} Helen Buss, \textit{Repossessing the World}, 3.
imbalance and a resource-based economy. For example, *Vanderhoof, the Town that Couldn’t Wait,* is dedicated to the “pioneer, whose courage and determination settled this country,” while *Deeper Roots and Greener Valleys,* the official local history of Fraser Lake, honors the “rugged men and women of past and present, whose courage, ingenuity and steadfastness began the settlement of this area.” In this latter work, an added tribute recognizes “the pioneer women who braved the elements and hardships of the early years.” In *Heritage Lost: A People’s History of the Ootsa Lake Region,* the bachelors are singled out for special recognition. These ideological virtues of rural men and women persist throughout these local texts; however, in addition to courage, determination, ingenuity, etc, they exploit far more restrictive and gender-specific language to describe rural women.

First and foremost, pioneer women’s identities remain ideologically rooted within traditional spheres of domesticity, home and family. Even when the breadth and scope of their experiences clearly suggests an expansion of gender roles, they are narratively presented as routine, domestic chores. By implication, rural men become the true pioneer heroes. Further, these perceptions have no gender for they are perpetuated by both male and female narrative voices. However, having said that, there is a difference in that women tend to understate and misrepresent their experiences, while men often omit them altogether or make women so peripheral so as to assume they contributed little to rural life. As Judy Long

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166 Lyn Hancock, ed., *Vanderhoof, The Town that Wouldn’t Wait,* 2.; *Deeper Roots and Greener Valleys,* iii.
167 *Deeper Roots and Greener Valleys,* ix.
168 Jean Clark Giesbrecht, *Heritage Lost,* Forward.
169 For example, one of north-central British Columbia’s most popular contemporary authors of local history, has published several works featuring his pioneer experiences, and by and large, they do not mention women. See Jack Boudreau, *Crazy Man’s Creek* (Prince George: Caitlin Press, 1998); *Grizzly Bear Mountain* (Prince George: Caitlin Press, 2000); and *Mountains, Campfires & Memories* (Prince George: Caitlin Press, 2002).
explained, these omissions are not necessarily intentional, but a reflection of gendered voice preference. When men write, they generally use the first person 'I' voice and focus on their own experiences or those of their male counterparts, while women include men because they favor the collective, third person 'we' or 'they' narrative positions.170

This gendered voice difference is exemplified in the section of local histories reserved for family memoirs. For example, George Kirkland, of Fraser Lake, does not acknowledge his wife at all in his memoirs, although the accompanying photo does.171 Similarly, Lloyd Ray's memoirs, appearing in the same work, provide no hint of his wife Birdie's existence, or their fifty plus years of marriage. Ivan Ray, on the other hand, pays tribute to his wife, Ruby, and their fifty-six years of marriage, but only by stating, "they don't make women like her anymore....We wore out ten saddle horses together."172 Finally, the memoirs of Alvin Mooney, a revered pioneer doctor of Vanderhoof, reveal similar patriarchal ideologies, for he requested that his wife be remembered, as "Janey, whose special qualities have supported him so well through the years."173

The notion that early 20th century rural women were confined to domestic spheres is similarly promoted by the pioneer women themselves. For example, in her reminiscences of life in early 20th century Prince George, Jessie Sugden maintained that "a woman's place was in the home, few women worked, nice girls

171 *Deeper Roots and Greener Valleys*, 283.
172 Ibid., 300.
said no, and to be married after age twenty-five was a disgrace.¹⁷⁴ By comparing Sugden's ideological representations to the lived experiences of women like Nellie Law, who never married, but worked forty years as a hotel clerk in Prince George, or Miss Cain and Cassie MacMillan, lifelong independent female farmers, or Mrs. Henkel, the owner/operator of two hunting lodges, we can assume that there were many non-conforming "disgraceful" females living in this region of the province during the early settlement period.

Secondly, as the following passages suggest, local sources not only define rural women within traditional notions of domesticity, but they also characterize them as uncomplaining. The image of rural women "putting up and shutting up," or "making do, and getting by," denotes another deeply rooted feminine virtue, of passivity.

It was a hard life for the pioneer housewife but Julia Larsen never complained...not even when the water was frozen in the pails on winter mornings.¹⁷⁵

...the twins were born one afternoon when she was alone....True to her industrious nature, the next day Mrs. Dungate was up on the roof, putting on shingles.¹⁷⁶

...women's lot was to do and endure, to be battered and cheated by life and never complain, [and] to fight bad luck and poverty with hard work and consideration for others.¹⁷⁷

Even when Mrs. Silverthorne’s work here was finished, and death came peacefully one night as she slept, the next morning was found on the side-board her usual supply of fresh baked, delicious bread. She had stayed up late the night before to bake it, symbolizing that true pioneer spirit—that whatever may come, everyday jobs must be done!¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁵ Deeper Roots and Greener Valleys, 195.
¹⁷⁶ Marks of a Century, 50.

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Based on these narrative voices, it seems that to be a true pioneer, a woman had to sacrifice her life for the welfare of her husband and children.

Thirdly, and perhaps because many of their experiences fit rather uneasily into domestic language, rural women are praised for being help-mates to men. Help-mate, in rural discourse, as previously explained, refers to women’s “ability to fulfill duties which enabled men to succeed and to handle crises with competence and without complaint.” The term also implies that women’s assistance to men was occasional or peripheral, and therefore, that it did not represent “a permanent confusion of spheres.” This helpmate label is applied freely to north-central British Columbia’s women, and is, once again, reflected in both male and female narrative voices. For example, Lenore Rudland, in *Fort Fraser (Where the Hell’s That?),* insists that “much credit must be given [the] women because they stood behind their men and worked hard to provide homes for their children and helped to build a good community.” In a similar vein, an authorial voice sums up Vanderhoof’s early 20th century rural women:

Some women wept at the continual hard work. Others found loneliness much more difficult to bear. A great majority of the women, however, cheered and helped their men and in so doing, raised their own morale. Even in the building of homes, there were many ways women could be of help. Because of the long winters, a comfortable dwelling was of more importance to the wife than the homesteader himself.

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178 Elnora Smith, ed. *Marks on the Forest Floor,* 60.
179 Beverly Stoeltje, “‘A Helpmate for Man Indeed’: The Image of the Frontier Woman,” 32.
181 Lenore Rudland, *Fort Fraser,* 57.
182 Lyn Hancock, ed., *Vanderhoof,* 43.
In one short passage, this narrator perpetuates the three most dominant cultural images of rural women in North American discourse, thereby drawing attention to the role that language plays in the construction of identity and how it is used to subvert gender power. The pioneer women of Vanderhoof are to be remembered as "simpering, reluctant emigrants" who wept in response to their plight; as "over-worked drudges" who "put up and shut up"; and finally, as "cheerful helpmates," who happily served as adjuncts to men. Above all, they are to be remembered as wives, not as homesteaders. This paragraph also suggests that rural life offered women just two choices – to weep or to stand behind their men. Ultimately, local discourse constructs and sustains ideologies of rural women as dependent, subordinate, adjuncts to men. These androcentric worldviews are so entrenched in pioneering language that the women themselves seemed to take for granted that settlers, pioneers, homesteaders, farmers, and ranchers were roles that could only be applied to the male gender. Consequently, they understate their contributions to rural life because they lack the words to more appropriately describe themselves. They are "womenfolk" or "farmer’s wives," who just happened to milk cows, clear land, build houses, haul hay and shoot guns.

Patricia Turkki, female author of Burns Lake’s official community history, wrote about the area’s "many pioneers...and often their wives," and suggested that the model of an early 20th century rural woman was, "Mrs. P. J. Carroll, a girl endowed with grace and charm,... intelligent and capable, [who] also had the qualities necessary to share the versatile life of a man who was pioneer, prospector,
traveler and trapper.” Following tradition, Turkki identified Carroll by her husband’s name. In reality, she was Beatrice Carroll, pioneer of Ootsa Lake, and prospector, trapper, and traveler in her own right. Caroll also raised sled dogs, and among her (and her husband’s) many diverse and interesting experiences was a 6,000 mile, eighteen month-long dog sled trek across North America to New York and back in the early 1930s. Because she is a rural woman, however, she is praised in the local historical record not for her individual experiences or accomplishments, but for being endowed with the qualities necessary to live with a man who, as the narrative implies, was the true pioneer, prospector, trapper and traveler.

The relationship between gender identity and the rural landscape is another feature of local discourse, in which agrarian language ideologically associates males with the control of land, and females with nature. For example, rural men have plowed, tamed, and conquered the virgin, barren and fertile lands of north-central British Columbia and by symbolic association, women, as well. The connection between individual women and nature is also found in this male-written description of “Old Lady Hinton,” a woman “well into her sixties...[and] of heavy build and somewhat lame,” who traveled by horse and wagon from Hazelton to Ootsa Lake near the turn of the century. According to the narrator, the “trip in must have been a

183 Pat Turkki, *Burns Lake*, 7, 175.
trial," but she "took it like a thoroughbred, as she did too, the often far from easy life afterwards."\textsuperscript{186} Metaphorically speaking, the author is asking that Mrs. Hinton be forever remembered as a heavily built, somewhat lame thoroughbred horse.

As the previous example suggests, even when rural men attempt to give special recognition to the roles women played in early settlement, they are hindered by unconscious narrative strategies and ideologies that guide their discourse. For example, benevolence, reluctance, and refusal seemed to control the voice of Ootsa Lake pioneer, Arthur Shelford, when he wrote, "\textit{I feel I must} pay tribute to those first pioneer women who braved the long, hard trails into the country, and then settled in to make the best homes they could for their husbands and children."\textsuperscript{187} By including the words, "I feel I must," the author implies that he felt obligated to include women in his narrative, but would rather not have. He further intimates that the "trip in" was the hardest part of rural life for women, that women's roles were strictly domestic, and that pioneer women primarily existed to serve men and children. In subsequent passages, he describes his political duties as regional representative of the Farmer's Institute and uses similar narrative strategies to explain his wife's contributions to his success.

\textit{I must} record the grit of my little wife Millie, for she stayed alone during those two six-week campaigns and looked after all the work that has to be done on any farm. Not all women could stand such isolation, \textit{even though} she was only a mile from Jack and his family.\textsuperscript{188}

Again, through language, the author implies that it is obligation and not desire that motivates the narrative recognition of his wife. He also subtly suggests that he

\textsuperscript{186} Arthur and Cyril Shelford, \textit{We Pioneered} (Victoria: Orca Book Publishers Ltd., 1988), 149.
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid, 119. (emphasis added)
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 183. (emphasis added)
did not shirk his responsibilities often and when he did, it was loneliness and not labour that taxed his wife the most. However, Shelford acknowledges the diversity of his wife’s gender roles in a slightly less diminishing and condescending manner:

The life of a wife on a pioneer farm is always a busy one for besides the ordinary routine work around the home, three days a week can be written off for washing, churning, and bread making. The chickens take a lot of attention, as does the lone pig kept for home consumption. In addition to all this work, Millie has done most of the work in the garden, helped often with the milking...and she has always given a lot of help in the hay-field and in the harvesting. She has also helped to harvest potatoes and turnips and in many other tasks...but it has often not been easy for her.189

Undoubtedly, he was correct to suggest that it was often not easy for her. However, like many other men, he clearly misrepresented his wife by over-using the word “help” and perpetuating the notion that women were not farmers, but instead farmers wives.

In summary, a motherly, pragmatic, reading of the genres that comprise the local historical record produces a dominant image of ‘rural woman’ as hard-working, passive, and subordinate. While these ideologies conform to and sustain the static, androcentric pioneer cultural script, they also reflect a shift represented elsewhere in rural discourse, in which feminine characteristics of strength and stoicism have replaced weakness and frailty, or the pre-emigrant ideological attributes of most rural women. Just as importantly, a motherly reading of these texts emphasizes the links between genre, voice, language, and gender in the narrative construction of rural women, and how these factors operate in tandem to subvert power by downplaying the significance of women’s experiences. On the other hand, as the following chapter suggests, by reading the sources from a more consciously-focused feminist

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189 Ibid, 210, 211.
deconstructive position, another layer of interpretation, characterized by a subtle female resistance to the politically correct surface narrative, can be found.
Chapter Three

Discourse and Identity

Sisterly (De)liberations: Beneath the Surface of Local Discourse

*We frame our construction of identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the identities our significant others want to recognize in us.*
- Charles Taylor, *Malaise of Modernity*

The interpretation of rural women’s identities offered in the following pages is based on a feminist deconstructive reading position, wherein the reader, like a sister, seeks to find a “common cause” with the texts.\(^{190}\) By sisterly, I am suggesting that the reader becomes one with the texts, enters into them, transcending time and place in order to recognize in rural women’s voices the realities of her own life.\(^{191}\) In my case, this subjective reading position is further amplified by my own personal relationship to the sources. However, instead of suggesting that my proximity to the subject undermines my reading position, I propose that it enhances it. As a rural woman living in this geographical area and as a contemporary female academic, I bring life experiences, skills, biases, and an agenda to the discourse that allow me a deeper level of understanding and an ability to more fully recognize the “parallels between my own subjectivity” and the subjects expressed within these texts.\(^{192}\) As Helen Buss suggested, “as sister [to the texts], I take in the details of [rural women’s] experience as a woman like me...[and] realize the possible implications of her experience that my experiences can allow me.”\(^{193}\)

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The decoding strategies of this interpretative reading position require more than a disciplined, sisterly, empathetic sensitivity. In order to dig beneath the surface layer of local discourse, it is also necessary to draw on historical and theoretical knowledge not readily understood by the authors and narrators of these sources. For example, it is a basic understanding of linguistic strategies that enables me to recognize the "small breaks in the code" that create resistance, contradiction, and tension in the narrative representation of women.\textsuperscript{194} By combining these discursive ruptures with my gendered sensitivities, I am then able to piece together "the undercurrent of forbidden discourse, a discourse of rebellious accusation, which [lies] hidden below the surface narrative of obedient conformity" in local sources.\textsuperscript{195} In essence, this sisterly deconstructive reading position produces an interpretation of rural women that suggests, as authors, editors, and narrators, they have empowered themselves by drawing on unique feminist strategies to subversively challenge the traditional meta-narrative. Further, although this resistance appears in women's collective and individual narrative voices, it is most discernable in their published autobiographies. However, regardless of genre, these women's narrative strategies follow a pattern. They are subtle, seemingly unconscious, and most often, appear in the form of juxtaposition, a misrepresentation of normative language, autonomy, displacement, and contradiction.

**Juxtaposition**

Juxtaposition, as a narrative strategy, refers to the ambiguous, ironic,

\textsuperscript{194} Helen Buss, "Settling the Score with Myths of Settlement: Two Women Who Roughed It and Wrote It," in Great Dames, eds. Elspeth Cameron and Janice Dickin (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 168.

\textsuperscript{195} Ibid.
disconnected arrangement of ideas, voices, phrases, or paragraphs that defy grammatical logic, but are subtle, easily missed or interpreted as accidental.\textsuperscript{196}

Rural women utilize this paratactic narrative tool, as do men, by taking up most of their allotted “family memoir” narrative space within local histories to describe their own experiences, thereby ignoring their spouses. This strategy is also used by female editors, who more consciously seek ways to give primacy of place to women. For example, one might expect the family memoir, entitled, “Mr. and Mrs. Charles Barrett,” appearing in Houston’s local history, to emphasize Mr. Barrett, not only because of his gender, but also because of his previous prominence as a wealthy bachelor and because he was the first British emigrant to settle in the Bulkley Valley.\textsuperscript{197} Instead, the editor, Elnora Smith, focuses entirely on Mrs. Barrett’s accomplishments, thereby suggesting that she was the most prominent of the pair.

Mrs. Barrett nursed numerous ill people back to health, and supplied countless meals to weary travelers. Hours of tilling and weeding produced most prolific vegetable gardens. Timothy hay became the main crop, and ....Mrs. Barrett spent hours handpicking seed...which took prizes all across Canada. Cattle were raised on the ranch by the hundreds. Sheep, pigs and chickens took up a good portion of time with their care. Mrs. Barrett became an expert horsewoman, and took her place with the ranch hands when round-up time came around...[and] handled the post office for the Barrett District, with mail carried from the CNR station 2 ½ miles away.\textsuperscript{198}

Just as intriguing, is the biography of Mrs. Slavin, which follows in the same work. Entitled, “Mrs. Slavin,” it too focuses entirely on this woman’s life experiences, thereby giving the impression that she was widowed or divorced. Her husband's


\textsuperscript{197} During the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, Barrett owned a 300 horse pack train and the largest, most successful ranch in north-central British Columbia, twenty years of which he was a bachelor. Elnora Smith, ed., Marks on the Forest Floor, 70, 71.

\textsuperscript{198} Ibid. The same story appears in Grace Hols, ed., Marks of a Century: A Story of Houston, B.C. 1900-2000 (Houston: District of Houston, 1999), 46.
existence is made known only by the statements, "Mrs. Slavin moved to Houston where she and her husband operated the Hotel," and, "from Houston the Slavins moved to Fort Fraser and later to Telkwa, still following the hotel business." 199

Again, it appears that the editor consciously chose to portray Mrs. Slavin as more prominent and noteworthy than her husband. The same pioneer couple is featured in Fraser Lake's local history, where, in an equally odd manner, the narrator states, "Mr. Slavin came down from Houston [in 1920] to look at the Tittlemore Hotel which he bought. Mrs. Slavin was very active in the formation of...Our Club Women's Institute. She...donated the land for the [Fort Fraser] community hall." 200 In both cases, juxtaposition, as a narrative strategy, subtly emphasizes the agency and independence of Mrs. Slavin.

Juxtaposition is also used to challenge traditional ideologies of rural women in the economic section of several local histories. In *Marks on the Forest Floor*, just two narrative voices describe Houston's forest industry history; one is that of Vivian Pederson, a female logging camp cook; the other is that of Harry Hagman, the community's corporate icon. 201 In *Marks of a Century*, three female voices highlight the forestry section, including Pederson's; that of Molly Luszez, the wife of a logger; and that of Dana Giesbrecht, the grand-daughter of a logging contractor. From a feminist perspective, these female voices have been strategically placed alongside male ones to subtly exploit the notion that men and women played integral roles in the local economy. 202 In a similar vein, Lyn Hancock, the editor of Vanderhoof's

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199 *Marks on the Forest Floor*, 73.
200 *Deeper Roots and Greener Valleys*, 288.
201 *Marks on the Forest Floor*, 100-108.
202 *Marks of a Century*, 121-129.
local history, utilizes just one narrative voice to detail the importance of telegraphy to that community's past. As a male-dominated occupation, one might expect that voice to be male, but instead, it is that of Genevieve Blench Barteaux, the only female telegraph operator employed by the Canadian National Railway between 1924 and 1942.\textsuperscript{203} The accompanying photo of Barteaux, depicted in her role as a telegraph operator, also represents juxtaposition as a strategy for disrupting traditional gender ideologies. The photos of Mrs. Jim, one of Houston's tie-hackers, portrayed lifting huge ties onto the train, and those of Edna Westgarde, and Betty Dungate, wearing hunting gear and holding guns are also meant to create new paradigms of rural women.\textsuperscript{204}

**Misrepresentation of Normative Language**

Many rural women, including Genevieve Barteaux, utilize the language of domesticity, family and home in their narratives in order to justify their assertiveness, independence, and contributions to family survival. For example, Barteaux prefaced the details of her non-traditional career, with the statement, "In 1924, I realized I had to support myself and two children, [so] I hired out as a telegraph operator on the CNR."\textsuperscript{205} Then, after justifying her transgression of traditional domestic boundaries, she more confidently asserted, "I worked at every station from Chilliwack to Prince Rupert to Jasper....I also worked on work trains, ditches and steam shovels and I was three years on a bridge and building gang up in the

\textsuperscript{203} Vanderhoof, the Town that Wouldn't Wait, 20, 21.
\textsuperscript{204} Ibid., 20; Marks on the Forest Floor, 14; and Marks of a Century, 5, 147, 250.
\textsuperscript{205} Genevieve Barteaux Interview, by Lil MacIntosh, August 19, 1973. Nechako Valley Historical Society Collection.
Smithers division. The notion that this woman's experiences are strategically intended to serve as a model of resistance is made more explicit by her female interviewer, who responded to Barteaux's reminiscences, by adding, "In these days of women's lib...this is an example of someone who took it in their own hands many years ago and entered the man's world of occupation." 

Rose Wright is another rural woman who utilizes normative language as a feminist narrative strategy to manipulate, shift, and redefine traditional ideologies of domesticity without openly rejecting them. However, unlike Barteaux, Wright does not exploit her resistance in the name of necessity. She was twenty-five years old when she emigrated from Britain in 1912, and in her family memoirs, she asserts, "Why I actually was coming to Canada, Mother didn't understand at all. She said I had read too many books." With implied independence, she then details her journey, which she shared "with twenty five other girls—a mixed lot of working class girls between nineteen and thirty one years old." By 1914, Wright found herself married and living in Prince George in a tent. Soon after, she and her husband, Fred, pre-empted land west of Prince George, near Cluculz Lake, and became homesteaders. When describing her life on the farm, Wright manipulates the help-mate image to demonstrate the diversity of her gender roles.

It was a life of hard work and I learned to help in many ways. I learned to harness horses and drive them, to hold the handles of the plow while Fred drove, to pick up sticks for the land clearing piles, to help put up hay, to milk cows, to raise sheep and shear them in the spring. ...to plant and care for a big garden, to make butter and cheese, and to preserve meat and vegetables for winter. I also learned to card the raw wool and make socks, sweaters,

206 Ibid.
207 Ibid.
mitts, caps, quilts and little felt boots for the boys.\textsuperscript{209} Clearly, this woman understood the significance of her roles on the pioneer farm. She uses normative language ("I learned to help") to affirm her ideological conformity, which then allowed her to resist it, by providing a more detailed representation of her identity. In succeeding paragraphs, she challenges the helper notion, by recalling how she wrote to the Department of Agriculture in Ottawa for advice about summer frosts, soil erosion, grain crops, vegetables, and making cheese, adding that, "A month later, I got a reply [and] all the literature I wanted."\textsuperscript{210} Wright also points out how for the following thirty years, she made thirty pounds of cheese a week and overcame marital pressures in order to profit from it:

Fred would not let me sell [cheese] for money so I traded it for things I needed, such as baby lambs, little pigs, potatoes, apples, a second hand sewing machine and harnesses for the horses. I traded brown bread, cheese, and butter for hired help in the hay field, for second hand clothes for the boys and many other things. The Indians were really good. They would fish on Cluculz Lake close by or pick a pail of blueberries and bring them to me. I gave them sugar, soap, and cheese in return, so we were all satisfied.\textsuperscript{211}

\textbf{Autonomy as a Narrative Strategy}

While some women manipulate ideologies of domesticity and separate spheres in their narrative representations of rural life, others reject them and instead use autonomy as a narrative tool to emphasize the diversity of their experiences. The strategy of autonomy, or the notion of a pioneering partnership, is implied by a narrative emphasis of the word "we," which subtly lets the reader know that men and women were homesteaders; that they contributed equally to family survival; and that

\textsuperscript{209} Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{210} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{211} Ibid., 27.
gender roles were very fluid. In fact, autonomy seems to be rural women's preferred strategy of resistance, perhaps because it allows them, as individuals, to assert the diversity of their gender roles without the self-centred 'I' narrative position. Instead, they confront the pioneer myth with such statements as, “We started a ranch,” “we hauled hay,” “we fell trees,” or “we built the house.” When placed alongside men’s narratives, which tend to be ego-centred, these third person voices exemplify the difference in men and women’s ideological representation of rural women. For example, in the following female-written excerpt, autonomy is used to carefully paint a new paradigm of rural women.

The Grundys’ obtained two hundred and forty acres of land four miles west of Endako....The couple had two cows and a team of horses. They grew a garden and worked long, hard hours on the land. In the winter months, railway ties were made by hand with a broad-axe. Ted and Lillian would saw the trees down with a crosscut saw – she at one end of the saw and he at the other.

Like the domestic language used by Barteaux and Wright, autonomy also serves as a set-up tool for more assertive representations of female identity.

My husband Howard and I cleared land, grew hay, herded cattle and kept poultry, pigs and horses. I never drove a binder but I did most chores connected with a farm....[and] in 1919, I took over the running of the Stellako Post Office, [a position] I held...until 1934.

As a resistance strategy, autonomy seems to come naturally to these women, perhaps because, as historians elsewhere have noted, it was during the early settlement period that women learned to manipulate ideologies of mutuality, not only in their narratives, but also to empower their everyday lives. As Nancy Osterud

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212 See for example, Deeper Roots and Greener Valleys, esp. Chapter 9, where the gender voice difference is quite apparent.
213 Deeper Roots and Greener Valleys, 186.
214 Vanderhoof, the Town that Wouldn’t Wait, 160.
explains, pioneer women responded to their gender inequality by “voluntarily participat[ing] in the most labour-intensive and highly valued work” on the farm, thereby nurturing “an ethic of mutuality in work and decision-making” in their marriages.\(^{215}\)

**Displacement**

Displacement is another narrative tool rural women use to confront conventional ideologies of ‘woman’ and femininity in their texts. By displacement, I am referring to the way that, as narrators, authors and editors, they let others do their resisting. As Buss suggested, “another level of implication becomes available when talking of others,” because it offers a less restricted subject position that allows a female narrator to overtly challenge dominant cultural scripts, while also presenting self as conforming.\(^{216}\) In the Bulkley Valley area, the icon of female resistance is Popcorn Kate, the road-house owner who wore a cassock, a belt, and a whiskey bottle hanging from her waist and offered food, drink and “anything else” a man might want.\(^{217}\) In the Vanderhoof area, it is Mary Stewart, the “homemade character who stands out with the most colorful of the pioneers,” simply because she chose to wear men’s jeans and a wool jacket and chew snuff, before and after she married.\(^{218}\) It is also Amy Sharpe, the young “gold-medal” winning school teacher from the University of New Brunswick, who married a bachelor farmer in the Mapes


\(^{217}\) Eva MacLean, *The Far Land* (Prince George: Caitlin Press, 1993), 156; and *Bulkley Valley Stories Collected from Old Timers Who Remember* (Smithers: Heritage Club, c1974), 14, 89.

\(^{218}\) Vanderhoof, *the Town that Wouldn’t Wait*, 58.
area in 1914, and eighteen years and eight children later, shot herself. Sharpe is a resistance character because she is used by others to portray the negative side of rural life. She is also a resistance character for, unlike most rural women, she controlled her demise. Dying quietly in the night, leaving freshly baked bread on the counter for the family, would, seemingly, have been a more appropriate way to epitomize “the true pioneer spirit.”

Generational distancing is also a form of displacement offering a less restricted subject position, and therefore, a level of honesty not readily found in representations of self. Male voices, for example, are far more likely to acknowledge women’s contributions to rural society in the name of their mother, than they are to give similar credit to their wives. John Corless, who immigrated to the Prince George area with his parents in 1914, is one of the males who challenge the myth of the pioneer male hero in the name of his mother.

I think possibly that in the story of pioneering, the woman should get the credit. Looking back on it, and talking to my mother up until she died at age eighty-four, I really feel that the women were the true pioneers. It was easy for the father to say he was going out to get some meat and go out hunting and disappear for awhile; but she had to stay and look after the children and cope with the stove and the leaky old building and the cold and the misery, packing in the water and the washing and the wood.

Rural women also use generational distancing to resist patriarchal convention, by juxtaposing images of emotionally weak, irresponsible fathers and strong, responsible mothers. This strategy of resistance is more commonly found in oral histories than in written narratives, because the spontaneity of the oral voice

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219 Frances Almond Interview; and Ivy Stampflee Interview, Nechako Valley Historical Society Collection; and Letters from Rachel Nott to Elizabeth Dowson, 1939-1940, Lakes District Museum, Burns Lake.
220 John Corless Interview, Pioneer Tapes, Vol.I, Prince George Public Library. See also Earl Baity, I Remember Chilako.
increases the risk of unconscious slips in the expected script. The notion of the emotionally stronger woman is suggested, for example, in the oral voice of Burns Lake pioneer, Queenie Rowland, who stated, “Mother took to her new life, but Father never did. He missed the city.” Similar images, albeit less subtle, are reflected in the generational distancing methods of Isabel Ford:

He could have worked for the railroad, but didn’t like working for anybody else…. [instead he purchased a threshing machine and] lost everything really because he was poor at business. My mother was better at keeping track of money…. Dad wasn’t really a farmer…. [but] my mother was really good at managing the farm…. Dad was away from home a great deal and probably didn’t listen to us when he was home.

While Ford's challenge to dominant ideologies is fairly explicit, rural women's resistance is generally done less consciously.

Contradiction

Contradiction can also be seen as an unconscious coding strategy in rural women's narratives, and nowhere is it more apparent than in discussions of female employment. Rural women of north-central British Columbia clearly accepted the notion that females did not work for wages during the early 20th century, yet they constantly contradict themselves in their narratives by stating such, and then offering examples of women who were employed.

Did you work after your marriage?... Good gracious, no! There weren't jobs and women, I don't recall any women working, unless it was in their husband's building or something like that.

Marriage meant the end of my job.... After I married, I took over as accountant for our family business.

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221 Queenie Rowland Interview. Lakes District Historical Society Collection.
222 Isabel Tyner Ford Interview, Fraser-Fort George Regional Museum.
Were there many jobs for girls in Prince George?...Not too many, although there were banks...when I came in 1911...[but] mostly they had men working in banks. They didn’t have girls....I worked in the Royal Bank, oh, and my sister and I also worked in the lawyer’s offices, and as public stenographers, and as telephone operators.\footnote{Mabel Peterson Interview, Fraser-Fort George Regional Museum.}

Were there many jobs for girls in Prince George?... only menial ...demeaning ....and humble jobs...I clerked in a store...and a large number of girls found work in cafes, stores, hotels, the post office, banks and private offices [and] others became teachers or nurses.\footnote{Jessie Bond Sugden, \textit{In the Shadow of the Cutbanks}, 23, 34.}

Although contradiction, as a strategy of resistance is fairly easy to discern, women’s challenges to social convention are often so subtle that they are implied by one small word or phrase, occurring within an otherwise conforming script. For example, the words “must” and “had to” can be read as metaphorical italics in the narrative of Florence Ray, a Fraser Lake pioneer, who wrote, “I knew I \textit{had to} stay here....My mother always said a wife \textit{must} go where the husband makes a living and be satisfied. So I was.”\footnote{Deeper Roots and Greener Valleys, 297. (emphasis added)} In the nuances of language, however, Ray suggests otherwise. As with many female voices, her ideological intentions are being misled by her unconscious representation of reality. Resistance is also suggested by the word “either,” attached to the following description of the “two-man whipsaw,” an apparatus used for building pioneer homes. According to the female narrator, “[t]he two-man designation isn’t accurate \textit{either}, as many wives or daughter took their regular turns on the end of the whipsaw.”\footnote{Vanderhoof, the Town that Wouldn’t Wait, 46. (emphasis added)} The implication is that there are many other inaccurate gendered representations of rural life in the local historical record.

\footnotesize\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{Mabel Peterson Interview, Fraser-Fort George Regional Museum.}
\item \footnote{Jessie Bond Sugden, \textit{In the Shadow of the Cutbanks}, 23, 34.}
\item \footnote{Deeper Roots and Greener Valleys, 297. (emphasis added)}
\item \footnote{Vanderhoof, the Town that Wouldn’t Wait, 46. (emphasis added)}
\end{itemize}
Finally, some rural women do not draw on subversive narrative strategies when rejecting pioneer stereotypes, but instead, assert themselves by doing so more openly.

Between you and me, it wasn’t the men that went through a lot of hardships – it was the women of the district who were the real pioneers.²²⁹

One thing I have noticed is that men are always hollering about opening up new country. But if it weren’t for us women, a country would never be settled.²³⁰

It is interesting to note that this last female voice confronts the pioneer male as hero myth, but has no similar quarrel with the Eurocentric “empty wilderness” ideology.

In summary, a sisterly or feminist deconstructive reading of local discourse suggests that rural women, as authors, narrators and editors, both consciously and unconsciously adopt narrative strategies that allow them to challenge cultural stereotypes that misrepresent their identities. At the same time, they also, both intentionally and unintentionally, affirm the dominant script that distorts, constrains and essentializes their identities as rural women. They do so, according to Buss, because they “operate from within assumed limits of the genre.”²³¹ In other words, rural women recognize, albeit often unconsciously, that the local historical record requires a collective, voice that conforms to traditional pioneer ideologies and affirms their attachment to place. The contradictions and tensions found within local texts, then, are not surprising, given that “consistent misrepresentation is difficult.”²³² As Carolyn Heilbrun pointed out, “women write their lives on a level far below consciousness,” and it is because their sub-conscious governs much of their

²²⁹ Clara Stangebye Interview, Nechako Valley Historical Society Collection.
²³⁰ “Grandma Wakefield – Bulkley Valley Pioneer,” in Northwest Digest 14:3 (June 1958), 35.
²³¹ Helen M. Buss, Mapping Our Selves, 19.
²³² Ibid., 20.
discourse that we, as readers, by adopting a sisterly deconstructive stance, are able to discern their unintentional glimpses into reality.  

**Autobiographies as Resistance Texts**

*Autobiographical acts of survival are about restoration, reformation and reinvention...[by] making the old alive in the new, we can perform acts of repossessing the self and the world.*
- Helen Buss, *Memoir with an Attitude*

Turning to the region's four published autobiographies of rural women, we are, once again, reminded of how “different accounts relay different truths.” While the collective voices of women in the local historical record are remarkable for the narrative resistance they offer, these four female-written autobiographies can clearly be read as counter-narratives or models of protest against the dominant cultural script, afforded by a less restricted first person narrative voice. In the narrative construction of their identities, Olive Fredrickson, Eva MacLean, Nan Bourgon, and Mary John, further exemplify the links between genre, voice, power, and knowledge.

Autobiography, as a genre claimed traditionally by males, has roots that extend from St. Augustine to north-central British Columbia’s present day historical record. One has to wonder, then, what is it that allows Frederickson, MacLean, Bourgon and John to transgress these deeply rooted social and literary boundaries? The expected common thread of a British middle-class heritage can not be used to explain these women’s asserted rights to this genre, as Bourgon is the only British emigrant among the four authors, and she claims a working-class background, as

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does Fredrickson, who was born to poverty in Wisconsin. MacLean, on the other hand, originates from eastern Canada, and, as a Protestant minister’s wife, she can claim a middle-class identity. Mary John cannot so claim; but, as a Carrier Native, she does have the deepest historical roots in the region. What three of these female authors do share is a primary identity as widows. As widows, Fredrickson, MacLean and Bourgon represent narrative positions that allowed them to be honest in their reflections. They could more assertively exploit their experiences and challenge patriarchal conventions, for example, because they were not writing from within the same “system of dependencies” as married women who need to worry about protecting living male egos. However, Mary John was not a widow. Therefore, her participating rights to the genre of autobiography are not implied by her marital status. Her privileged narrative voice is more complex because, as a Native woman, her work can be deemed Native protest writing or even salvage ethnography.

John’s work is also a collaborative effort, in which her biographer Bridget Moran’s divorced status can also be used to partially explain this privileged narrative position that transcends the confines of the male ego.

In spite of the diverse narrative positions from which the four women speak, their texts, as part of the local historical record, serve a similar function and purpose as the other genres. Like all rural women, the four authors seemed to understand that their status as early 20th century pioneers afforded them a narrative voice and that therefore, on some level, they needed to conform to the pioneer cultural script.

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235 Helen M. Buss, “Constructing Female Subjects in the Archive: A Reading of Three Versions of One Woman’s Subjectivity,” in Working in Women’s Archives: Researching Women’s Private Literature and Archival Documents, eds. Helen Buss and Marlene Kadar (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2001), 34.
On the other hand, the individual, first person voice of formal autobiography also offered the literary space to more overtly express the differences and diversities of their experiences. Accordingly, the four works serve dual purposes, in that they represent “an attempt to express belonging to the cultural heroization of the settler,” and they serve as “an act of ritual redress” against “the narratives which homogenize and deny experiential differences.”

By continuing to adopt a feminist deconstructive, empathetic, sisterly reading stance, these autobiographies can be interpreted as resistance texts, with unique motives and strategies for confronting the pioneer cultural script.

*Silence of the North*

Olive Fredrickson offers a complete overview of her life in her autobiography, *Silence of the North*. However, the central focus of her work is the thirteen years she spent as a young widow with three children, homesteading on the Stuart River, near Vanderhoof. As such, hers is an autobiography of survival without a man. Fredrickson draws on many feminist strategies to construct her identity of difference, including the employment of a male editor, Ben East, the New York journalist who subversively functions as validation of her participation in the male-only club of autobiography. Fredrickson’s primary motive for writing, however, is not to destroy the club, but to confront the male heroic struggle against the wilderness pioneer plot, by exploiting the same images in the name of woman. She does this

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236 S. Leigh Matthews, “‘Bound to Improve’: Canadian Women’s Prairie Memoirs and Intersections of Culture, History and Identity,” iii.

237 Olive A. Fredrickson with Ben East, *The Silence of the North* (Toronto: Paperjacks Ltd., 1980), (1972). This autobiography has been made into a movie, known by the same title, with Ellen Burstyn portraying the character of Fredrickson.
well by recounting her own hunting, trapping, farming, employment, and survival skills, which, in turn, challenge traditional gender norms.

Like other rural women, Fredrickson utilizes normative language of domesticity, family and home as a feminist strategy to justify her agency and independence, by suggesting they were born of necessity. Acceptable resistance is implied, for example, when upon learning of her husband's death, she writes, "How was she ever going to manage three children on her own?" By unconsciously slipping into the third person, collective voice here, Fredrickson draws attention to the contradictions between realities and ideologies, in the expression of her grief. In other words, her collective voice implies that her husband's death was a turning point in her life, while her first-person voice had previously demonstrated that she was very capable of living without a man long before his death. In previous passages, for example, she recalls how she and her husband separated several years prior to her arrival in Vanderhoof, during which time she ably supported herself and her young children. She also indicates that she pursued the opportunity to farm in Vanderhoof without her husband's knowledge and, on her own, saved enough money to move from Washington and purchase 160 acres of land after arriving. Fredrickson also offers no indication that her husband knew of her whereabouts or indeed, that he planned to join her. These and many other narrative strategies allow her to demonstrate freedom, agency, independence and choice in the diversities of her experiences. She manipulates normative language and switches again into the mythologizing, collective voice of woman when she asserts that "the young

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238 Ibid., 105.
homestead widow prov[ed] to herself that she could take care of her family and make the grade."239

*The Far Land*

Eva MacLean's autobiography, *The Far Land*, does not provide an overview of her entire life. Instead, MacLean represents her identity by focusing on a five year period of her life, 1911 to 1915, when she and her Presbyterian minister husband resided in Hazelton.240 Thus, her overall narrative strategy is one of displacement, in which she consciously commits the rest of her life to silence.241 Unlike Fredrickson, MacLean does not collaborate with a male author to justify her soiree into the ego-centred genre of autobiography. Instead, Ken Coates, a prominent male historian of northern British Columbia, provides the forward to her work, and thus, serves a similar function of validity. Coates uses the words “unpretentious” and “modest” to describe MacLean and suggests that her story “is a modest one, told with a gentleness of spirit and sprightly humor,” which effectively assures the reader that she and her text conform to traditional ideologies of femininity.242 Coates also proposes that MacLean’s primary narrative challenge is “to the standard version of Canada’s ‘peaceable’ frontier,” thereby referring, not to the focus of her work, but to the peripheral segment near the end of her text, where she contradicts realities expressed earlier, by offering stereotypical images of the wild west through tales of

her gun-toting minister husband saving the town of Hazelton during a bank robbery and shoot out in 1914.243

More accurately, MacLean's primary motive for writing is to refuse the traditional identity of a minister's wife as devout, domestic, subservient, and constrained by class and racial boundaries. Instead, she defines herself as "insufficiently religious" and "rebellious," and focuses on her friendships with Native women, old bachelors, and prostitutes.244 The hero of her narrative is Marie, the former dance hall queen, who, as her closest confidante, taught her to cook and explained "babies and their origins," and "wore a halo" in the author's eyes.245 Further, while MacLean draws the parallels between geographical isolation and flexible social boundaries in her own friendships and experiences, she suggests diversity and difference by denying them in others, including the "pretentious" wives of railroad officials. Displacement, anecdote and dialogue also serve as strategies of resistance as she describes how these latter women criticized her for dressing "like a hussy;" for keeping her laundry on the line too long; and for choosing friends of the wrong religion, class and color.246 Juxtaposition and self-deprecation are similarly used to confront essentializing ideologies of race, class, and gender and to further exploit notions of diversity and difference.

For example, MacLean notes how the years she spent in Hazelton represented the height of the Grand Trunk Railway construction period, when hundreds of bachelors, from all over the world and from all walks of life, were her

243 Ibid., vii.
244 Ibid., 14, 41, 144.
245 Ibid., 38, 40, 81.
246 Ibid., 68.
closest neighbours. She challenges traditional historiography that suggests
gеographical isolation and demographic imbalances produced uncivilized, rowdy
bachelors, by insisting that she felt “safer there in a sea of men than on the streets
back home” in urban Ontario.247 Finally, MacLean defies similar stereotypes of
uncivilized Natives, by juxtaposing Native and non-Native personal relationships and
drawing parallels between their cultural customs, and more subtly with anecdotes,
such as the one where she describes the cold winter evenings when the entire
community of Hazelton gathered on a nearby lake, to skate and dance to the strains
of “Strauss waltzes” and “Sousa marches,” provided by a local all-Native
orchestra.248

**Rubber Boots for Dancing**

Among Nan Bourgon’s many feminist narrative strategies is a subtle
misrepresentation of her work. I suggest so, because *Rubber Boots for Dancing and
other Memories of Pioneer Life in the Bulkley Valley*, while clearly an autobiography,
could be easily mistaken for a community generated local history.249 This is implied
by the book’s title, which infers a collective voice, and by its physical size, of 8 ½ x
11 inches, which is more common to the local history genre than to autobiography.
Therefore, from a feminist, deconstructive position, the title and size of the book can
be interpreted as a narrative strategy aimed at minimizing Bourgon’s
autobiographical narrative position. However, Bourgon does not disguise her primary
motive of resistance, but states clearly in the forward to her work that she writes

247 Ibid. For scholarship that suggests otherwise, see Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race and
the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871.*


Marjorie Rosberg (Smithers: Tona and Janet Hetherington, 1976).
"because she does not want her memories to be fictionalized."²⁵⁰ Like Fredrickson, she provides an overview of her entire life, but focuses on her pioneering experiences. In this case, they do represent most of her life. Bourgon, a British emigrant, was single and thirty-three years old when, in 1914, she settled in the Bulkley Valley. Soon after, she married Joe Bourgon, a local bachelor, farmer, and French emigrant from eastern Canada. This "mixed" marriage, as she calls it, is the focal point of her narrative resistance, directed towards ideologies of autonomous marriages and uncomplaining, passive, rural women.

Bourgon's strategies of resistance are similar to that of MacLean, but she relies even more heavily on dialogue, humility, and self-deprecating humor to express her agency and independence and her active resistance to the oppression she faced within her marriage. All three of these narrative strategies, for example, are in play in the following passage:

I wanted a couch and an easy chair...He said, 'What for? You are not going to have time to sit in them. Besides, that stuff goes down in value each year. We had better buy a calf, it will grow while we are sleeping.'²⁵¹

Instead of criticizing her husband in the name of gender, Bourgon conceals the feminist "undercurrents of [her] forbidden discourse," by suggesting that her husband's shortcomings were caused by his ethnicity. Accordingly, she writes:

I liked Joe, but he was not my kind of man. He was French Canadian and Catholic....he treated me as if I was his inferior and that was hard to swallow, because if I thought about it, I would figure he was my inferior. What a mess.²⁵²

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 9.
²⁵¹ Ibid., 67.
²⁵² Ibid., 37, 59.
Bourgon also adds silence and omission to her narrative tool-box, implicating further unspoken oppression with such phrases as “there is no use for me to complain,” and, “there is so much more which could be said.” She also uses juxtaposition to both affirm and challenge the dominant cultural script, by countering her many examples of marital oppression with a few less emotionally charged statements about her husband’s successful farming and parenting skills.

The tension and contradictions between the realities and ideologies of Bourgon’s female identity are succinctly expressed at the beginning and end of her autobiography. Early in the text, she recalls being asked about her constant laughter, “What makes you so happy?” and how she responded by saying, “I’m not happy. I don’t know what else to do.” In a similar manner, she chooses humility to end her narrative, thereby rejecting the allusion of power and self-importance implied by her autobiographical position. In the book’s final pages, Bourgon writes, “I wish someone else could have written this and made a better job of it.” But, at ninety-three years old, she tells it herself and when she is done, she marvels at this transgression of social and literary boundaries, by asking her readers, “Who would ever think it would be me, a woman, writing these things?”

**Stoney Creek Woman**

Mary John’s *Stoney Creek Woman* represents the region’s only other female-authored formal autobiography. Disguise as a narrative strategy is also suggested here; however, this time around the misrepresentation is not in the title or

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253 Ibid., 94, 105.
254 Ibid., 7.
255 Ibid., 105.
256 Ibid.
size of the book, but in by the fact that it is a biography, disguised as an autobiographys. The text, while written from the first person narrative position of its subject, Mary John, a Carrier woman from the Stoney Creek Reserve, near Vanderhoof, is authored by Bridget Moran, a non-Native social worker and friend of Mary John. For Moran, this strategy necessarily allows her to avoid the narrative marginalization of Mary John’s Native voice. It is also a more effective method for challenging the frontier cultural script, which in this case, is directed less at restrictive ideologies of women, and more towards its negative stereotyping of Natives. Moran also states her primary motive, by stating that she writes “so others will know the truth of Native lives.” Using Mary John’s life experiences as the focal point of her narrative, she presents the realities of early 20th century racial discrimination, economic and political oppression, poverty and death. Moran parallels these themes with examples of John’s agency, leadership, and active resistance, as exemplified by the many years she spent advocating for healthier social conditions on the Stoney Creek Reserve and for improved political, social and economic relationships between the Native and non-Native communities of Stoney Creek and Vanderhoof.

Like the other three female autobiographers, Moran also couches her narrative protest with traditional domestic language and strategies of juxtaposition, contradiction, anecdote, dialogue, humor, and humility, that allow her to both resist and affirm ideologies of John’s gender identity within her Carrier cultural community and outside of it. Using these methods, Moran effectively constructs parallels

258 Ibid., 8.
between Native and non-Native cultures. For example, she draws attention to the similarities and the differences between the gendered experiences of John and emigrant rural women, using juxtaposition and repetition to accentuate them with such phrases as, "Like most women, I date many of the happenings in my life from the times when my children were born," and, "like most women, I do not forget the dates when my children were lost to me." Irony, as a strategy of resistance, is also in play here, as John's personal tragedies are not like that of most women. She has unduly suffered, by enduring the tragic deaths of five of her children, her parents and her siblings. Finally, like the other three authors, Moran begins and ends her narrative with humility. However, she adds irony to humility, by highlighting one of the pivotal moments in Mary John's life, when, in 1979, she was honored as Vanderhoof's "Citizen of the Year." As John's voice tells it, it was a "come as you are" surprise, and so she did, in her work clothes. Upon discovering that she was the guest of honor, she adds, "I could have crawled through the floor." This honor bestowed upon John, as Moran suggested, represents both irony and social change, because Mary John was receiving the ultimate recognition from a community that had for many years shunned her.

In summary, these last two chapters draw attention to the discordant relationship between the realities of rural women's experiences and the ideological representation of them in local discourse. In spite of having authorial control over most of the local historical record, rural women themselves have consistently understated the significance of their early 20th lives. Instead, they have used

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259 Ibid., 73, 76.
260 Ibid., 129.

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conventional pioneer language to depict themselves first and foremost, as domestic housewives and helpers to men. On the other hand, a purposefully feminist deconstructive reading also reveals a subtle narrative resistance to these restricting paradigms of rural women. Most importantly, by analyzing the discourse from various reading positions, these two chapters emphasize the interpretative possibilities that lay within these texts, and how women can be seen as both oppressed and empowered by their rural experiences.
Chapter Four

One Daughter's Reckoning: Realities, Ideologies
And Rural Women

Women will starve in silence until new stories are created which confer on them the power of naming themselves.
- Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar

In order to fulfill the objective of both recovering and analyzing rural women's experiences and voices, this study has utilized traditional historical and post-structural linguistic strategies that required a reading of the discourse from various different interpretative positions. This approach, in turn, has drawn attention to the complexities and the narrative discontinuities, between the realities and ideologies of north-central British Columbia's rural women. This final chapter attempts to reconcile some of these tensions, by building on previous multi-generational deconstructive methods to further emphasize the importance of all (her)stories and the many narrative layers that exist within all discourse. The appropriate metaphorical interpretative position this time around is that of a daughter, who is in "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction." In other words, she is re-examining the discordant layers of interpretation and multi-generational voices she has inherited, which in turn, will provide new growth in her understanding. But first, as all daughters must, she revisits the interpretative memories of those who came before her.

In the archival attic, the fresh, young reader finds a treasure chest, overflowing with an eclectic array of historical material. They include diaries, letters, journals, newspapers, court records, as well as more recent materials, such as local histories, oral history collections, memoirs, reminiscences, and published

261 As cited in Carolyn Heilbrun, Writing a Woman's Life, 29.
autobiographies. Attached to these records, she finds three very different stories about early 20th century rural women of north-central British Columbia. She recognizes the first as that of her grandmother, because of its traditional appearance, and because it focuses on the gendered experiences and material realities of rural women. In the details, the cultural backgrounds of her grandmother and other emigrant women appear to merge with geography and gender, to create a sub-narrative of independence, autonomy, freedom and choice in women's experiences. Attached to the story are many photos of her grandmother and other single, married, divorced and widowed women engaged in a broad range of private and public economic, political and social activities. While she finds this story interesting, the young reader is left feeling that the story is somehow incomplete.

She searches for her mother's story and finds it partially deconstructed, but resting safely on the surface of the other written materials. She notices many differences between this story and that of her grandmother. While her grandmother seemed to be most concerned with where rural women came from, where they settled, and what they did, this story is more complex and pays more attention to words and relationships between genre, voice, gender, language and the ideological representation of rural women. Clearly, her mother has asked different questions, such as, who speaks for rural women, to whom do they speak, and for what purpose? Although many rural women are represented in the story, their lives appear similar and primarily defined by traditional domestic activities. She finds her mother's story interesting as well, but is still left feeling that the story is incomplete.

The young reader digs further down under the surface layer of the historical materials to find her sister's story, carefully hidden beneath the others. Wrapped around it is a pair of feminist reading glasses, the ephemera of her sister's life, and an amazing collection of narrative strategies, which are unconsciously woven together and in an advanced stage of deconstruction. This story has many devious and subversive sub-plots, and is much harder to follow. Once again, the women are wearing identities of difference and diversity, some boldly exploiting their experiences, while others are obscuring their faces of anger, defiance, and confrontation. At times, she recognizes the parallels between this story and her grandmother's, but at others, the plot seems to shift, conforming more closely to her mother's story. The young reader is confused by the unresolved contradictions and tensions between and within these stories. As the daughter inheriting them, she must add to them and she wishes she could somehow get the story right.

**Genre, Gender and Power Revisited**

Throughout this inquiry, issues of genre, gender and power repeatedly surface to explain the apparent contradictions and tensions between the material and discursive levels of rural women's identities. Looking first at genre, we find that, by and large, rural women are not represented in scholarly or traditional archival
historical records, but that they do dominate all local genres, except published
autobiographies. Further, it appears that all but the latter narrative form have a
function and purpose that makes it difficult for women to write themselves out of a
restricting and deeply rooted pioneer cultural tradition. Instead of empowering
themselves by exploiting their agency, independence and the diversity of their
gender roles, rural women create essentializing images of themselves in their texts
that reflect traditional domesticity and subordination to men. Why, given these
implied constraints, do they restrict themselves to the collective genres of local
discourse? If, as Foucault suggests, all discourse is a source of power, who holds
the restricted patent on autobiography?

Power, in the context of this discussion, according to Heilbrun, is being able
to “take one’s place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have
one’s part matter.” One can assume, therefore, that if rural women had the power
to fully represent themselves, more of them would choose the less restricted
narrative position implied by formal autobiography. The differences between the
genres and the narrative freedom offered by autobiography is evidenced, for
example, by the stories of Nan Bourgon, Olive Fredrickson, Eva MacLean, and Mary
John, which more explicitly demonstrate the diversities and differences of rural
women’s experiences, thus offering a less nostalgic and more female-centred
rendition of the past. However, as the historical record indicates, autobiography is a
narrative form traditionally dominated by males. With so few female models to follow
and affirm women’s place within the genre, rural women will continue to avoid it,

263 Carolyn Heilbrun, Writing a Woman’s Life, 18.
thereby ensuring that the traditional androcentric early settlement narrative will persist.

Rural women are not the only females who rely on the collaborative narrative position. Canadian women's scholarly record, I would argue, is also over-represented by collaborative narrative works. Several feminist scholars, including Adele Perry, have also noted this phenomenon, as well as the "dominance of article length studies", which Perry attributed to persisting patriarchal controls, whereby women "continue to work under conditions of limited security within the academy." While Perry and others link genre, gender and power, by suggesting patriarchal structures restrict the narrative voices of women, it is equally conceivable that women's preference for the collective narrative voice speaks as much to the inherent characteristics of female gender identity, as it does to issues of genre and power.

In a recent work, sociologist Judy Long suggested that women avoid the genre of autobiography because it is a narrative form characterized by self-display and an ego-centred individualism, which are traits more commonly linked to the

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265 Adele Perry, "Feminism, History and Writing British Columbia's Past," in Atlantis 25:1 (Fall/Winter 2000): 70. Publishing companies are also dominated by men, who assumably have the power to deny women equal access.
masculine personality. For example, a published autobiography infers that the author believes his or her personal experiences are significant enough that they will change the context of history. As a woman, these egotistical assumptions are risky, because they contradict traditional female virtues of modesty, humility, and concealment. This also explains why Bourgon, MacLean and Moran rely so heavily on silence, self-deprecat ing humor, modesty, and concealment in their narrative representations of self. The collaborative nature of local histories, on the other hand, is more compatible with nurturing feminine characteristics, because it provides the narrative space to speak for others, to focus on the relationships between people, to express belonging to community, and most importantly, to identify with other women. In other words, the collective genres are more suitable for a woman who prefers to write, “not to extricate her own voice, but to inscribe it within, to hold it in dynamic balance with the other voices of her community, voices that her sense of the othered nature of her identity makes her own.”

What happens when we take genre out of the equation and consider gender and power on its own? It is also conceivable that the discontinuities between the experiences and representations of rural women reflect persisting patriarchal ideologies and contemporary social tensions between rural men and women. After all, as Emma Curtin suggested, idealization is “frequently a defense ideology and an expression of tension within the society.” If rural women asserted the power and agency necessary to openly exploit their shifting gender identities, they would be

267 Ibid., 27.
268 Ibid., 17.
269 Helen M. Buss, Mapping Our Selves, 94.
diminishing the contemporary social power and privilege of their male counterparts, whose self-images are constructed around ideologies of their heroic pioneering experiences. Further, we must also consider that the differences between rural women’s past and present lives are equally relevant to the discursive discontinuities in local discourse. It may well be that the identities of rural women articulated within these sources pertain more to their present realities than to their pasts. After all, the early settlement period signified a unique political, economical, cultural, and psychological moment for rural women, when geography, gender and emerging rural societies created unprecedented freedom and opportunities for expanding their identities as women. However, by the end of World War II, improved gender ratios and a decline in subsistence and agrarian lifestyles, coupled with an increase in male-dominated breadwinner households, returned many rural women to previous systems of dependencies and to culturally devalued domestic roles. Therefore, when they write their pasts, rural women may be constructing ideologies of subordination that more accurately reflect their present-day domestic realities.

The contradictions between the experiences and representations of rural women can also be seen as a marker of difference between the women themselves. Most of the female voices in local historical records are of women in their senior years, who, as a whole, tend to be rather conservative in their views. For example, Florence Ray, of Fraser Lake, seemed to accept that her lot in life was to follow her man and be happy doing so. When women like her narratively conduct their life reviews, they are guided by desires to confirm their cultural belonging and collective, community identities, not by feminist impulses to protest the cultural script that
narrowly defines them. Clearly, many of the female authors and editors of these texts have taken the stereotypes for granted and not questioned their truths. For example, when Pat Turkki, author of Burns Lake’s local history, wrote about the area’s “pioneers…and often their wives,” it is unlikely that she gave any thought to the subordination of women implied by her statement.

We must also consider the possibility that for some women, traditional domestic roles were their reality. It is important that we, as scholars, not devalue the everyday, ordinary experiences that many women’s lives and identities continue to be built upon. Although rural women’s domestic ideologies do not reflect all of their early 20th century experiences, they do represent many of them. By privileging the non-domestic in our studies, we risk contributing to patriarchal notions that managing households and raising children are somehow inferior or subordinate to the public economic and social activities of women. In other words, we are perpetuating the gender hierarchies we seek to change. On the other hand, some feminist scholars argue that women who buy into domestic ideologies participate in their own oppression.\(^{271}\) We need to consider the implications of making such assumptions.

In any case, as this study also suggests, some early 20th century rural women of north-central British Columbia did have proto-feminist ideologies that guided their narrative representations. Like Laura Wakefield and Isabel Tyner Ford, they expressed them overtly. Others positioned themselves on both sides of the fence, alternating between their collective and individual identities and creating

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contradiction and tension in their narratives that reflect this personal internal conflict. Finally, it is possible that some women were intuitively aware of the multiple stories they were creating. This notion is supported by the texts of Fredrickson, Bourgon and others who shift from the first to third-person voice when presenting ideological representations of self. Helen Buss, in her analysis of the 19th century early settlement narratives of Susannah Moodie, Anna Jamieson and others, proposes that these female authors were “sophisticated in [their] knowledge of the devious purposes to which narratives could be put and of the politics a woman encounters in self-representation.” As such, one cannot assume that in the late 20th century, rural women were any less aware of their feminist narrative strategies.

In the realities of their lives, rural women manipulated domestic ideologies in order to assert their agency and independence and affect political, economic and social change devoid of gender conflict. Years later, as they wrote their pasts, they may have used similar methods to disguise their resistance to androcentric narrative traditions. After all, even in present-day rural societies, overt expressions of feminism is likely to incite gender conflict and cultural criticism.

Reflexivity

Finally, I must consider my own role in the interpretations of rural women offered here. Like the subjects of my inquiry, I am an observer, participant and historian, in the sense that I share a similar inter-subjective connection to these sources. In other words, my familial roots in north-central British Columbia are as deep as the subjects I study. Admittedly, I, too, own personal insights and a privileged understanding of the places and people that I write, which are not

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common to scholarly inquiries. On the other hand, I believe that generational distancing allows me the level of objective space necessary to recognize and understand social change. My age, gender, middle-class socio-economic status, life experiences, scholarly skills, and critical understandings similarly influence and enrich my work, just as they do others’ studies.

In order to balance my subjective relationship to this inquiry, I have purposefully chosen methods and theories that would produce several interpretations and, in turn, ensure that I considered rural women from a variety of perspectives. Although I recognized the parallels between this metaphorical multi-generational methodological approach and my own realities, I had no idea of the irony they would come to represent. During the making of this thesis, my sister, my mother and my grandmother were lost to me. My sister, Sandy Stickney, succumbed to ovarian cancer on November 2, 2002. She was forty-eight years old, and like many rural women, combined an active public career with a private life on the family farm, where she lived with her husband, two sons and a menagerie of horses, sheep, ducks, dogs and cats. Four months later, on March 6, 2003, I lost my mother, Bessie Whitehead, at seventy-five years old, to cancer, as well. Like the subjects of my inquiry, many of whom she knew, she was a rural woman who quietly pushed gender boundaries and asserted much agency and independence throughout her life. Then, on June 28, 2004, my ninety-seven year old grandmother, Ivy Middleton, passed away, not so unexpectedly, but creating an equally painful void in my life. Ivy represents the link between my personal and academic paths, for it was during an oral methodology course in my final undergraduate year that she
broke her code of silence and agreed to share her life with me in a four day interview marathon. It was then that I learned first-hand about reticence, humility, modesty and concealment in rural women's narrative voices. Grandma Ivy's stories created as many historical gaps as they filled, which intrigued me and set me on this path of historical inquiry, aimed at understanding her life in a broader context. Along the way, I have come to a new level of maturity in my understanding of early 20th century rural women of north-central British Columbia. My quest, however, has not provided closure or discerned any absolute truths relative to their identities.

Most importantly, this metaphorical four-generational journey draws attention to the many truths that lie within local discourse (no pun intended) and influence our understanding of rural women. Secondly, although a multi-pronged analytical process and personal insights have helped determine the discontinuities between the realities and ideologies of rural women in the local historical record, they have not produced any multi-generational female instincts whereby I could pretend to know what motivated rural women's voices. Obviously, these narratives have "a core of subjectivity knowable first hand only by those whose minds and bodies 'lived' the experience."273 Many truths are possible. My scholarly growth in understanding has been the quest itself. It is also here that I am once again reminded of Ruth Pierson's call for "epistemic humility" and the need to avoid appropriation by letting the rural women "narrate their own reality and express their lived experiences in their own voices."274 It is also here, in the details of rural women's experiences, in the patterns of their stories, and in the many connections between genre, gender,

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273 Ruth Roach Pierson, "Experiencing Difference, Dominance and Voice in the Writing of Canadian Women's History," 83.
274 Ibid., 83, 92.
language, and power, that we, as researchers, can continue to have meaningful discussions, in which we explore the possibilities for revising our paradigms of early 20th century rural women. In the final analysis, early 20th century rural women in north-central British Columbia have asserted power, agency, independence and resistance by writing themselves into the local historical record. They may be “telling it slant,” but there is power in the telling.275 As quiet feminists, they have exploited the diversities of their experiences, their skills, their solidarity with other women, and their contributions to building rural societies. In doing so, they have also rejected identities of oppression. That, I believe, is a step in the right direction.

Who Cares?

If this thesis draws attention to any of the following, the past three years of my life have not been in vain. First, it is my hope that this work creates an awareness of the need for more scholarly research of rural British Columbia and specifically, of rural women. Second, that it emphasizes the scholarly possibilities offered by the “quiet archive” or the non-traditional narrative forms that constitute local historical records in all communities. Moreover, that such sources have value, not only for reclaiming rural women’s lives, but for understanding the roles genre plays in the cultural production and reproduction of women. Third, that this inquiry demonstrates the value of separating experience from language in our analyses, and how applying several different methodologies and inter-disciplinary theoretical perspectives to our sources alters our interpretations and enhances our understanding of the power and instability of language. Fourth, that this study emphasizes the need for self-reflexivity in all scholarly inquiries. Finally, as a rural woman of north-central British Columbia, 275 Judy Long, Telling Women’s Lives, 37.
it is my hope that this study will empower and challenge the way present and future generations of rural women read and write themselves into local historical records. As Thomas King reminded us, “there are no truths, only stories.” It is important, therefore, that we create stories that resist the inequalities under which we live.
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