

Settler Feminism
in
Contemporary Canadian Historical Fiction

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Introduction: Historical Fiction and Feminism in Canada’s Settler Colonial Context.....	1
Chapter 1 “And then she had walked in dressed like an Indian”	
The Settler Woman on the Frontier in <i>The Outlander</i>	30
Chapter 2 “I wiped their feverish necks with cool, moist cloths”	
Mothers of the (Settler) Nation in <i>The Birth House</i>	55
Chapter 3 “And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once?”	
Settler Women as Ambiguous Settler Subjects in <i>Alias Grace</i>	82
Conclusion	122
Works Cited.....	125

Abstract

Canada has seen a veritable explosion in the production and popularity of historical fiction in recent decades. Works by women that present a feminist revision of national narratives have played a key part in this phenomenon. This thesis discusses three contemporary Canadian historical novels: Gil Adamson's *The Outlander* (2007), Ami McKay's *The Birth House* (2006), and Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996). By examining these novels through a settler colonial lens and with a specific interest in the critique of settler feminism, this thesis offers readings that can reveal how feminism operates within the confines of the settler fantasy. These readings suggest that women's historical fiction offers an opportunity to consider different aspects of feminism in the settler setting and to consider different aspects of critiques of patriarchy in settler contexts. This thesis suggests that these novels present a settler women's history that cannot be properly understood through the simplistic logic of male/female or colonizer/colonized oppositions, and that the ways the novels depict women's interactions with patriarchal settler structures and institutions can contribute to critical understandings of a colonial history with which Canada continues to reckon.

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Introduction

Historical Fiction and Feminism in Canada's Settler Colonial Context

In 2007 Herb Wyile observed that, “for Canadian writers at the turn of the twenty-first century, history has indisputably become a central preoccupation” (*Speaking* 2). Canadian writers’ “collective engagement with the past” (Hulan, *Canadian* 144) has occurred within a veritable international “explosion” in the production of historical fiction that persists into the present decade (de Groot 1). Scholars have also noted that, as part of this global phenomenon, there has been a corresponding upsurge in the popularity of historical fiction written by and for women (Cooper and Short; King; Wallace, “Difficulties”). Indeed, in her study of British historical fiction, Diana Wallace asserts that the historical novel has become “one of the most important forms of women’s reading and writing” (*Woman’s* ix). Canada’s particular contribution to the production of women’s historical fiction includes many successful contemporary examples from novelists such as Suzanne Desrochers, Alix Hawley and Jane Urquhart. Protagonists in works of women’s historical fiction are often spirited heroines who assert their independence in settings that are patriarchal and sexist yet interesting and historically engaging. These settings frequently include a settler colonial context, with the North American Western frontier, small rural towns, and the emerging industrialism of new settler colonial cities as common favourites. Ann Heilmann comments on the appeal of this particular historical moment to modern novelists, and she notes how contemporary women writers “draw on historical, predominantly Victorian, contexts to explore questions of gender, sexuality and identity” (“Elective” 104). Remarking on the popularity of the genre of women’s historical fiction, international reviewers have observed how history has “provided a particular and powerful imaginative resource for [contemporary] women writers” (Munford 205), and they have acknowledged how, given the plethora of recent television adaptations of women’s

historical fiction, “the historical female figure as both desirable and marketable seems a resoundingly timely argument” (E. Young 214).

This thesis concerns itself with feminist readings of three works of contemporary Canadian historical fiction by women, each set in nineteenth- or early-twentieth-century Canada: Gil Adamson’s *The Outlander* (2007), Ami McKay’s *The Birth House* (2006), and Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996). These texts have been variously read as a “celebration of women’s ways of knowing” (Bourrier-LaCroix 26); as a “reclamation of lost histories that give voice to silenced women of the past” (Mannon 552); and as stories that “subvert patriarchal narratives” (Mintz 129). Meanwhile, their protagonists have been read as women who “resist the gender politics of [their] day” (Siddall 85); who “metamorphose from a passive victim into an active, independent woman” (Urbaniak-Rybicka 116); and who have “nothing in common with Hollywood’s worn-out damsels in distress” (Charles). In a move beyond these kinds of feminist readings of contemporary women’s historical fiction, this thesis draws from the insights of settler feminist criticism and examines how settler colonial issues intersect with feminism and literature. Through a discussion of how these novels explore the themes of marriage, caregiving, birthing, women’s healthcare, domesticity, housework, and women and the law, this thesis suggests that women’s historical fiction might offer us an opportunity to consider different aspects of feminism in the settler setting and to consider different critiques of patriarchy in settler contexts. Moreover, it argues that when read as nuanced depictions of settler feminism, these texts highlight some of the intricacies of patriarchy in settler contexts that tend to go underappreciated in reviews and commentaries – particularly when those reviews seek to celebrate the strength and supposed independence of their female characters without exploring the socio-political basis of Canadian settler societies. By studying settler women’s complicity with and participation within the cultural norms of the settler

patriarchy, this thesis wishes to establish the value of a critique of settler feminism. In doing so, it suggests that these novels present a settler women's history that cannot be properly understood through the simplistic logic of male/female or colonizer/colonized oppositions, and that the ways the novels depict women's interactions with patriarchal settler structures and institutions can contribute to critical understandings of a colonial history with which Canada continues to reckon.

In her reading of Canadian nineteenth-century settler women's narratives of self-representation and those women's relationships with power structures in the settler context, Jennifer Henderson describes how the position of Canadian first-wave feminists like Emily Murphy¹ was complex and often paradoxical. Henderson argues that the norms of a post-/colonial white-male-dominated society and government cannot help but infuse, impact and ultimately regulate movements such as feminism. Among examples of how this heteropatriarchal frame of reference influences settler feminists' discourse, Henderson cites how Theresa Gowanlock² felt an obligation to present, in her published memoir, an "indebted disposition" to the "protections of 'civilized' society" that freed her from "untold suffering and privations at the hands of savages" (Henderson 118–119). Henderson also cites settler feminists' general tendency not to show solidarity with other marginalized groups like First Nations peoples or immigrants. Countering the view that the aim of feminist literary criticism "should be the recovery of an authentic feminine subject as author," Henderson contends "feminist cultural critique can be sharpened and rejuvenated through a refusal to assume that the individual woman is the subject – the source and centre – of her own narrative" (15). In the discourses Henderson examines, she suggests the ability to say "I" in first-person narratives – the access to the position of speaker – was granted to women

¹ Emily Murphy: Author, Canada's (and the British empire's) first female magistrate, and one of the "Famous Five" group of women who successfully challenged women's lack of personhood under Canadian law in 1927–1929.

² Theresa Gowanlock was among eighty hostages, including Theresa Delaney, held by Plains Cree for two months after the 1885 Frog Lake Massacre.

in exchange for a general subjection to the moral norms of the newly emerging liberal Canadian society. She further suggests that a “dangerous intimacy between subjectification and subjection” (Riley 17) occurs when women insert themselves into a discourse that is already overwhelmingly regulated regarding the authority and legitimacy of women’s speech: “The opportunity to speak for herself within these constraints does not amount to liberation from silence or from political structures in which she can only be represented by others. Women’s authorization to speak the truth ... is not the opposite of victimization” (Henderson 15). Henderson’s critique of settler feminism, then, concerns itself with how feminism operates within the constraints of the settler colonial context, and how settler women negotiated a voice for themselves within the norms of that system.

Cecily Devereux also explores the paradoxical elements of Canadian first-wave feminism in her study of Nellie McClung’s³ eugenic feminism. While the kind of feminism espoused by McClung (and Murphy) included feminist premises such as birth control, sex education, support for mothers and “the empowerment of women to implement these premises,” it also promoted ideas about controlling reproduction, which ultimately manifested in the compulsory sterilization of Indigenous people in Alberta and British Columbia in the early twentieth century (Devereux 12). Devereux describes nineteenth-century eugenics as the “science” of selectively breeding out “undesirable” hereditary characteristics: “The logic of selective breeding suggested that if ‘bad’ characteristics could be blocked and ‘good’ ones fostered, the quality of a nation’s people, or its ‘race,’ could be improved ... and thus the nation itself would be made more powerful” (6). Eugenics becomes an important impulse in settler colonies wishing to strengthen themselves as nations: “Indeed, empire building makes national strength all the more urgently required for

³ Nellie McClung: Social activist and campaigner for suffrage and temperance. A member of the “Famous Five” group alongside Emily Murphy.

maintaining the home ‘stock’ while also populating colonized territory with nationally identifiable settlers” (Devereux 7). Nancy Forestell acknowledges how feminism’s evolution is connected to its British imperial context (9). She cites Marilyn Lake’s example of how early Australian feminists’ sense of identity was “constituted in these years around the turn of the century within an imperialist framework, in terms of the dichotomies drawn between the ‘civilized,’ and the ‘primitive,’ ‘Europeans’ and ‘natives,’ ‘advanced’ and backward” (Lake 280). Both Devereux’s and Henderson’s studies point to “domestic ‘missionary’ work” by first-wave feminist organizations (Devereux 5) that promoted these kinds of “race making” projects (Henderson 17) and that implicated feminists in racist practices that were key to the process of building the nation of Canada. By invoking the British imperial casting of white settler women as “guardians of civilization within imperial and colonial societies” (Paisley 218), the ultimate goal of such activity was to “promote the evangelization of ‘heathen’ women and children” (Henderson 9). As such, settler women’s advancement relied upon the construction of racial and colonial otherness as “infantilized, backward, less evolved, needing ‘uplift,’ [and] requiring assimilation into Canadianness” (Devereux 11). Devereux observes how “first-wave feminism is not something that occurred in *reaction* to imperialism but *within* it; white women cannot occupy the position of ‘the colonized’ because their own work – suffrage, missionary, social purity activist – was crucial to imperial colonization” (144). The acknowledgement of this phenomenon, Henderson says, acts as a “counternarrative to the dominant story of feminist and national progress,” and so offers readings of settler feminist texts that work to confront the limits of established feminist literary criticism and historical study, highlighting how in certain ways white feminism benefits from its implication in racist practices (10–12).

In her discussion of early settler feminist activity in Western Canada, Mallory Allyson Richard notes how significant these kinds of racist discourses were to feminist activity like suffrage campaigns:

[A]dvocates of women's suffrage ... argued for the franchise by measuring their contributions relative to those of ethnocultural and Indigenous groups. In effect, the implied and unspoken ... point in support of women's enfranchisement was that women were at least as deserving of the vote as some enfranchised males, and were *more* deserving than their fellow disfranchised Canadians. (112)

In Canada's settler feminist context, settler women's resistance – to their own oppression by the patriarchal culture – was often formed at the expense of a concomitant oppression of Indigenous peoples in a struggle for recognition. Postcolonial scholar Jodi Byrd discusses the problems that arise in colonial contexts when a range of disenfranchised groups compete for recognition against other marginalized segments. Byrd examines the continuing historical erasure of Indigenous peoples in the United States by American liberal multiculturalism's ostensibly progressive ideology, and the consequent distortions of Indigenous identity and history that emerge when Indigenous subjectivity is enfolded into other forms of difference including gendered, sexual and racial minorities. Byrd suggests the field of postcolonial studies has often not addressed the relationships between the array of groups oppressed by the colonial system, and calls for “an act of interpretation that decenters the vertical interactions of colonizer and colonized and recenters the horizontal struggles among peoples with competing claims to historical oppressions” (xxxiv). Byrd says that foregrounding the vertical interactions of European arrival as the defining event of colonialism distracts from the “complicities of colonialism and the possibilities for anticolonial action” that arise beyond the binary of colonizer/colonized (xxxv). The fact that settler feminist

activity that sought to empower women sometimes involved competition with and subjection of other minority groups is something that settler feminist criticism scrutinizes. This thesis suggests that an understanding and critique of these processes can help us illuminate and better understand the settler feminist activity presented in contemporary Canadian historical fiction. Analysis of such presentations can also draw attention to the ongoing persistence of a settler feminism in twenty-first century Canada (as it manifests in literature) that at times continues to form by way of the effacement of Indigenous or other suppressed populations.

It is important to note that early feminist organizations did encourage (settler) women's independence and promoted women's authority to govern themselves. Both Henderson and Devereux emphasize the achievements of first-wave Canadian feminists. Murphy was "an exemplary Crusader" and the "hero of a much-publicized feminist quest for the recognition of Canadian women as 'persons'" (Henderson 205, 160). McClung, who worked with Murphy on the Persons Case, was "instrumental" in the passage of women's suffrage legislation in Canada (Devereux 3). She was also a well-published writer, and a "recognizable and popular spokesperson" on issues from temperance to international relations (5). Critiques of settler feminism do not seek to diminish the real feminist achievements made by white settler women, but to offer an opportunity to consider the paradoxical and ambiguous nature of settler feminism. That is, while first-wave feminists brought challenges to the colonial project, they also, at times, carried further the patriarchal aspects of the settler system. As Tracy Kulba argues, "contemporary feminists cannot disavow the legacies of first-wave feminism, nor can they embrace those figures uncritically. Rather, those legacies exist not as past problems but as histories that inform the world within which contemporary feminists practise their politics" (39). By reading contemporary historical fiction's presentations of settler women as figures produced by a patriarchal colonial

social system, this thesis shows how these novels can help shed light on the ambiguities and paradoxes of the feminist figure in the settler setting. Furthermore, by conducting a reading that emphasizes the settler colonial situation (over that of other readings of these texts that have focussed on feminism in general), this project is an opportunity to consider this particular social context, and to explore how contemporary authors have addressed some of the nuances of the relationship between the female settler subject and early Canadian patriarchal social structures.

To support this project's settler feminist critical approach, its analysis of contemporary Canadian historical fiction also draws from the relatively recent scholarly field of settler colonial studies. Scholars including Patrick Wolfe and Lorenzo Veracini have articulated the necessity of a defined critical field for settler colonial studies, discrete from colonial or postcolonial studies, that highlights "the inherent difference between encounters in a colonial setting and encounters in a settler colonial one" (Veracini, "On Settleness" 1). These critics argue that developing an understanding of the specific dynamics present in colonies where "settlers had come to stay" requires particular investigation into the material and social ramifications of the settler system (Edmonds and Carey 2). Wolfe, Mark Rifkin, Audra Simpson and Glen Coulthard each challenge the notion of colonialism as a past occurrence, and they point to continuing present-day attitudes, discourses and practices that normalize the absence of Indigenous peoples. These scholars share a view of colonialism not as a historical event but as something present and continuing; to borrow Wolfe's phrase, they suggest "invasion is a structure not an event" (388). Rifkin proposes that "settler common sense" – which he defines as the commonplace practices, attitudes and ideals that normalize the absence of Indigenous peoples – continuously pervades contemporary settler culture, shaping structures from property to family and even time (xvi–xvii). Simpson argues that conceptualizing colonialism as something that happened in the past enables current governments to

dismiss Indigenous concerns. She also recognizes the need to “push on the clean promise of a binary of settler and native,” and she acknowledges how, despite the more nuanced work by scholars (including Byrd) that emphasizes the competing discourses within settler colonialism, “the notion of structure [the “settler and native” binary] maintains its allure [for academics], in part because of its undeniability but its simultaneous and ongoing disavowal” (439). Meanwhile Coulthard draws attention to the fact that, despite “a seemingly more conciliatory set of discourses and institutional practices that emphasize [Indigenous] recognition and accommodation, ... the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the state has remained colonial to its foundation” (6). In light of these current concerns in settler colonial and Indigenous scholarship, this thesis recognizes the problems both with reasserting the settler/colonized binary and with studying the colonial context as ‘history.’ With this in mind, this project seeks to understand the ways recent Canadian historical fiction depicts the past within the purview of present concerns. The anticolonial objectives cast by scholars such as these – specifically those in relation to Indigenous absence and negation – may not be immediately enacted by these novels’ representations of classed and embodied subjugations. However, by drawing attention to the nuances of the settler figure in these texts, and how such a figure can at times work to obscure Indigenous antecedence, this project suggests that these novels offer an opportunity to explore different aspects of colonialism.

A key component of settler colonial scholarship, and one which this thesis frequently employs, is the concept of the “settler subject.” Alan Lawson – an earlier, but still fundamental, critic of settler contexts – suggests that “settler cultures” are “the very place where the processes of colonial power as negotiation, as transactions of power, are most visible” (153). Studying the settler is important, he says, because “to overlook the particularity of the settler site ... is to engage

in a strategic disavowal of the actual processes of colonization” (151). Lawson identifies the settler subject as an “in-between” or ambiguous figure caught between two worlds (162). He suggests this subject is one formed within a relation, inherently anxious and shifting, and unable to hold a singular or stable identity position. This ambiguity arises in two ways. First, the settler “mimics” the culture of the imperial colonizer by applying its knowledge, attitudes and understandings to the new society in the new land (155). It can only be mimicry because the settler represents the empire and acts for the empire, but is not the (original) empire. Second, the settler mimics the Indigenous subject position in the settler’s desire to adopt and assert an authority over the new land. This desire is actually an acknowledgement of Indigenous legitimacy; in order for the settler to claim that authority as its own it must first “efface” the Indigenous subject, then mimic the Indigenous sovereignty over the land (156). Scott Lauria Morgensen describes this as a “paradoxical logic:” “Settlers supplant *and* incorporate indigeneity to attain settler subjectivity” (*Spaces* 17). This practice normalizes the settlement process: if the settler has a ‘natural’ authority over the land then settlement is a ‘natural’ occurrence. However, as Phil Henderson observes, this process leads to “radical instability” in the settler subject (40).

Lawson also describes how the settler figure mimics an Indigenous subject position when the settler identifies as “the other” (157). This occurs in processes of nation-building when former colonies construct national identities to distinguish themselves from imperial Britain. The Indigenous subject is again effaced in this process, especially when national identity is rooted in a constructed and performed affinity with the natural landscape, and also rooted in a generalized portrayal of the land as empty and ready for settlement. Wolfe suggests settler society expresses its difference from the colonial power and its independence as a nation by incorporating, symbolically, aspects of Indigeneity. He cites Australian examples such as “national airlines, film

industry, sports teams and the like, [that] are distinguished [from the empire] by the ostentatious borrowing of Aboriginal motifs” (389). Lawson refers to Terry Goldie’s concept of settler “Indigenization” when he describes how the settler strives to achieve authority over the land through narratives that include “forms of white indigeneity such as the pioneer, the Mountie, [and] the woodsman” (157). Settler culture, therefore, does not simply replace Indigeneity, but “the process of replacement maintains the refractory imprint of the native counter-claim:” the “contradictory reappropriation of a foundationally disavowed Aboriginality” (Wolfe 389). Lawson describes how this process contributes to the creation of a nation and of the settler subject:

In the foundations of cultural nationalism, then, we can identify one vector of difference (the difference between colonizing subject and colonized subject: settler-Indigene) being replaced by another (the difference between colonizing subject and imperial centre: the settler-imperium) in a strategic disavowal of the colonizing act. The national is what replaces the indigenous and in doing so conceals its participation in colonization by nominating a new colonized subject – the colonizer or invader-settler. (160)

Anna Johnston and Alan Lawson argue that “the occupation of land formerly owned by others always translates into the cultural politics of representation” (362). They see the settler as “uneasily occupying a place caught between two First Worlds, two origins of authority and authenticity” (370). Cynthia Sugars articulates a similar view of the settler identity as one caught between familiar and unfamiliar, and whose narratives articulate the “inexpressible unhomeliness” of the “in-between” settler subject (xx). Meanwhile Avril Bell also discusses the “unhappy identities” and the “hybridity” of both settlers and Indigenous peoples captured in “tragic colonial dynamics in the present” (3, 19).

While Lawson does not discuss the role of gender in his theory of the settler subject, there are more recent scholars who have highlighted the importance of feminist and gender perspectives to the field of settler colonial studies. Morgensen suggests theories of settler colonialism will remain incomplete if they do not investigate how political and economic formation is constituted by gendered and sexual power, and he points out how gender and sexuality have been an intrinsic part of the colonization of Indigenous people (“Theorizing” 3). Morgensen also defines a process of “the terrorizing logics of a society of normalization” when he explores how techniques of biopower such as church missionaries and residential schools were (and are) perpetrated upon Indigenous communities to educate them (and settlers) in the ways of modern sexuality, such as heteropatriarchal gender and sexual norms (*Spaces* 42). Sarah Carter likewise describes how the Christian heterosexual monogamous model of marriage was wielded by colonizers in Western Canada to consolidate white patriarchal power by de-legitimizing Indigenous relationship practices that did not conform to it. In addition, contributions to gender and women’s studies by recent Indigenous feminist scholars help to highlight how “settler colonialism has been and continues to be a gendered process” (Arvin et al. 9). This thesis explores how gendered issues come to the forefront of depictions of the settler colonial context in these novels, with particular attention to power struggles informed by gender hierarchies. It suggests that a focus on gender in the settler colonial setting allows us to read contemporary historical fiction in light of settler women’s participation in Canada’s “race making” project. It also suggests that thinking of feminism in terms of postcolonial or settler colonial studies helps us to consider the entire range of effects that the event of colonialism and settlement has had on a nation, its subjects and their literatures, and the writing of the history of that nation. As Lawson argues, “We need to attend more comprehensively to the different ways in which imperialism interpellated the full range of its

subjects so that we can explore the particular investitures of power, both material and discursive, that postcolonial readings unmask and unravel” (153). This thesis attempts to move further from a straightforward critique of patriarchal colonial institutions and discourses. It suggests that the novels read in this study are open to multi-faceted analyses, and that they create space for critiques of settler colonial patriarchy in settler contexts.

Scholars, activists and politicians argue for an acknowledgement that settler society is not simply a romanticized story of the past but a condition that continues as a present and violent colonial institution. In the current political climate of truth and reconciliation, then, contemporary culture is aware of the problems that come with wholesale affirmations of Canadian nationhood. Insofar as many of the practices of settler colonialism assert a national identity for a newly established nation, the practices of writing, particularly writing historical fiction, also help to establish and assert a national identity. Many scholars have discussed the significant role literature plays in the development of a nation. Margaret Atwood has underscored the importance of literature’s contribution to the formation of Canada’s national identity: “To know ourselves, we must know our own literature; ... Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, ... the product of who and where we have been” (*Survival* 17–19). As Daniel Coleman asserts, popular fiction is an excellent arena in which to track the nature and complexities of Canadian identity. Coleman argues that the “official symbolic history of Canada” (28) was established in Canadian popular literature between 1850 and 1950 through the presentation of what he identifies as “white civility:” the “ideal” Canadian identity defined in opposition to the “uncivilized” Indigenous subject (9, 13). Coleman identifies in the literature of this period four allegorical figures (“the Loyalist brother, the enterprising Scottish orphan, the muscular Christian, and the maturing colonial son”) that present whiteness as civilized and desirable (6). Coleman suggests this official history works to obscure

the “spectral, fantasmatic history” of Canada, and includes the “denial of Indigenous presence in these lands, the disregard of pre-contact history, and the continuing suppression of First Peoples’ claims to land and sovereignty” (29). Margery Fee’s survey of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Canadian writers with “varying relationships to Indigenusness” explores the nation-building power of literature, and argues that “a national literature constitutes a land claim” (1–2). By tracing Atwood’s and Northrop Frye’s assessments of the history of Canadian literature – infused, Fee says, with “romantic national critical ideas that focus on the distinctiveness of Canada, particularly its landscape” (5) – Fee explains how Canada’s national literature developed out of presentations of an empty, harsh, cold “wilderness” that the Canadian character withstands: “The land itself forms the national character, for which literature becomes the primary evidence ... [T]hat distinctive identity, formed by the land (autochthony), then becomes the title (entitlement) to the land itself” (6). The novels examined in this project align well with these facets of Canadian literature. As works of historical fiction set in an earlier settlement moment, these texts depict various versions of settler figures negotiating or surviving the Canadian landscape, and in doing so they often romanticize that landscape to a greater or lesser extent. Moreover, as works of feminist fiction, these texts portray women as settler figures seeking – and attaining – new identities in the newly settled Canadian context. Janice Fiamengo identifies English-Canadian narratives of settlement as stories “in which writers seek to adapt themselves to their new surroundings and to form new identities,” often amidst tales of “dislocation and adaptation” or “records of suffering and endurance” (261–265). Hamish Dalley also describes how settler colonial literature contributes to the articulation of the settler subject, who is “by definition one who comes from *elsewhere* but who strives to make *this place* home. The settlement narrative must explain how this gap – which is at once geographical, historical, and existential – has been bridged, and the settler transformed

from outsider into indigene” (31). As this thesis argues, the novels of this study certainly participate in the articulation of the settler subject, while the feminist aspirations of the female characters seeking independence from (or within) the patriarchy often mirror a ‘settler fantasy.’ In this thesis, the term settler fantasy refers to an ideal often rehearsed in narratives of settlement – and especially evident in works in the Western genre – where an autonomous, self-directed individual finds liberation in a new (colonized and settled) land: usually ‘the frontier.’ While not every instance of feminist activity in these novels is a settler fantasy (for example, women rejecting marriage or women opposing the medical establishment), the instances of feminist assertions of freedom that take place against a settler backdrop of encounters with, in and through the Canadian land/landscape could qualify as the kind of fantasy that is a settler fantasy: *The Outlander*’s protagonist escapes her marriage and forges her new identity in the Alberta mountains; the feminist victory of *The Birth House*’s heroine is integral to her ownership of land in Nova Scotia at the novel’s conclusion; and *Alias Grace*’s Grace Marks experiences episodes of escape, capture and (limited) freedom that are tied to her crossing Lake Ontario multiple times. The ways these female characters find liberation in their new lives and in their new spatial locations often mirrors the settler fantasy of the individual seeking autonomy on the frontier. In these ways, then, it could be argued that these novels contribute to the ongoing literary articulation of Canadian identity, and that this is one of the many ways in which they offer a sound opportunity to explore feminist issues in the Canadian settler context.

While literature performs an important function in building national identity in settler colonies, there are scholars who have argued for the specific role the genre of historical fiction plays in this phenomenon. In her study of how historical fiction operates in the development of nationalism, Katie Trumpener traces historical fiction’s progression as it emerges out of

eighteenth-century Irish and Scottish national antiquities and poetry into nineteenth-century nationalist fiction, “and then [into] a new kind of historical novel” (11). She argues that, in turn, these genres were “transported” to various parts of the British colonies “where they form the primary models for early colonial fiction:” “The transportation of Scottish and Irish novelistic genres to Canada, Australia, and British India is facilitated by the novel’s own long-standing obsession with cultural transfer and imperial-consciousness” (12). Trumpener observes that the “myth of survival in destruction” and a “plot of loss and growth through historical change” are foundational components of historical novels that participate in nationalism (131). Historical fiction is a key site where assertions of national identity take place, and where cultural ideologies are highly visible. The genre can therefore be a useful location in which to study and critique how feminism operates in particular cultural contexts, both historical and present.

Many academics have explored how historical fiction functions within the genre of Canadian national literature. Andrea Cabajsky and Brett Josef Grubisic highlight the importance of the historical novel to concepts of Canadian nationalism and observe that historical fiction has become a touchstone for critics “seeking to understand how Canadian literature encourages readers to reconsider traditional historical processes, national narratives, and communal priorities” (x). Alice Ridout similarly demonstrates that Canada’s “national tradition” of the historical novel is “directly related to Canada’s postcolonial situation,” and that it cannot be separated from “the issue of nation” (299). Renee Hulan attributes the recent popularity in Canada of reading and writing historical novels to a “particular cultural moment” in the late 1990s, when history and fiction were both participating in a “contestation and deconstruction of foundational narratives” (“Reading” 781, 793). This occurred, Hulan says, in tandem with a revision of historiography to take into account postmodern criticism (785). Wyile’s survey of Canadian historical fiction investigates

contemporary writers' and scholars' "renewed interest in and revitalization of Canadian history" (*Speaking* 2). Wyile suggests one of the most distinctive features of recent Canadian historical fiction is its "predominantly postcolonial sensibility [which is] in large part a response to the predominantly revisionist reappraisal of the legacy of Canada's colonial experience" (7):

"Contemporary historical novels, in contrast to their nineteenth-century predecessors, seem less inclined to participate in creating a collective mythology than to question traditional narratives of Canadian history and any notion of a collective, consensual experience of the past" (6). Indeed, Guy Vanderhaeghe claims that in writing *The Englishman's Boy* he had hoped to produce a historical novel that "urged readers to contemplate the making of history in all its various manifestations, whether they were school texts, films, or historical novels" ("History" 430). Wyile also observes the influence of postmodern aesthetics and narrative techniques in contemporary historical fiction, such as "its self-consciousness and historiographical self-reflexivity" (*Speaking* 16). Linda Hutcheon's earlier, but transformative, assertion of the postmodern nature of Canadian literature describes contemporary historical fiction as "historiographic metafiction" – "fiction that is intensely, self-reflexively art, but is also grounded in historical, social, and political realities" (*Canadian* 13). The kind of historiographic metafiction Hutcheon describes contains a mesh of fictional narrative and historical fact, while it is simultaneously aware of the acts and consequences of reading and writing history (14). The novels examined in this thesis incorporate these characteristics of contemporary Canadian historical fiction, particularly in their feminist reappraisals of Canada's colonial past, and consequently they offer rich ground for analysis of contemporary attitudes to Canada's settler colonial situation.

In addition, Wyile observes that contemporary Canadian historical fiction is also characterized by its careful attention to historical detail (*Speculative* 262–263). A number of

historical novels published in recent decades contain metatextual structures that incorporate historical documents such as letters, newspaper articles, interviews, court transcripts, photographs, and recipes. This technique serves as a way of “authenticating the truth,” but also as a way of highlighting the “frustrating inaccessibility of historical documents” (Hulan, “Reading” 791, 788). It also highlights, as Hutcheon describes, the “dialogue between the ‘texts’ of both history and art” (*Canadian* 14). *Alias Grace* and *The Birth House* each incorporate various historical texts like news reports, letters, and advertisements – a technique that not only enhances their presentation as works of historical fiction, but also functions to reassess the reliability of such historical ‘evidence,’ especially when conflicting viewpoints are juxtaposed. This technique troubles the notion of a knowable truth, especially in *Alias Grace*’s murder mystery, where “nothing has been proved. But nothing has been disproved either” (466), and it works to blur the distinction between reality and fiction in history, and to demonstrate the fictionality of all recorded events, real or imagined (Michael 431–432). When discussing the writing of history in general and the writing of historical novels in particular (and especially when critiquing *Alias Grace*), various academics discuss issues of truth in storytelling and how any accounts of the past must necessarily be stories, “mediated and possibly distorted by the reporter,” where “the result is not history but a historical novel” (Knelman, Review 348). While Hayden White has claimed that history is a form of fiction, of narration, where history is made by its writers through a process of selection and interpretation, Hutcheon says historiographic metafiction “does not deny that reality is or was, it just questions how we *know* that and how it is or was” (“History” 173). As Wyile observes, contemporary novels “come across as less profoundly sceptical about historiography, less concerned with fracturing and interrogating retrospection, and largely, if somewhat ambivalently, rooted in historical verisimilitude and an engagement with (rather than abandonment or disruption of) the historical

record” (*Speculative* 263). Each of the novels of this study includes an engagement with actual Canadian historical events and people: *The Outlander* depicts the devastating 1903 landslide in Frank, Alberta; *The Birth House* recounts the 1917 Halifax Explosion and the 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic; and *Alias Grace* focusses on the sensational 1843 trial and imprisonment of convicted murderer Grace Marks. The authors of these works demonstrate an effort to respect historical reality, and they each describe in their novel’s Acknowledgements or Afterword the meticulous process of their historical research in an effort to attain accuracy (Adamson, Acknowledgements; McKay, Acknowledgements; Atwood, Afterword). At the same time, these novels remain works of fiction; as Atwood notes, “I have not changed any known facts ... [but where] gaps exist in the records, I have felt free to invent” (560). As scholars including Hutcheon and Jeanette King have argued, it is this “direct engagement with the historical process itself” and the “blending [of] historical documentation and events with its imagined narratives and characters” that characterizes contemporary historical fiction (King 3).

Generally speaking, it is women authors who have charged themselves with writing about women’s history from a feminist perspective and, accordingly, it is texts by women writers that often provide the best opportunities to examine gender issues in historical contexts. This project is interested in exploring settler feminism as it is presented in historical fiction, as opposed to actual historical texts, because of the opportunities fiction brings to explore issues (historical and current) from a contemporary perspective. Wallace notes how historical fiction “has a tradition ... of making a space for women (as readers, writers and subjects) in a way that few other genres do” (“Difficulties” 207). One of the reasons why women writers have been so attracted to historical fiction is that it allows female authors to respond to a genre steeped in the masculine tradition of the nineteenth-century historical novel, as reinvented by Sir Walter Scott in adventure stories

committed to historical fact such as *Rob Roy* and *Ivanhoe*. After Scott's success, a "heavily gendered distinction" emerged which linked historical fiction by women writers with "love, romance and domestic intrigue ... and/or historical inaccuracy" (Cooper and Short 2). However, and as Katherine Cooper and Emma Short observe, the women's historical novel as a genre has been recently "substantially re-evaluated," with a "wealth of critical work" conducted around the renewed potential for feminist reinterpretations within the genre (4), including studies by Wallace (*Woman's*), and Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (*Metafiction*). Ann Heilmann observes how contemporary women writers use fiction set in the past to interrogate "masculinist and heteronormative orthodoxies" (105), while Heilmann and Llewellyn suggest historical fiction has a "strong political resonance" for women (and "ethnic" writers), and that "one of the driving forces in the writing of historical fiction is to give a voice to the silenced Other" ("Hystorical" 142). Heilmann and Llewellyn argue that fiction, and metafiction especially, is a useful genre for women writers who "seek through the very act of writing to deconstruct and reinterpret aspects of the historical process which have previously silenced or been closed to their female subjects" (Introduction 2). Postmodern metafictional practices appeal to women writers wishing to disrupt traditional (masculine) notions of linear history, because "it is by interrogating the male-centred past's treatment of women at the same time as seeking to undermine the 'fixed' or 'truthful' nature of the historical narrative itself that women can create their 'own' (counter-) histories; it is in such acts that the metafictional and metahistorical combine" (2–3). Heilmann and Llewellyn speak of the value of historical fiction when they suggest that "while historians can argue over the precise meanings of an event or series of events, ... novelists can place them in an entirely new, frequently ironic, light" ("Hystorical" 140). Such processes are particularly useful in interrogating what is unfamiliar or repressed in traditional accounts of history, making fiction an attractive genre in

which writers can investigate settler colonial or feminist issues: “Historical fiction allows an effective opportunity to create a feeling of unease about both the past and its role in the present” (139). Depicting the past from the perspective of the present also allows authors to explore topics of gender, race or sex more critically and in ways that may not have been available to women writers in an earlier period. Fiction also offers writers the opportunity to work with tropes rather than individual facts; fiction can manipulate literary figures like the outlaw, the cowboy/girl, the pioneer, the lady, the nurse, the witch, the maid, or the mistress to test their viability without needing to refer to primary documents. Contemporary historical fiction, then, offers a place where current attitudes to the past and the present are visible, and where reconsiderations of both are possible. By bringing a “modern, feminist sensibility” to the reconstruction of historical women’s lives, writers of historical fiction “provide a bridge between past and present, making it easier for the reader to identify the ideological pressures at work on the experience of gender identity today” (King 178).

It is important to note that this kind of women’s historical fiction – the “bridge between past and present” – ultimately depends upon a linear historicism. If Marxist historical realism acknowledges the reality of lived experience, it is the materiality of that lived experience that contemporary historical fiction is concerned with: domestic duties, childbirth and childcare, the experiences of sexual discrimination and sexual harassment, receiving punitive action for perceived indiscretions, etc.; i.e. “the lived realities of women’s lives” (Harstock 106). In her theorizing of a “specifically feminist historical materialism,” Nancy Harstock asserts that “feminist theorists must demand that feminist theorizing be grounded in women’s material activity” (126). Meanwhile, Claire Colebrook identifies a problem with feminist approaches to historicism: “How can an ethical practice such as feminism, which relies so heavily upon the trans-historical force of

its claims, also embrace a form of historical relativism?” (305). Colebrook explains how “the capacity to judge the past is central to feminist politics,” and that feminism relies upon the notion of a past “characterized almost uniformly as a history of injustice;” as such, “it is difficult for feminists to avoid historical narratives of progress or development” (300). The nature of historical fiction means that it necessarily relies upon relativist historicism in the way that it depicts and judges the past from the perspective of the present, while at the same time women’s historical fiction often adopts a feminism that “attempts to release women from the bonds of those supposedly ahistorical phenomena such as nature or femininity” (295). This thesis is therefore aware of the conundrums inherent in feminist approaches to history and historiography. While the novels of this study depict a women’s history rooted in the reality of feminist experience, they also adopt presentist attitudes in the revision of that history, and at the same time rely upon transhistorical ethical norms.

While this thesis acknowledges the obstacles within a feminist historicism, it also acknowledges the complications within indiscriminate assertions of nationhood. Joan Sangster’s examination of the concept of the nation within Canadian feminist history identifies the problems with the idea of a “homogeneous (masculine) nation” for feminists who are “wary of overarching ‘metanarratives’ which obscure the local and particular in women’s lives” (255). National identity was important to the work of Canada’s first-wave feminists, who conducted missionary work integral to nation building, and whose suffrage campaigns “fought for new definitions of citizenship” (257), although, and as this introduction has shown, race was “deeply woven into the nation building project” (259). Sangster notes how women historians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries “often embraced nationalist narratives, looking for pioneers, heroines, and role models” (256), and she suggests their attempts to “gender the nation” often “assumed a

popular form, such as the many accounts of intrepid white women explorers and travellers” (256). While these feminists may have called for a redefinition of nation that includes new (gendered or racial) perspectives and questions inequalities, they have not necessarily questioned the basis of nation itself (258) – a problem that a project other than this one could take up. This project offers a consideration of how contemporary historical novels can contribute to new understandings of the Canadian idea of nation, and how new readings of historical fiction’s representations of settler feminism can contribute to new understandings of Canadian nationalism. If settler feminist activity was integral to Canada’s nation building project, perhaps new readings of settler feminism in contemporary historical fiction can contribute to new, diversified ideas of nation. The ways the texts of this study engage with feminist issues in a historical context (issues that remain present-day concerns) reflect a re-evaluation of traditional, homogenous historical storytelling that highlights, troubles, negotiates and explores colonial history and heritage myths, while paying particular attention to giving expression to those perceived to have been denied a voice in conventional modes of historiography. This thesis is interested in how an examination of contemporary Canadian historical fiction, especially one with a settler colonial/settler feminist critique, can contribute to current understandings of the role that historical fiction plays in nationalism in a contemporary context – especially as feminist and Indigenous issues begin to occupy more space in mainstream cultural discourse. If one objective of such novels is to contribute to a national identity, then these texts can be linked to the Canadian literary tradition in as much as they offer a revised, feminist version of history, one that acknowledges oppressions (of women) within settler colonialism but still keeps that national identity intact.

This study of contemporary Canadian historical fiction by women blends settler colonial scholarship, including critiques of settler subjectivity, with a settler feminist critical approach. In

doing so it aims to offer something new to both fields. This thesis suggests that the settler setting of these novels constitutes the shifting, ambiguous, liminal subjectivities of the female characters. It further suggests that, because of this context, these characters are often confined in a paradox where their roads to freedom and autonomy at times mean they need to adopt the racist or classist attitudes of the patriarchal system, uphold the settler fantasy of claiming an affinity with the land, and/or participate in disseminating imperial knowledge conceptions by perpetuating sexist Victorian stereotypes. A reading that is cognizant of the shortcomings of settler feminism can reveal how female settler subjects participated within settler colonial cultural norms, and it can illuminate how settler women's progress was enacted alongside and within Canada's national progress.

Readers and critics have tended to champion these novels for their strong female protagonists and the ways these characters succeed despite the limitations placed upon them by patriarchal structures. *The Outlander's* Mary Boulton is hailed as a heroine "one cannot help but admire as she struggles through the novel's many challenges" (Galletly 318); *The Birth House's* Dora Rare is praised as "a woman who fights to preserve the art of midwifery [with] acts of bravery, kindness and clear-sightedness" (Powning ii). The celebratory reception of these novels, however, has often missed the fact that these novels also highlight the complexity of settler women's relationships to patriarchy in ways that can be explored through the arguments of Henderson, Devereaux, Carter, and other scholars. In missing this point, this reception also overlooks one of the ways in which these texts target patriarchy, which is through offering a rigorous and particularized critique of colonialism – itself a patriarchal institution. As such, these novels offer an opportunity to explore and critique feminism in settler contexts. This thesis is a chance to interpret these novels in a way that calls upon readers to further consider feminism and

colonialism today and in the past. It is also an opportunity to consider how we can better understand relationships between feminism and colonialism in certain contexts, how Canadian historical fiction can cast a particular light on a problematic colonial history, and how such works might encourage reconsideration of traditional national narratives.

The first chapter is a reading of Gil Adamson's 2007 novel *The Outlander*. Set in 1903 Alberta, it follows the story of nineteen-year-old murderess Mary Boulton who flees into the Rocky Mountains to escape the law, and who learns to survive the elements and reinvent herself on the Western frontier. Using the insights of contemporary feminist scholarship's critique of settler feminism, this chapter demonstrates how the independence that Mary forges for herself is available to her precisely because of her privileged position as a white settler woman. It suggests that reading this novel as 'feminist' simply because of its strong, independent protagonist misses this text's invitation to explore and critique the world of settler patriarchy. This chapter also examines how the novel exposes the nuances of settler relationships to the land. By incorporating the notions of the settler subject and settler Indigenization, it explores how Mary's survival in the wilderness depends upon how she, as a settler, attempts to assert an affinity with the land. As a settler woman, her limited position within the patriarchal society means that, in order to liberate herself from that structure, she often must adopt the sexist or racist aspects of the settler colonial system. This reading aims to emphasize this kind of ambiguity by examining instances in the novel where Mary uses marriage as something to escape to, but then finds it is something she must escape from; where she adopts a stereotypically feminine caregiver persona as she tends to miners on the frontier after escaping the confines of her settler marriage; and where she clothes herself in Indigenous garments as she escapes her pursuers. Chapter One proposes that this reading serves as

a way to augment and update feminist acclaim for strong, self-sufficient female figures in historical novels.

Chapter Two reads Ami McKay's 2006 book *The Birth House*. Set in small-town Nova Scotia in the years surrounding World War I, this novel tells the story of young midwife Dora Rare. It depicts the feminist actions of Dora and her female friends as they work to protect traditional birthing practices in their community when they are faced with the threat of a new maternity hospital and a male obstetrician who pressures the women to accept modern, scientific childbirth procedures. Similar to Chapter One's reading, this chapter discusses how the novel presents female characters at once engaging with settler colonial discourses and attitudes while also attempting to reject patriarchal social structures and interference. This chapter's reading uses critiques of both settler feminist and settler colonial activities to point out how settler women are presented in this novel as subjects who mimic Indigeneity as they endeavour to achieve legitimacy in the settler context. By reading the novel's presentation of Dora as an ambiguous settler subject, this chapter suggests she is one caught between her Indigenous Mi'kmaq and Scottish settler ancestries, and who invokes and then displaces a medicine-woman/healer figure in her journey to feminist autonomy within the settler system. This reading also examines the novel's presentation of women as caregivers and these characters' efforts to maintain their caregiver roles. The female characters in this novel reject the patriarchal medical industry's intrusion on caregiving activities, but at the same time adhere to the patriarchal colonial female caregiver stereotype: a situation the novel presents that, as this chapter suggests, speaks to the paradoxes and complexities of the lives and activities of settler feminists.

The final chapter explores a text that has been the subject of many feminist readings since its publication: Margaret Atwood's 1996 historical novel *Alias Grace*. Atwood's fictional account

is based on the life story of the infamous Grace Marks – a domestic servant and convicted murderer, imprisoned in Kingston Penitentiary between 1843 and 1872. As a servant and prisoner, Grace lacks the social freedoms of the protagonists of the other novels in this project. As an Irish immigrant, she also experiences additional discrimination and suppression that complicate her position further. Nevertheless, this novel is one that explores how settler women like Grace simultaneously reject and engage with settler colonial discourses and attitudes (towards, for example, femininity and notions of hysteria) in order to assert independence from and within a patriarchal colonial institution: in this case, prison. Previous feminist readings of this novel have recognized Grace as a woman who negotiates her way verbally and behaviourally through patriarchal social structures. This study extends these more gender-based feminist readings of *Alias Grace* (of the female subject as suppressed yet self-determining) when it suggests that Grace's negotiation is also one of the settler subject in a colonial setting. This chapter argues that Grace actively participates in a complex and paradoxical negotiation of settler structures to achieve her own ends and her own (relative) freedom, similar to the settler feminists critiqued by Henderson and Devereux. This chapter also suggests that by reading this text through a settler colonial lens, incorporating the notion of an unsettled settler subject, the novel offers ambiguous and liminal conceptions of subjectivity that help to shed new light on Atwood's much-read story. In addition, this reading addresses how the novel critiques class wrangling between middle-class settler women and the domestic servants they suppress and/or infantilize in an effort to maintain their class position within settler society. In doing so, this contemporary historical novel presents feminist activity that in many ways anticipates the paradoxical endeavours of Canada's early twentieth-century feminists.

The novels of this study are open to textured and multifaceted critiques; the readings in this thesis offer a particular perspective while acknowledging there is still much more that these texts can offer. While approaching these novels from a feminist perspective, my impulse was often a desire to promote how these texts revise historical stories from a feminist perspective, or how they advocate for the plucky (white) female protagonist who triumphs over patriarchal oppression, despite my proposal that this is exactly the position that needs to be complicated in feminist studies of historical fiction. In resisting this impulse, I hope I have successfully articulated the necessity of this complication without disparaging the novels' heroines or questioning the valid feminist historical revisions these texts embrace. Meanwhile, as a study of historical fiction I was hoping to give more space in this thesis to the novels' feminist revisions of actual Canadian historical events; for example, the depictions of the Halifax Explosion and the Frank Slide as portrayed from the caregivers' (women's) points of view; Grace Marks' murder trial as seen from Grace's perspective; or (perhaps especially) the minutiae of women's domestic space and its contribution to women's/Canadian history. In addition, there are other aspects of patriarchy in the historical context that these novels critique but that this thesis does not have space to explore: the Frank Slide tragedy as a consequence of capitalism's disruption of the land; domestic violence; the terrible treatment of female prisoners or psychiatric patients; or the confines of marriage as a patriarchal institution. Critiquing these aspects of patriarchy for a modern, female audience is something that all three novels do particularly well. This thesis's focus on settler feminist criticism necessarily means that I am unable to fully explore in the space here the value of these novels, especially to concepts of Canadian culture or nation building, nor is there space to fully explore the implications of these fictional texts for the anticolonial work of settler colonial theorists. However, my examination of the complexities and paradoxes of feminist activity in the settler context, as it

plays out in these novels, hopes to offer a contribution to critical understandings of Canada's settler colonial framework. I also hope to underscore the value of contemporary historical fiction to feminist and settler colonial scholarship. As Judith Knelman proclaims, "The good news is that we are now being showered with novels whose backgrounds weave a Canadian cultural context that has the potential to be far more meaningful than simple 'history'" (Review 348).

Chapter 1

“And then she had walked in dressed like an Indian”

The Settler Woman on the Frontier in *The Outlander*

As a work of contemporary Canadian historical fiction, Gil Adamson's *The Outlander* probes twenty-first-century attitudes to feminism and settler colonial issues in the way it draws attention to Indigenous and women's perspectives along with environmental and mental health concerns. This novel has been lauded for its strong female protagonist, a “bold and resourceful heroine” (Galletly 318) who rebels against the confines of her settler colonial life and “grows into independence” (Urbaniak-Rybicka 125). Set in 1903 Alberta, the novel tells the story of nineteen-year-old Mary Boulton who is “widowed by her own hand” after killing her philandering husband (*The Outlander* 4). In third-person narration that alternates between past and present, the novel reveals how Mary becomes an outlaw as she flees into the Rocky Mountains and learns to survive in the wilderness while evading her brothers-in-law who are in pursuit to avenge their brother's death. Mary's story of a melancholy childhood and a loveless marriage is told in fragments as she wrestles with inner demons while confronted by the Canadian wilderness and, eventually, by the law that tracks her down to bring her to justice. Mary's experiences of survival in the bush and on the Western frontier enable her to fashion a new life of independence for herself, making this novel a modern feminist story of escape, survival and rebirth, and of one woman's journey towards liberation in the turn-of-the-twentieth-century West.

Ewa Urbaniak-Rybicka argues the novel's reinterpretation of the Western genre is a pretext for protagonist Mary testing and reshaping her identity (119), and this novel does succeed in revising and challenging the traditional Western genre to present a feminist and Canadian interpretation of it. *The Guardian*'s book review labels the novel a “feminist western” (while also suggesting readers may groan over that designation), but the reviewer also notes “this is a serious,

literary book that moves far beyond genre or gender stereotypes” (O’Grady). *The Globe and Mail*’s review similarly acknowledges that “if *The Outlander* were only this wry reconstruction of the turn-of-the-century woman, it would be worth the price of admission. It is much more” (Kuitenbrouwer). This chapter’s reading of *The Outlander* seeks to complicate some readers’ views of the text and to further explore commentary that recognizes the novel’s offering of a character and setting that invites interpretations more nuanced than those seeking to champion a female heroine-on-the-frontier. This reading suggests that any tendency to read this text as feminist simply because it contains a strong female protagonist misses an opportunity to explore and critique the world of settler patriarchy in this novel. Conventional feminist readings also miss the novel’s invitation to examine the roles of settler women and their positions and assumptions of agency in colonial contexts. This chapter argues that a reading of *The Outlander* that incorporates a critique of settler feminism can showcase the paradoxical nature of the figure of the white settler woman as it affirms the settler fantasy: one who upholds the ideals of Western liberalism as an autonomous subject advocating for herself. This reading suggests that the insights of settler colonial studies (particularly from a feminist perspective) can reveal how this novel’s critique of a patriarchal settler system that involves an uncomplicated celebration of a self-liberated woman overlooks a critical opportunity to consider how this settler subject acquires and expresses her power.

This chapter also discusses how this novel’s use of the Western genre helps to expose the nuances of settler relationships to the land, and how that enables this novel to better rehearse the intricacies of colonialism and the patriarchal settler colonial structure; that is, it examines how *The Outlander* explores the extent of a settler woman’s involvement in the colonial project of settlement while it simultaneously targets patriarchy through a critique of (the patriarchal

institution of) colonialism. A reading that moves beyond the celebration of female empowerment, and that is aware of the shortcomings of settler feminism, can reveal how that empowerment operates within the confines of the settler fantasy, or within patriarchal colonial power structures. Examples of this phenomenon include how the patriarchal institution of marriage offers Mary an escape from her depressed father; how the murder act offers Mary an escape from that unhappy marriage; how Mary's attempt to assert an affinity with the land helps her to survive during her escape into the wilderness; how her role as a mother-like caregiver allows her to live 'freely' in the mining camp; and how her decision to dress in an Indigenous deerskin costume acts as a signifier of her newfound independence. These examples illustrate how Mary's constricted position within settler society often compels her to take on aspects of the patriarchal settler system at the same time that she attempts to free herself from it. By emphasizing this kind of ambiguity and how settler feminism, or female 'empowerment,' is regulated by the patriarchal settler system, this reading might serve to enhance and update feminist praises of a strong female historical figure in novels such as this.

Marriage and widowhood are feminist themes this novel explores from a contemporary perspective. Feminist readings can, and have, explored how Mary creates her own widowhood in an act of defiant rebellion against her unhappy marriage, and how murdering her husband is Mary's "metaphorical annihilation of her imprisoned self," a "gateway to rebirth," and a way for Mary to shape her independent identity (Urbaniak-Rybicka 116, 119). A reading that includes the insights of settler feminism can further extend this analysis to draw attention to Mary's social position – a pioneer woman in a settler colonial setting – and how she has been positioned this way by a patriarchal settler colonial system that grants her a certain amount of privilege, leaving her poised to make such a (limited) assertion of independence. The extent of Mary's complicity with

marriage as a patriarchal institution and the nuances of Mary's ambiguous nature as a settler woman are rehearsed in the way *The Outlander* presents Mary's convoluted attitude and responses to her pioneer marriage in the settler colonial setting.

Sarah Carter articulates the ways in which the Canadian colonial project utilized and legislated marriage in order to build a nation ordered around private property and husbandly power (*Importance*). The Christian heterosexual monogamous model of marriage (one which, Carter argues, is not as "ancient and universal as conservative thinkers ... would have us believe" (3)) was wielded by colonizers in Western Canada to consolidate white patriarchal power, and it included expectations that governed all married people: the encoded gender roles of the submissive wife and the powerful head-of-household man (9). *The Outlander* depicts this attitude in Mary's grandmother's assumption that marriage is the only available option for the uneducated, illiterate Mary, and how Mary comes to believe this, too: "'It'll be a curse on me if I let her become an old maid and ruin her own life!' ... The idea of a life of spinsterhood seemed to fill her grandmother with an elemental terror, and gradually this fear became contagious" (137). In keeping with the "family farm" model of land ownership fostered by the law in Canada's Western expansion (Carter, *Importance* 6), pioneer landowner John Boulton visits Mary's town to seek a wife. John peruses a group of girls at a garden party, "seem[s] to inventory them," and decides upon Mary as the best fit for a pioneer wife: "Here was a girl who could stand the quiet and isolation, a girl who didn't need a social life, didn't want it. How much better she would be in a lonely log cabin than would these happy, playful girls" (138). While a feminist reading may underscore Mary's lack of autonomy or her economic dependence in her marriage, it is also important to recognize that the marriage about which Mary is "properly happy on her wedding day" (210) – "drunk with the promise of transformation" (140) and "gaily waving" from the train (210) – is granted to her by a

patriarchal settler society because of her position as a middle-class settler woman, one young and attractive enough to be eligible to participate in the family farm model of settler expansion and to help forge a “new settler identity” through such a marriage (Carter, *Importance* 6).

Mary’s purportedly idyllic married life on a pioneer farmstead with “nothing but room” (140) turns sour after the death of her newborn propels her into a post-natal depression. This event brings into sharp focus her ineptitude at housekeeping (“all her training had been for a different kind of life” (169)), and her isolated, lonely marriage to an absent, gambling and, she discovers, adulterous husband. When one of John’s pregnant lovers pays a visit to the cabin, Mary immediately resolves to end her marriage violently: she shoots John in the leg and waits overnight for him to bleed to death. As a contemporary novel, this feminist interpretation of the conditions of pioneer wives might encourage modern readers to applaud the wronged woman who escapes (kills) her negligent, cheating husband. Although readers may admire a female protagonist who leaves an unhappy marriage on her own terms, thereby rejecting abuse and neglect (despite the morally questionable method of that escape), a reading of the novel that integrates settler feminist criticism can emphasize that Mary’s ‘free choice’ is a confined one: as a settler woman she has been granted a certain amount of freedom by colonial patriarchy, but can access this freedom only in this particular, confined way. Furthermore, Mary’s decision to end her marriage and leave the pioneer cabin underlines the settler colonial fantasy; that is, the self-directed person fighting for herself. This fantasy is emphasized when set against the backdrop of the Western frontier, and becomes part of the Myth of the West, the place where settlers can “escape the burdens of the civilized world” and define themselves as “a new people” (Katerberg 65–66). In fact, by shooting her husband Mary participates in the gun violence typical of Western-genre depictions of the frontier:

a lone rebel battling against the mainstream. In this case Mary merely substitutes as a female performance of a male outlaw.

Furthermore, it is not marriage as a patriarchal institution that Mary finds displeasing and tries to escape. Rather, it is that Mary's dream of a "well-appointed house" (127), children, and the relationship she thought might let her be "free to change, to be something and someone else" (139) remains unrequited. As a settler woman and the mistress of a pioneer's cabin, Mary has been positioned to exercise a degree of power and is therefore able to make the decision (albeit one blinded by grief, anger, and jealousy) to kill her husband and flee, and to begin, as Urbaniak-Rybicka describes, "self-creation with an act of violence" (116). Mary's liberation and the possibilities for her autonomy are privileges extended to white settler women by the settler colonial power; this kind of release from an unsatisfactory marriage may not be available to members of other classes and races. A reading that acknowledges the limits of feminism in the settler context can reveal the complexities of a situation in which Mary commits murder, and can expose the ambiguities inherent in the kind of 'freedom' Mary attains by performing that act. As a settler woman, Mary has access to a successful marriage, but also to the opportunity to end it violently.

In recent decades Canadian literature has seen somewhat of a renaissance of the Western genre, with best-selling and award-winning Western novels published by Patrick deWitt, Fred Stenson and Guy Vanderhaeghe. As a Western, *The Outlander* sits within this twenty-first century trend, but it also sits within the greater Canadian literary tradition of works that emphasize the role of the landscape in Canada's national imagination. After murdering her husband and while closely pursued by John's vengeful twin brothers, Mary flees into the Alberta mountains that stand "like a monument in her path, promising freedom and camouflage" (58–59). The classic theme of survival

employs the Canadian wilderness not only as a haven of escape, but also as something Mary must overcome in order to find individual autonomy: the Rocky Mountains function “as a metaphorical passage ... towards self-liberation” (Urbaniak-Rybicka 122). While a feminist reading of this novel might stress that Mary’s time in the bush represents the protagonist traversing a personal frontier shaped by the social context of nineteenth-century women’s lives (122), a settler colonial reading might suggest this novel’s interpretation of the frontier – one that promulgates the Myth of the West where individual freedom and autonomy beckon – sustains a quintessentially settler colonial understanding of land.

In her exploration of how national literature constitutes a land claim, Margery Fee explains how Canada’s literary tradition developed out of presentations of Canada’s distinctive landscape, “a nature usually characterized as ‘wilderness’” that needs to be “brought under control” (5). *The Outlander* would appear to contribute to this aspect of the Canadian imagination in its description of the Alberta forest as something to be tamed: the bush is described as a “strange and wicked-looking topography” (59), the morning fog as “ghostly forms” (60), and the sounds above as the “slow funhouse creaking of pine branches” (61). Here the horrors of the unknown represent something Mary must survive and overcome in order to fulfill her destiny, in the same manner as pioneer settlers who tamed the landscape to forge new, Canadian identities. Indeed, when bathing in a frigid mountain stream Mary experiences a “painful cleansing” (62), metaphorically describing her divine pursuit of liberty in the bush. Critics have aligned this kind of literary forging of new identities in the Canadian wild with the desire for a definition of Canadian culture at large. Northrop Frye asserts that “[t]o feel ‘Canadian’ [is] to feel part of a no-man’s land with huge rivers, lakes and islands that very few Canadians [have] ever seen” (220), while Margaret Atwood proposes Canadians form an identity based on their unique ability to survive a harsh, cold

wilderness (*Survival* 33). *The Outlander* certainly upholds Atwood's survival thesis, but it also brings focus to Frye's notion of the Canadian wilderness as a "no-man's land." As in many Westerns, the Canadian frontier in this novel is depicted as void of civilization, an attitude compounded by Mary's lack of navigational skill: "The widow did not know which territory she might be in or whether she had passed into another world" (68). The novel identifies early twentieth-century colonial attitudes to the Canadian landscape when describing Mary's memories of her husband's map on the wall of their cabin, where

[e]ach American state had been filled in with a different colour, all of them tidied together like a box of sweets. Canada itself was a broad emptiness of circumscribed territories each holding its own name and nothing more ... without cities or borders, no line to indicate where she had come from or where she was, the widow had stared at Canada and seen it as others did. An attic. A vacancy. A hole in the world. (68–69)

This description highlights the way that even inanimate maps assert the emptiness of the Canadian West as something waiting to be filled with settlement. The widow's memory of musing over John's map constitutes the only geography lesson she ever had ("No good woman knows too much about geography or politics. Even her father had believed this" (68)) and it exemplifies how Mary's understanding of the Canadian Western wilderness is inescapably shaped by settler colonial attitudes, as encapsulated by this map of Canada's West. *The Outlander* in some ways participates in the endorsement of the Myth of the West as a vacant wilderness to be survived and tamed in the pursuit of individual liberty, and it uses this myth in its production of a Canadianized version by contrasting a 'closed' America with an 'open' Canada. In doing so the novel also draws attention to how Mary as a settler woman is caught up in settler colonial attitudes to land, and is

able to traverse that land and seek freedom in the ‘untouched’ wilderness precisely because of these attitudes.

Alan Lawson describes the settler subject as one who seeks to strike an affinity with the land in order to legitimize appropriation of it, but who also struggles to truly adapt to that new, foreign landscape. *The Outlander* offers an illustration of this problem when it presents Mary as a settler figure who struggles with her relationship to the Canadian wild. Mary’s confrontation with the Western wilderness is coupled with her confrontation with her own shortcomings as a middle-class settler woman as she navigates the bush, “wandering deeper into a wilderness she knew nothing about” (67). Her lack of knowledge and experience in caring for horses results in the loss of the mare she had stolen and rode into the mountains. She faces starvation and acknowledges that her incapacity to snare wildlife for food and her inability to determine which plants are edible are attributed to her middle-class settler status: “Her will was strong enough, but she lacked the knowledge to help herself. She had been trained for another life, ... : sonatàs and études; the art of a good menu; ... Alabaster skin and parasols” (66). This lack of knowledge about the land turns almost fatal: “With no idea how to save herself, she lay motionless and febrile, while all about her edible ferns waved ... Abundance lay about her, but she starved” (71). Mary finds herself shocked to be facing death by starvation, believing a more civilized death awaited someone like her: “Death did not come this way, lingering in the trees. It came by apoplexy. By cancer. By public hanging” (66). However, *The Outlander* does offer an alternative to traditional narratives of helpless women alone and afraid in the wilderness. This novel depicts a heroine who finds contentment, not fear, in the wild:

She had now spent six days and nights alone in the mountains, and still she didn’t know where she was. Yet she wasn’t frightened, merely attentive. The thing to be feared always

came from within: exhaustion, unsound thoughts, ignorance, starvation ... the locus of fear for her [was] the darkness of her own mind. And yet here she was alone in the wilderness, strangely content. (65)

The biggest threats to Mary's life come from her own ignorance and her mental lapses, not the wilderness. These life-threatening challenges eventually bring her towards a zeal-like salvation in the wild: "The widow looked about her with the ragged clarity of starvation. Clarity and a disastrous elation. This was what church aspired to, she realized: a greatness in the hollowing mind, brought on by dissolution" (69). Although Mary struggles to physically survive in the mountains, she is endangered more by her lack of survival skills, a result of her middle-class privileged settler upbringing, than by any natural danger extant in the environment. Mary exemplifies the ambiguity of Lawson's unsettled settler subject who simultaneously desires and disavows both her colonial upbringing and an Indigenous affinity with the land. Mary's approach to seeking freedom in the wild is necessarily caught up in a settler colonial construct, and the female settler subject remains a product of the patriarchal settler social system.

Lorenzo Veracini describes the tendency of settler colonies to see themselves as simultaneously representatives of yet independent from the colonial power, with "both a special sovereign charge and a regenerative capacity" (*Settler Colonialism* 3). This paradox might be applied to the role Mary adopts when, after surviving weeks in the wilderness, she arrives in the remote mining camp of Frank and is taken in by the local Reverend. In setting up a new life on the frontier, Mary is a refugee from the patriarchal settler system that would hunt her down for murder. But as the only woman in the makeshift town, Mary's activities in Frank – caregiving and missionary-type roles – find her neatly fitting into roles made available to her by that gender-dualist, patriarchal system. She makes a new home figuratively and literally as she becomes a live-

in housekeeper and platonic friend to the Reverend. Scenes of Mary cooking the Reverend's breakfast (153), bringing him lunch each day (161), boiling stew (259), keeping clean floors (263) and making soap (242) depict Mary's civilizing influence on the renegade preacher. Mary also takes on a position in the town's new makeshift barbershop, where she tends to miners with "sooted and theatrical faces ... ruined hands [and] filthy and corduroyed necks" (220), and to horse traders who "looked like they were fashioned out of mud... the same colour as the ground they passed over" (258). As she shaves beards and cuts hair, it is apparent Mary's role is to transform these wild men, marked by their work on the frontier, into civilized beings.

Mary also nurses back to health "the lunatic" Arthur Elwell, a North West Mounted Police (NWMP) officer whose "madness [is] kicked into overdrive" after his participation in the murder of a group of Indigenous men at his outpost (183). Arthur's madness contributes to the novel's acknowledgement of the actual violence and oppression that occurred in North America's colonial expansion, something that many traditional Westerns gloss over in their representations of the frontier (A. Young 4). *The Outlander* suggests that the horrors witnessed and perpetuated by NWMP officers in their dealings with "futile war parties of two or three men at a time" (182) are sufficient to prompt Arthur to behold visions of ghosts rising from the dead bodies (183) and to turn him into a "hollow-eyed cadaver... hands knotted up under his chin like an old lady with the panics" (179). In her counsel, Mary is able to restore a calm resolve to someone whose nerves are racked with guilt over his participation in the colonial violence on the frontier. In fact, the healing ministrations of both Mary and the Reverend restore Arthur enough so that he can return to his outpost and resume his officer's duties at the NWMP. He leaves town "holding a little package of food made for him by Mary" while Mary puts "her hand on his arm, in a motherly way" and she and the Reverend fret "like worried parents around a schoolboy" (192). Although Mary and the

Reverend clearly feel empathy for Arthur and his difficult circumstance, they are supportive of him returning to his work maintaining order at the outpost. Mary's caregiving, civilizing, mother-of-the-nation activities in Frank echo the kinds of activities early Canadian settler feminists practised as they pursued autonomy within a patriarchal social structure. Although missionary-style activities did enable settler women to achieve a measure of independence – in this instance Mary has shaped a new life away from the confines of marriage – the lessons from settler feminist criticism can reveal that these women's (limited) autonomy is necessarily confined within the colonial project of settler expansion in the West.

Mary is also instrumental in encouraging the Reverend to start conducting regular church services for the miners, even with the church's construction incomplete.⁴ As the daughter of a former minister, Mary appreciates the trappings and familiarity of church, and she enjoys Bible readings with the Reverend with a "childish pleasure" (155). Mary is therefore delighted to encourage the Reverend to minister to the miners. The church, a liberal Christian patriarchal settler colonial institution, was often used by expansionists to justify oppression and removal of Indigenous people (J. Henderson; Carter, *Importance*; Janiewski; Ware). While *The Outlander* depicts Mary helping to establish a church, and in doing so engaging in this classic missionary-type role as a settler woman, it also shows Mary operating within the confines of the position constructed for her by the patriarchal colonial system. The type of church services the Reverend conducts are not typical: his reputation as a skilled boxer is known and appreciated; the miners wait for services with "a true eagerness in the crowd, as if they were attending a sporting event" (221); and Mary is scandalized to discover the services will be little more than boxing challenges. Ultimately, the Christian church arrives at the frontier in a pugilistic form, celebrating machismo.

⁴ The unfinished church is a common trope in Westerns, and is one often affiliated with women, as, for example, in the 1971 film *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* and in the 2017 television miniseries *Godless*.

Nevertheless, the establishment of the church helps to define Mary's position in the town; as deputy to the Reverend her privileged position in the mining town is secured, much as her position as a minister's daughter was secured at home. However, Mary's social security is guaranteed only so far as the limited opportunities granted to her by the colonial power, in this case, the opportunity to civilize the frontier.

In its depiction of the coal mine at Frank, *The Outlander* illustrates the settler colonial encroachment on the Western space and the disastrous impact of the settler economic structure on not just the Canadian landscape but on the working-class settlers who live there. The mine is portrayed as a "vast ugliness" that transforms the Alberta "wilderness to wasteland," and upon her arrival at the mine Mary "[gazes] about her in horror. Barrenness and ruin lay all about it, the building forming an epicentre of destruction" (148). The miners themselves similarly display the visible hallmarks of colonial resource extraction: "holding their axes and shovels, men with ghostly faces, exhausted and odorous and moulding ... like something dank had floated up from hell" (221). In the tradition of historical fiction drawing upon actual historical events, *The Outlander* describes the 1903 Frank Slide, the deadliest landslide in Canadian history, in which 110 million tonnes of limestone fell from the summit of Turtle Mountain and partially buried the town of Frank, Alberta. The landslide was caused by several factors that weakened the mountain, including mining activity (*Frank Slide*). By showcasing this event, the novel exposes the devastating, violent consequences of such exploitation of the land and of working-class settlers. After the avalanche the mountain is "a different shape – an ashen, treeless concavity, strewn with rubble" (300), while the men are "camouflaged with dust, with blood, and something else, a distortion common to those in disaster, a huge-eyed infantility brought on by surprise" (308). In this revised, feminist Western, the threat to the land and to the lives of settlers does not come from

uncivilized or antagonistic Indigenous peoples, but rather from the mine – a representation of the manifest settler imposition on the land.

When confronted with the landslide, Mary's response is to draw upon her familiar, caregiver persona. Mary helps to nurse the hurt and dying as a "cavalcade of horrors" passes before her: "All that day she had gone barefoot among the barnyard racket of moans and coughs and begging, helping where she could ... Those in terror would hold her hand and bless her for her kindness" (311). Ironically, Mary finds a use for the ladylike skills that could not help her during her time alone in the bush: "She took up a needle and thread and willed her fingers still to sew [a] boy's wound closed ... This, she thought, is what the embroidery lessons were for" (312). In this case, Mary's duty is to enclose and conceal the violence of the frontier, similar to how she helps Arthur disremember his role in colonial bloodshed. These scenes illustrate how the lives of those on the fringes of settler society – the working class, immigrants and outcasts – are at the mercy of the settler colonial system. In doing so, this historical novel presents environmental and class-based, workers'-rights issues, which are valid contemporary feminist concerns. It also illustrates how Mary remains confined within the patriarchal system, from which she sought refuge in the Western mountains, when she assumes a mother-of-the-nation caregiver role, and as she relies on the settler economic system (i.e. the mine that profits from seized natural resources) for her barbershop income and her home with the Reverend.

In these ways, then, Mary disseminates a settler orderliness at the Frank camp: keeping house, keeping church, shaving men, saving men. Jennifer Henderson explores how settler feminists were often extended autonomy by the settler system, albeit within the confines of evangelizing, civilizing, educating, or caring for others in missionary or motherly roles. Mary's independence on the frontier sees her used (by the system from which she is trying to escape) as a

carer for the men at the mine. Her feminist “rebirth” in the West (Urbaniak-Rybicka 116) allows her to participate in bringing civilization to the bush, which further promotes and establishes the patriarchal settler system in the West at the same time, paradoxically, as she is attempting to escape the misogynistic elements of that system. Mary’s participation in the social structure of the frontier amounts to settler feminism in terms of Henderson’s concept. That is, settler women sometimes propagated aspects of the settler colonial project while they attempted to challenge that patriarchal system. In this novel, the settler heroine’s ability to carve a new life on the frontier away from the system, and to find freedom and a new identity, is inextricably tied to her association with and confinement within the colonial structure. Any agency she performs is on behalf of the governing patriarchal group. In revisiting the pioneer typecast, the novel replaces one stereotype (the pioneer) with another (the pioneer woman). As such, while Mary’s liberation allows her to take on pioneer or settler attributes (surviving in the bush, starting a new life, carving out a new existence in an extreme landscape) she does so only within the confines of the patriarchal settler system.

In addition to the notion of settler women as caregivers, Terry Goldie’s concept of settler Indigenization can be applied to this novel to reveal the complexities and paradoxes of settler feminism and of settler colonialism generally. Lawson, Patrick Wolfe, and Scott Lauria Morgensen each describe how settler culture simultaneously adopts and supplants Indigenous characteristics to assert authority over the settled land and also to express its difference from the colonial power and, accordingly, its independence. The assertion of feminist freedom in this novel works in a similar way, in that *The Outlander*’s depiction of a female heroine’s confrontation with the Western wilderness, along with her outlaw status and circumstance, exemplifies a settler Indigenization characteristic of the Western genre and of settler colonial attitudes. The incorporation of

Indigeneity into Mary's character works, firstly, as a way to demonstrate her difference from settler masculinity. She rejects the masculine settler system by incorporating otherness, in this case Indigeneity, as an assertion of her liberation from that system. Secondly, Mary's incorporation of Indigeneity functions to provide her with the skills, clothing and attitudes (i.e. an affinity with the land) to help her negotiate and escape that patriarchal system by physically surviving the wilderness on the frontier. As a woman, Mary already has a complex relationship with the notion of identity, which is made all the more complex and unstable by her episodes of mental illness and the grief she experiences from the loss of her mother and then of her newborn. Mary's settler subjectivity does not engage with the negotiation between colonizer and colonized in quite the same way as Lawson describes in his definition of the settler subject. She is neither directly appropriating nor owning land (she lives in residences provided for her by her father, her husband, and then the Reverend), and so her assertion of an affinity with the land is not exactly to legitimize her appropriation of it. When Mary's dream of a house with children is ripped from her, she struggles to assert an identity distinct from the pioneer wife and mother role she had hoped to fulfill (and in fact she continues this role while in Frank as she sets up the church and takes care of the miners). It is Mary's experiences in the wilderness, and especially her interactions with the characters she meets there, that help to build her into an Indigenized version of a liberated woman. By considering this kind of feminist figure, who acts in these ways and incorporates Indigeneity in these ways and for these reasons, we can begin to see the complexities and nuances of the feminist effort in the settler colonial context. We can also begin to realize that this kind of feminist freedom is intricately involved with patriarchal colonial frameworks and attitudes. Lawson's and Goldie's works have not addressed gender in their descriptions of the processes of settler subjectivity or settler Indigenization. Employing settler feminist criticism while considering Lawson's and

Goldie's ideas can help us reflect upon how this kind of settler Indigenization (i.e. how Mary incorporates Indigeneity as an assertion of her independence from the masculine social system) works for female settler subjects. In doing so we may be able to update and expand upon the work of thinkers like Lawson, Goldie and Henderson.

The way that Mary's subjectivity takes on Indigenous attributes, as part of her process of forging a new identity on the frontier, is evident early in the novel when Mary learns to survive in the wilderness by adopting a "woodsperson" guise, as defined by Goldie. Mary strikes a deeper affinity with the land when she meets "the Ridgerunner," a more experienced woodsman and fugitive with the aptronym William Moreland, who has been living alone in the mountains for thirteen years. Moreland is a quintessential form of white Indigeneity as a man-of-the-woods: "Here was a man ... who believed he could so deeply commune with nature that deer would eat from his hand and allow him to scratch their heads... [He was] accustomed as other men weren't to the subtler physiology of forests and rivers and snow" (83–84). Moreland is even directly compared to an Indigenous person: "His hair had the same healthy oil you saw on Indian women" (80). Moreland finds Mary on the brink of starvation and nurses her back to health, teaching her how to find rosehips to eat, how to set rabbit snares and how to shoot his rifle – essentially, how to adopt Indigenous ways to live off the land. Moreland uses this knowledge to assert this authority over nature and he teaches Mary to do the same. After Moreland disappears, Mary lives more confidently off the land, checking her own snares, finding her own rosehips and, once established in Frank, shooting game for herself and the Reverend while wearing a buffalo coat (184). In these ways the novel's depictions of Moreland and Mary present white settlers asserting an authoritative settler subjectivity by incorporating aspects of an Indigenous affinity with the land. This Indigenization is also an integral part of Mary's evolution to independence and escape from the

confines of a patriarchal settler society. The paradox is that in order for Mary to find freedom from this patriarchal settler system, she carries further the practices of that colonial system – those that incorporate and supplant Indigeneity.

Both Jennifer Henderson and Sarah Carter describe the story of Teresa Gowanlock and Teresa Delaney's imprisonment by Plains Cree during the 1885 North-West Rebellion and the account of their ordeal that was published after their release. Carter describes how these women felt pressure (including their desire to access government-endowed widows' pensions) to frame their "Indian captivity" in a particularly harsh light and to frame themselves as "victims of Aboriginal savagery" ("Two Months" 70–71). The publishing of these women's memoir and their celebrity following the publication contributed, Carter explains, to settler colonial Canada's othering of Indigenous people: "The threat of violence against white women was a rationale for securing greater control, for suppressing Indigenous people, and for clarifying boundaries between colonizers and colonized" (84). Henderson and Carter use this illustration as an example of how settler feminists' self-narratives contributed to racist attitudes in Canada. And these attitudes inevitably helped perpetuate the trope in Western-genre fiction of "white female vulnerability set against the sexual aggression of male subalterns" (Henderson 103).

The Outlander revisits this captivity trope from a contemporary standpoint. The Indigenous character Henry rescues Mary from the wilderness after Moreland abandons her, and leads her to the safety of his teepee village. In this modern version the novel draws attention to Mary's own racial and class prejudices. She is surprised Henry can speak English with "no accent she could detect" (116), and is even more astonished when she realizes she is not actually his captive: "[N]othing more than curiosity had got him into this. She felt sure she could veer off and go a different direction and he would not try to stop her" (121–122). As a contrast to the previous

scenes of Mary's ineptitude in the bush, the novel emphasizes Henry's authority over the land while also underscoring the settler's naivety. That is, Henry knows the mountain well enough to anticipate that Mary would emerge into a clearing while, despite her lessons from Moreland, Mary is not astute enough to foresee someone would be waiting for her there. At Henry's camp Mary eats with his white wife Helen and is "absurdly affronted" when Helen chews loudly and smacks her lips: "She decided that her benefactor had lost her civilization" (132). The irony is that Mary is the one who has lost her civilization ("a girl with wild hair, grimy face ... and torn boots" (115)) while Helen is the one feeding and caring for Mary and speaking with the "matriarchal tone of authority" (130). Each woman is clothed in a makeshift costume of a sort. Mary wears her widow's dress roughly sewn into pants, and Helen is "covered from head to toe in ... deer hide:" "They might have been of a piece, these two women in rough-stitched clothing. But one was not like the other, and both knew it" (131). The novel contrasts Mary's wildness with Henry and Helen's civilized calm to exemplify the dignified authority of Indigenous people over the Western landscape, and to suggest the strength and lack of ambiguity (unlike the settler subject) that comes from a genuine affinity with the land. However, in this case Henry and Helen are both born and raised in cosmopolitan Baltimore. Helen represents a feminist settler woman: a middle-class daughter of a breeder who followed her heart to live with Henry's family and now appears in Indigenous dress with her blond hair in leather binding. A contemporary feminist reading can accentuate how a woman like Helen can follow her own path and marry whom she chooses, adopting Indigenous costume and lifestyle in order to transcend the confines of a patriarchal settler colonial society and live a new life on the frontier. Meanwhile, a reading of the novel that incorporates settler feminist criticism can further demonstrate that Helen, as a white middle-class settler woman, has been positioned by the patriarchal nature of colonialism to access these free

(albeit limited) choices. This contemporary historical novel does indeed acknowledge present feminist concerns by depicting an inter-racial happy marriage and by usurping the captivity narrative by presenting two white women living peacefully in an Indigenous camp on the frontier. However, in its feminist challenge to the nineteenth-century captivity narrative, the novel also presents a form of white Indigeneity in the character of Helen. Furthermore, Henry's east-coast accent (his "nice voice" (116)) makes him appear to be a version of white Indigeneity himself.

The novel culminates in Mary, in her final act of metamorphosis to freedom, emulating Helen's example. After the Frank Slide Mary sews herself a deerskin garment, modelled after Helen's "simple trousers and overdress" (316), as a way of rising from the ashes or rubble of the landslide, of shucking off her former widow status and of becoming an independent liberated subject. The physical labour of sewing the outfit completes Mary's transition from a parlour-bound girl of leisure to someone working on/from the land: "Normally, the widow would have sat back and relaxed into her work, the way a woman might do petit point by a fire ... [but] she was obliged to bend over [the deerskin] and fight with the seams. Much like sewing up a man's injured face" (317). Mary's vanishing settler civilization becomes more pronounced as she snaps the thread loudly with her teeth, making the shopkeeper wince (319). Her new costume projects Mary's hybrid, in-between status, in line with Lawson's settler subject who dwells in an inherently ambiguous position: "[The costume was] a strange mixture of the parlour and the wilds. Though in outward style the dress was Indian, the widow had added a high collar, a profusion of tiny buttons held by loops of twisted thread, and an attempt at a ruffle across the breast that, in deerskin, lacked refinement" (321). Mary's husband's brothers eventually track her to Frank, and when they arrive, Mary, decked out in deerskin and standing on the trading post porch, brandishes a rifle and fires at them. A chase ensues and Mary, "brash and rocketing" (332), makes it to the "Indian bridge," a

suspension bridge spanning a deep gorge, “slung roughly with saplings and rotting rope” (333), over which the twins fail to follow her. The fact that Mary is clever enough to traverse this ancient Indigenous artifact testifies not only to her newfound strength and independence but also to her newfound Indigenous-like affinity with the landscape.

One of the most enduring motifs within the Western genre is that of the outlaw figure, and *The Outlander* owes much of its appeal to modern audiences to its female incantation of the outlaw. The novel opens with the gothic cliché of a woman fleeing through the darkness, and indeed the novel’s entire narrative is one of Mary on the run from the law (represented by her husband’s brothers) and in constant fear of capture. Like Atwood’s *Alias Grace*, *The Outlander* is interested in exploring the patriarchal settler colonial context that creates (and then persecutes) such a female outlaw. (It would seem these novels interrogate the sexist settler historical situation more than the questionable actions of the women in the stories.) By characterizing Mary for much of the novel by her small stature, reticent nature and weak mental state, *The Outlander* manipulates the familiar trope of the violent outlaw. However, it is through Mary’s process of Indigenization that she is reborn into a feisty heroine who can hold her pursuers at bay with her newfound skills. When the men eventually capture her, she is locked in the local, temporary jailhouse to await a judge for an arraignment and, much like Grace Marks in Atwood’s novel, Mary experiences the celebrity-status of the female killer: “The widow intuited that her presence offered something of a spectacle in the town ... A murderess dressed to all appearances as an Indian, arriving restrained in ropes ... strolling through a gauntlet of staring faces, some men following along the sidewalk under the awnings to get a close look, children running up through the mud... She was a curiosity, certainly” (360). The locals are impressed into awe, as if in the presence of a wonder, like one of the freaks in the circus sideshow Mary remembers from her childhood (340–341). Additionally,

the novel employs some clichéd Western comedy during the scenes of Mary's incarceration, including Allan the jailer's casual curiosity and pensive reverence in the presence of a murderess (350–351), and the circuit court judge with his wandering artificial eye (365). These scenes have the effect of not only invoking classic frontier character tropes of traditional Westerns, but they also provide a contemporary feminist comment on the absurdity of the masculine system of law and order, prosecution and incarceration. Nevertheless, Mary the murderess as an alluring, fascinating figure is perhaps the only difference between this outlaw and the conventional male outlaw in a traditional Western. Rather than a truly independent feminist version, Mary becomes a female substitute for the male outlaw, with her gun-slinging, horse-riding, jail-breaking ways, complete with a Clint Eastwood-like utterance when she feels the twins' rifle against her temple: "Go ahead" (344).

Mary the outlaw manages to free herself from prison by using her dinner knife to extract the mortar from around the bars of her cell window. Once again Mary's Indigeneity helps her to escape the settler colonial system that would incarcerate her, and provides her with the strength of a liberated subject: "[T]he widow came melting out of the dark ... Like an Indian clad for battle, smeared with frightful warpaint [the mortar dust that had fallen on her face]. There was determination in her stride" (374–375). Her newfound affinity with animals is emphasized as Mary whispers entreaties to her stolen horse, and a grey fox leads her in the direction of Frank (377–378). As she rides off into the night, Mary's rising sense of "exquisite gladness, a pride bursting inside her, for ... her life was now her own" (377) comes from the Indigenous attributes that enable her to assert a subjectivity in defiance of the patriarchal settler structure and to find liberation on the frontier. Back at the mining camp in Frank, Mary's costume is also key to the romantic allure she holds for Moreland, whom she finds waiting for her: "And then she had walked

in. Dressed like an Indian. She had walked right in and stood smiling at William Moreland... She had looked different, somehow. Was it in her gait or her voice ... her eyes? ... It was familiar, a thing he'd only seen in certain men" (387). Mary's appearance as a confident independent woman (a 'sexy Indian' stereotype, perhaps?) at the conclusion of the romantic plotline once again offers Mary as a female substitute for the traditional male outlaw, the "certain men" that Moreland recognizes. As her final expression as an outlaw and of her newfound Indigenous authority over the land, Mary prepares to leave Moreland and ride her horse ("saddled and heavily packed, almost expertly" (385)) off to the Yukon to fulfill her destiny and find her freedom on the final frontier – Canada's North becomes the emptier, wilder frontier. However, it is precisely Mary's already relative freedom as a white settler that enables her to appropriate this guise and 'authority' to her own ends. Mary's autonomy becomes not merely an affront to the patriarchal settler system from which she is running, but it also involves the incorporation of, if not the effacement of, the Indigenous individual she embodies as she rides off into the sunrise. In this instance, a settler woman looking like an Indigenous woman stands as the ultimate expression of settler feminist power, and is in line with Henderson's acknowledgement of the paradox of settler feminism: that is, for women to be recognized in the settler system, Indigenous people often must be infantilized or obscured. While novels like *The Outlander* can offer strong female characters in a traditionally masculine history and genre, a reading that adopts the critiques of settler feminism can point to more nuanced layers and particularities of feminism in the settler context. Novels that present feminist characters like Mary and Helen who incorporate Indigeneity as part of their transformation to autonomous subjects can demonstrate the kind of liberatory politics behind such depictions of strong female characters – a politics rooted in processes like the settler Indigenization articulated by Goldie and Lawson.

The Outlander can be read as a contemporary feminist Western that champions strong pioneer settler women. In approaching Canadian history from a contemporary perspective, the novel strives for inclusivity and depicts white women working in partnerships with other disenfranchised individuals on the frontier. Nonetheless, a reading of the novel that incorporates an awareness of the limits of settler feminism allows us to acknowledge how Mary benefits from her position in the colonial project, and can therefore highlight the figure of the settler woman as one which affirms the settler fantasy. It also can reveal how feminist heroines like Mary are necessarily caught up in the various patriarchal assumptions of a settler colonial society. Indeed, within her journey to independence, Mary is physically rescued by men three times: Moreland rescues her from starvation, Henry leads her to Frank, and the Reverend provides a home for her on the frontier. In addition, McEchern, the owner of Frank's trading post, gives Mary a job in his barbershop and provides her with all of the provisions for her trip to the Yukon. Without the assistance of these male characters, Mary would not have survived her time in the mountains. The novel's plotline thus underscores how this woman's freedom remains regulated by a patriarchal system of masculine 'heroes.' Mary can only escape from the oppressive men in her life (her husband, her brothers-in-law, and the system of law represented by men like the jailer and the judge) with the help of other men – a situation that illustrates the paradoxical and confined situation within which settler women practised feminist assertions of independence.

Such a reading can also reveal that Mary's transformation is liberatory only to the extent that it confirms the myth of Western liberalism – that which upholds the ideal of the autonomous individual advocating for him/herself. While Mary is a strong female hero who rides off into the sunrise, such a reading allows us to acknowledge that it is Mary's privileged position within the settler colonial system that enables her, in the end, to leave a cute note for her lover ("Find Me"

(387)) and to disappear without paying for her equipment. This kind of reading can reveal how the settler woman acquires and wields her social power in the settler setting, and can also move beyond established feminist readings of such texts.

Chapter 2

“I wiped their feverish necks with cool, moist cloths”

Mothers of the (Settler) Nation in *The Birth House*

Ami McKay's *The Birth House* has been commended for its contribution to the conversation on “women's reclaimed agency” in the birthing process (Mintz 129) and for how, by representing a tradition that continues in modern doula and midwifery practices, the novel places “the reader within struggles of the past while tying them to present concerns” (Tenaglia 31). The narrative depicts the conflict between midwives and doctors at a point in history when the tradition of natural childbirth in the home is threatened by the intrusion of modern medical science, and it illustrates how “turn-of-the-twentieth-century midwives fought medicalization processes and attempted to challenge the doctors' social power” (Mintz 129). *The Birth House*'s plot is essentially a coming-of-age story of the protagonist Dora Rare, a midwife's young apprentice who grows to inherit the responsibilities of caring for the maternal health of the women in the maritime village of Scots Bay, Nova Scotia. Dora and her close group of female friends oppose and then successfully oust a newly arrived medical doctor whose plans for a modern, “sterile” maternity clinic (30), “with the latest in obstetrics techniques” (31), threaten the women's agency over their own birthing and healthcare options. As such, the novel critiques the imposition of the patriarchal institution of scientific modern medicine on the women of a rural community, as it illustrates the difficulties for and implications of women asserting agency within a settler colonial context.

This chapter incorporates insights gained from critiques of settler feminism and of settler colonialism that illuminate the privileged position of settler feminists and their often racially driven caregiving and missionary enterprises, and that point out how the settler subject strives for authority by mimicking Indigenous attributes. It examines the novel's depiction of Dora as a more complex kind of ambiguous settler subject, one that is caught between her Indigenous Mi'kmaq

and Scottish settler ancestries, and that blends a settler identity with a medicine-woman/witch-doctor figure to create a unique (and somewhat problematic) version of an in-between settler figure. This chapter also discusses how the novel presents feminist actions in the face of (masculine) medical intrusion and how that action is caught up in a patriarchal settler paradigm. In addition, this chapter examines the novel's presentation of women as caregivers – a motif quintessentially linked with the project of colonization. Dora's efforts to adhere to this patriarchal colonial stereotype occur simultaneously with her efforts to reject the patriarchal intrusion on caregiving activities, and her situation speaks to the paradoxes and complexities of the lives and activities of settler feminists. Aligning with the observations of Jennifer Henderson, Cecily Devereux, and Alan Lawson, this chapter explores how Dora's position of privilege as a settler woman enables her to amplify her Indigenous identity, immerse herself in a caregiver role, and then lead a group of settler feminist women to force the doctor to close his maternity clinic. Although the novel shows Dora campaigning for the freedom for women to assert their own reproductive choices, a settler colonial reading would suggest it is Dora's settler status, along with the settler feminist forms of expression and identification with which she engages, that enables her to assert a midwife/witchdoctor/ leadership role, cultivating both her Indigenous heritage and her caregiver status to effect her autonomy in this patriarchal settler colonial setting. A focus on the settler setting can also demonstrate some of the problems and paradoxes of settler feminism in the way that these women's assertions of independence are ultimately confined within a patriarchal structure. These women find freedom in the domestic space – the “birth house” – which is itself a gendered conception of settler space. This chapter shows how this novel's treatment of various figures in the settler setting can shed new light on conceptions of gender and patriarchy within a settler colonial context.

In her reading of *The Birth House*, Dominique Hétu describes Dora as a character who “struggles to find balance between long-established traditions, social transformation, modern science [and] her own beliefs, [and who seeks] ways to respect her traditional healing practices in a changing world.” As the protagonist of a story set during the national and global social upheaval of World War I, Dora represents a community “torn between anti-modernity and the notion of scientific advancement” (Mintz 109), and this ambivalence is also apparent in the novel’s secondary characters. Dora’s shipbuilding father represents tradition while her electricity-entrepreneur husband Archer Bigelow represents the future; Dora’s mentor, the aging midwife Miss B., personifies ancient rituals and customs while Dora’s Aunt Fran exhibits a fetish for the latest medical and scientific journals. Caught between these two worlds and on the cusp of adulthood, Dora struggles to define her own future and to decide between the career as a midwife that Miss B. wishes to endow upon Dora, and the life as a wife and mother that Dora sees as her duty to her family. Dora’s character personifies much of the ambiguity or in-between nature of Lawson’s settler subject; however, the application of Lawson’s theory to this character can only be partial and is often problematic. In *The Birth House*, subjectivity functions with more complexity when the narrative makes use of Dora’s mixed-race ancestry.

The novel’s central themes of birth and lineage are foregrounded in its opening pages, as the story highlights the importance of Dora’s origins. In first-person narration, Dora recounts the story of her Scottish immigrant ancestor Annie MacIssac who arrived in Nova Scotia in 1760 and bore the children of “a Mi’kmaq man she called Silent Rare” (3). The novel makes reference to the kind of eugenics, or “selective breeding,” that Canadian settler feminists such as Nellie McClung and Emily Murphy supported as essential for social (and “racial”) reform and that required Indigenous “assimilation” (Devereux 6, 10–11). Part of Dora’s strength, *The Birth House* suggests, comes

from her Indigenous origin that survives the eugenic process: “Long after the New England Planters’ seed wore the Mi’kmaq out of my family’s blood, I was born with coal black hair [and] cinnamon skin” (5). Lawson observes how settler narratives express settlers’ desire for Indigenous authority in a “sentimentalization of the mixed-race figure,” who “enacts a slippage between the white desire and the Native right, white ‘civilization’ and Native ‘elemental energy’” (157). Dora’s settlerness is a more complicated version, however, than that of Lawson’s settler figure, and even than that of *The Outlander*’s Mary Boulton. This novel presents a unique interpretation of the settler subject in that Dora oscillates between her own settler and Indigenous lineages. Dora’s ambiguous subjectivity comes from the Indigeneity she inherits from her Mi’kmaq ancestors combining with her stronger, Scottish settler identification – the lineage that “wore” away much of her Indigenous blood (5). As a settler, Dora’s legitimacy on the Nova Scotia land is dubious, and so the narrative relies upon aspects of her Indigeneity to establish her character’s authority and feminist success in the novel. Rather than displacing the Indigenous figure, as per Lawson’s description, Dora’s subjectivity works to revive and invoke the Indigeneity of her family’s past while she simultaneously asserts her privileged settler position. In doing so, this novel’s presentation of a settler subject draws upon Dora’s liminal status and upon her character’s racial and gendered alterity to set her apart as the leader of the feminist opposition to the patriarchy.

While *The Birth House* uses Dora’s characterization as an ‘Indigenous settler’ to emphasize her peripheral status in the community, it also manipulates historical representations of midwifery and midwives as aligned with witchcraft and witches to accentuate this liminality. The casting of Dora as an Indigenous healer works to emphasize her inherent, mystical abilities to cure and care for others, especially babies, pregnant women and new mothers. Dora’s Indigenous colouring, along with her dubious existence as the first female born in “five generations of Rares” (5), incite

the local villagers, upon her birth, to suspect she was “changed by faeries ... When there’s no good explanation for something, people... call it witchery and be done with it” (5). In addition, Dora’s birth story affirms her potential for mystic abilities by describing the “caul” (a piece of birth membrane) that covers her face at birth. This unusual but harmless occurrence has been historically viewed as an omen of good luck, and the caul removed from infants’ faces was often sold because it was highly prized, especially by sailors, as a talisman believed to protect the bearer from drowning (Jick). Dora narrates how the local villagers believe her “gift” of the caul “supposedly allows [her] to talk to animals, see people’s deaths and hear the whisperings of spirits” (5). As a child Dora is blamed for the birth on a local farm of a “three-legged albino calf” (5), and she is subsequently taunted by her classmates: “Dora talked to ghosts, Dora ate bat soup, Dora slit the Devil’s throat and flew over the chicken coop” (6). Dora’s ability to commune with the dead is established when her Auntie Hannah June dies without writing down her popular brown bread recipe. Days after Auntie’s death her ghost sits next to Dora in church and leads Dora’s pencil across the cover of the hymnal – “¼ cup molasses, ½ cup oats, 2 egg yolks...” – for which her family is bittersweetly grateful (69). By incorporating the trope of the Indigenous medicine woman or witch doctor, the novel uses Dora’s mixed racial heritage to legitimize her authority over the knowledge and skills of midwifery and, consequently, over the healthcare of women in the community.

Dora’s already borderline position in the village is compounded by her friendship with the local midwife Marie Babineau, to whom Dora affectionately refers as “Miss B.” Dora is sent at age seventeen to live with Miss B. to undertake her midwife training. Miss B.’s racial lineage functions in a similar way to Dora’s, insofar as it emphasizes her mystical, knowing, caregiving abilities. Along with her voice that carries the “dancing, Cajun truth of her Louisiana past” (7), Miss B.’s

stories carry the melancholy of her Acadian heritage: her great-grandfather's family was driven by the British out of their Nova Scotia settlement and forced to journey to Louisiana. When she is a teenager in Louisiana, Miss B.'s great-grandfather appears to her in a dream, appealing to her to "take the sacred gifts of the *traiteurs* [religious healers] back to his homeland," while "whispering secret remedies and prayers of healing in her ears" (26). Local legend about Miss B.'s past also includes rumours of a visit she supposedly received from the angel St. Brigit, "the woman who had served as midwife to the Virgin Mary at the birth of Christ," who asked Miss B. to "dedicate her hands to bringing forth the children of this place" (26). Miss B.'s kitchen is filled with "jars and bottles of herbs, salves and tinctures ... feathered wings ... [and] one large, dark wooden crucifix ... Every wall, shelf or tabletop is covered with tallow candles and a thousand Marys" (23). The midwifery of Miss B. involves a French Catholicism that verges on the supernatural, combining prayers and rosary beads with an allegiance to the natural world. She experiences visions of angels; she can "tell a woman she's with child before the woman knows it herself" (38); and she can see that "trouble's come" in her tea leaves (28). Miss B.'s garden – the fantastic "*Le jardin de morts*" – includes a likeness of the Virgin Mary carved out of a tree stump and "strings of hollowed-out whelks and moon shells hung with tattered bits of lace ... like the wings of angels" (18). Miss B.'s genealogy is uncertain; she is an immigrant yet her ancestors lived in Nova Scotia, while her Acadian origins are likely French combined with Indigenous lineage. Her foreignness and ambiguity set Miss B. apart from the community, and leave the locals to understand "you're better off not to bother with her. Never break bread with midwives or witches; your skin'll soon crawl with boils, hives and itches" (24). Like Dora's, Miss B.'s settler subjectivity is one caught between two (or more) racial lineages, but it is also one caught between several spatial origins: France, Louisiana and Nova Scotia. While not quite displacing the Indigenous figure – Miss B.

invokes her own Indigenous heritage – she is both settler and other simultaneously. In these ways, then, the novel exhibits both Miss B.’s and Dora’s Indigenous-like affinities with the tradition of the healer figure. In doing so, the narrative’s presentation of these women as unique settler figures, and its articulation of these women’s ambiguous lineages and identities, functions to emphasize their healing abilities and their authority in matters of midwifery and birthing.

By drawing upon Dora’s Mi’kmaq heritage and upon Miss B.’s Acadian traditions to assert their rights to those healing traditions, the novel makes use of these women’s mixed-race performances in order to demonstrate Dora and Miss B.’s position of authority as settler women and midwives. This position subsequently accentuates their authority in their opposition to the new doctor and to the encroachment of the modern medical industry on the traditional birthing practices of the Scots Bay women. Dora’s characterization incorporates Indigeneity to express her difference from the patriarchal settler culture that would condemn or even imprison her for practising midwifery. The paradox is that in order for Dora to find freedom from that patriarchal settler system she must carry further the practices of that system: those that incorporate and at times supplant Indigeneity. In fact, the novel’s plot involves Dora physically replacing Miss B. as local midwife when the older woman literally “just vanishes” (164), leaving Dora a note and her legacy: “You gotta keep them safe” (166). Dora commits to replacing the Acadian woman and taking over her role, channelling Miss B. as she does so: “I wished that the moon she worshipped each night would come and put some of Miss B. in me – that I’d wake up wise, with silvery prayers on my lips” (165). However, Dora’s subjectivity cannot not simply “efface” – or even “mimic” – an Indigenous subject position (Lawson 158), because she is partly Indigenous herself. Lawson’s theory, therefore, falls short when applied to more complex subjectivities like Dora’s. Similarly, *The Birth House* also does not fully explore the complex implications of Dora’s racialization, but

merely alludes to her ancestry in order to enhance Dora's innate (and mostly unexplained) natural authority in feminist matters like childbirth and women's health. In this way, the narrative does indeed "sentimentalize" the mixed-race figure (Lawson 157) to the novel's own ends: Indigeneity is incorporated into Dora's (and Miss B's) character to create a tale of mystical, at times supernatural, healing episodes and to link settler women to the healing powers of the natural world. In a way, Dora's character is *The Birth House*'s rehearsal of a settler fantasy: that which celebrates the settler's affinity with nature/land. Perhaps one drawback of Lawson's definition of the settler subject is that it has not allowed for a deeper understanding of mixed-race subjectivities, and that this deficit risks reasserting the settler/Indigenous binary. The way that *The Birth House* positions Dora as 'other' because of her Indigeneity also risks perpetuating a similar generalization.

Within the novel's exploration of gender and patriarchy in the settler colonial context, Dora's legitimacy as a healer figure is paramount in her confrontation with the medical establishment and her struggle to prevent that settler colonial power from claiming ownership of women's bodies and de-legitimizing women's existing entitlement to care for themselves. Scott Lauria Morgensen and Sarah Carter each describe how settler colonial power struggles are informed by gender hierarchies. The notion that women's bodies are a key site of gendered and sexual power negotiations in settler colonial settings is a key component of settler colonial studies, and it is also a significant theme in this novel's presentation of a revised, feminist Canadian history with its focus on women's healthcare. In her study of "Victorian Canadian" women's relationships with their doctors, Wendy Mitchinson contextualizes the history of medical physicians' influence over women's healthcare in Canada, and she observes that Victorian doctors' views of women as weak and susceptible were merely an extension of generally held social attitudes about women: "The Victorian period ... encouraged and indeed esteemed the image of woman as frail and sickly

and ... such encouragement could not help but impinge on the way doctors looked at their female patients and also on the way women looked at themselves. The medical profession accepted the limited public role given to women and provided a biological rationale for it” (5). Mitchinson describes how the specialized medical fields of obstetrics and gynaecology emerged in the Victorian period, “influenced by the emphasis that society placed on the childbearing role of women,” and how “physicians combined their social perceptions of women to bolster this new specialty” (9). She suggests that, in exploring women’s historical relationships with medicine, “we should not view the medical profession as the villain of the piece. Such a view simplifies and distorts the past” (6). Nevertheless, *The Birth House* sets up the midwife/doctor dichotomy, with Dr. Thomas as the chauvinistic villain, to highlight and dramatize settler feminists’ actions in the face of such anti-feminist intervention. Bearing in mind the hazards inherent in binary representations of doctors and midwives in conflicts such as the one depicted in *The Birth House*, the novel remains a solid critique of how women’s bodies become a location of gendered power struggles.

As this novel’s feminist historical revision often relies upon the establishment of a male/female or colonizer/colonized binary, the foundation of the novel’s plot is the insidious and looming potential for the town’s new male obstetrician to assert a patriarchal capitalist agenda that seeks to monopolize control over settler women’s bodies and their capacity to choose their own maternity care. The medical establishment’s threat to women’s autonomy is personified in the figure of Dr. Gilbert Thomas. In contrast to Miss B.’s eclectic, earthy, caregiving persona, Dr. Thomas arrives in Scots Bay in his new automobile with “the evening sun glowing gold on its windshield” (27), alluding to the riches to be gained by practising modern medicine or, indeed, by ‘colonizing’ the new ‘territory’ of women’s bodies. The midwives view him as utterly out of place:

“No one in the Bay owns even a work truck, let alone a shiny new car like that” (27). Dr. Thomas visits Miss B. and makes a “well-rehearsed speech,” suggesting that Miss B. has “had to serve in place of science for too long” (29), and that she should now collaborate with Dr. Thomas and refer any pregnant mothers to his new “maternity home” in the larger town “down the mountain, in Canning” (30): “Imagine the benefits that modern medicine can offer women who are in a compromised condition ... a sterile environment, surgical procedures, timely intervention and pain-free births. The suffering that women have endured in childbirth can be a thing of the past [when employing] the finest obstetrical care” (29–30). During a tour of the clinic he hosts for the Scots Bay ladies’ society, Dr. Thomas displays stirrups, forceps, “a tray cluttered with shining silver knives, scissors and other medical instruments,” and “puitritin and chloroform, a mother’s two best friends” (57). As Dr. Thomas explains, these items represent “the path of modern medicine. These things hasten childbirth and put the labour process in the doctor’s hands. He has complete control” (57). Dora’s friend Ginny Jessup is the first mother to give birth at the doctor’s new clinic. Under a “twilight sleep” of scopolamine and morphine, “Ginny’s child is *extracted*... no moment of celebration at the end. She’s feeling left behind, unsure... She thanks [the doctor] for his accomplishment. She waits to hold her child” (110–111). As Dora observes, the doctor seems “less concerned with a woman’s circumstances and more concerned with selling his services” (59). The novel’s feminist interpretation treats these settler figures as occupying two sides of a dichotomy, with the doctor as colonizer and the women as colonized, as their bodies are encroached upon by the settler colonial community’s installation of medical science. In a way, the novel’s depiction of these settler women works as an effacement of actual colonized Indigenous women, who have experienced the actual sexual violence of embodied colonial domination. The novel presents Dr. Thomas’s emphasis on sanitation and medical advancement as a contrast to

Miss B.'s notion of childbirth as a traditional domestic event, grounded in prayer and nature, where women care for other women. The midwives' version of childbirth is illustrated by Mabel Thorpe's birthing experience. Mabel's friends arrive to help Miss B. and Dora as they deliver Mabel's baby, coming through the door "cradling baskets filled with tiny quilts, cradle blankets and baked goods" (63). The birth of Mabel's baby at home is domestically complete with the scent of "groaning cake" baking in the oven while she delivers: "The mother breaks the eggs and mixes the batter herself just before the baby comes. It fills the house right up with sweetness" (63).

The disparity between the midwives and Dr. Thomas is heightened as the plot progresses and the doctor becomes the villain of the story; the physician figure comes to represent a danger to women's lives, not a saver of women's lives. He threatens to enforce the settler colonial system of law and order which, as another patriarchal system, he also represents. When Miss B. fails to agree to participate in his scheme, Dr. Thomas threatens Miss B. by citing the "Criminal Code of 1892" and its criminal view of "failing to obtain reasonable assistance during childbirth" (34): "The law no longer considers a country midwife's care to be 'reasonable assistance.' ... Anyone who insists on taking up the practice of obstetrics without proper authority will be held accountable by a higher court" (135). Dr. Thomas repeats this threat to Dora when he discovers she has helped Ginny with contraception: "I think I should warn you ... preventing conception ... is illegal" (233). He utters a similar threat yet again when he learns Dora has helped another local woman, Experience Ketch, abort a pregnancy: "You've gotten yourself in quite a lot of trouble. You stand to lose everything... this house, your family's good name" (293–294). Dora's response to the first threat is comical: she empties a "2-gallon jug of 'Sure Sweet Molasses'" over Dr. Thomas's head when he confronts her at the dry goods store (234) (an episode where the "authoritative voice of scientific knowledge is literally turned on its head" (Mintz 127)). However, the second of these

threats is more sinister, and Dr. Thomas instigates a witch-hunt after Experience dies: “We must bring the guilty party to justice before she causes harm to countless other women and children” (311). Dora subsequently flees the community and departs on a boat headed for Boston, where she lives in exile for several months. Setting up a clear binary opposition between masculine medical science, as personified and villainized by Dr. Thomas, and the feminine caregiving activities of the midwives is this novel’s method of investigation into the forces of subjugation that patriarchal settler institutions like medicine and law assert over women (and ‘others’). Ultimately the novel depicts these women triumphing over these forces when, despite Dr. Thomas’s “language of law and culture of fear” (Hétu), Dora and Miss B. continue to deliver their friends’ babies in their homes and to offer contraceptive services and pediatric advice to mothers. Their strong friendships enable the women to support and protect each other, and they construct domestic spaces of private care out of kitchens, parlours and bedrooms. However, because Dora must flee the country temporarily in order to escape punishment, and because these women ultimately retreat into the domestic sphere to practice their midwifery, this novel offers us the opportunity to see how settler women often confined themselves within patriarchal constraints – such as the stereotype of the caregiver as disparate from the physician; and the gendered space of the home – within which caregiving becomes ‘women’s work,’ in order to practice and assert their feminism.

Both Henderson and Devereux critique caregiving activities and organizations coordinated by settler feminists that sought to infantilize Indigenous people through didactic missionary programs aimed at disseminating traditional British imperial attitudes and values. Such processes of settler colonization relied upon a belief in women’s natural aptitude for motherhood and the innate qualities traditionally linked with that role: caregiving, nurturing, guidance, moral superiority, and women’s ability to demonstrate “the qualities of respectable femininity – culture,

civility and manners” (Haggis 56). While the presentation of women as caregivers and the “feminisation of the missionary endeavour” (51) have been key components of colonialism, *The Birth House* tempers the notion of white settler motherhood as an “invincible global civilising agent” (Hammerton 163) with a focus on more intimate, domestic and familial feminist actions that critique the medical establishment’s intrusion on domestic spaces. And while this novel does indeed explore feminist interpretations of caregiving, these alternative modes of expression – i.e. settler women adopting caregiver roles – cannot help but be influenced by the patriarchal settler colonial system of which they are a part. The stereotype of the settler woman as caregiver is perhaps most evident in the colonial project’s appropriation of women for missionary roles. Although neither Dora nor the other women in the novel are employed as state-sponsored missionaries, many of Dora’s caregiving activities demonstrate her willingness to adopt a mother-of-the-nation persona, especially as she cares for marginal or liminal figures, leveraging her privileged settler woman position to do so. The novel’s depictions of Dora as a caregiver are set against the backdrop of three significant historical events of the period: World War I, the 1917 Halifax Explosion, and the 1918 Spanish Influenza pandemic.

As the teenage Dora is educated in midwifery by Miss B., her protective and maternal instincts are sharpened by the role she adopts as the emotional and spiritual protector of the young men who join the army and depart for the war. She writes supportive letters to her two enlisted brothers Albert and Borden, and to local boy Tom Ketch, and with her group of close friends (the “Occasional Knitters Society”) she knits special socks (with “twice as much warmth” (185)) for the war effort. The women of Scots Bay encounter social pressure to support the war, and they are faced with not only the local Minister’s proclamations from the pulpit about the “vicious acts by a barbaric enemy” (104), but also with advertisements in women’s magazines: “If your young man

neglects his duty to his King and Country, the time may come when he will NEGLECT YOU.

Think it over – then ask him to JOIN THE ARMY TODAY” (123). Despite this pressure, Dora openly objects to the violence of war: “Victory isn’t anywhere near the same as peace” (104). She defends her future husband Archer’s decision not to enlist, telling him, “There’s nothing cowardly in being a pacifist. It’s perfectly fine to call yourself a conscientious objector” (121). Dora likens herself to actual historical suffragettes and anti-war campaigners Sylvia Pankhurst and (Canadian) Julia Grace Wales, while also referencing the Australian “Women’s Peace Army:” “While I’m all for the boys from the Bay, I am not for the war ... I am decidedly a pacifist” (124). Her attitudes carry a definite feminist slant, with her desire to “run away and join with these fine women as they picket in the streets of London or New York” (124–125), but this desire remains hampered by her youth and her small-town inexperience: “I’m not brave enough to do anything but keep my thoughts to myself” (124). Dora’s pacifist attitudes represent at once a fiercely feminist opposition to the whims of a patriarchal colonial power, and a caring maternal instinct to nurture and protect her friends and relatives – an instinct condoned and encouraged as feminine by the colonial project.

Part of Dora’s coming-of-age, her passage to independence as a feminist settler woman, includes her impromptu train journey to Halifax the day of the explosion, when “all doctors, nurses, midwives and other help were to report to the train station” (212). Dora’s brother Charlie is quick to volunteer her: “My sister ... she’s a healer. She’ll go” (212). It is evident that the men around her expect Dora to perform her national duty as a settler woman and a “healer” in this time of tragedy, from the organizing physicians and her brother to the local shopkeeper Mr. Gordon, who passes her a medical bag before Dora has made up her mind about whether or not to go, telling her to “go on and help” (213). The same is not expected of her husband Archer who, with a

bandaged arm after a pub brawl, simply states, “I’ve got wounds of my own to tend” (213). Dora arrives in a devastated Halifax to witness “visions” she “had imagined as being only a part of hell” (213) and “faces covered with blood and soot” (214). She is soon ensconced as midwife in a corner of a hospital “open to everything else, doctors sawing off tattered, bloody limbs, nurses pulling sheets over bodies, voices calling out from the rows of stretchers. *Please, help. I’m alive. Mama ...*” (214). As the force of the explosion sends countless pregnant women into labour, Dora delivers more than a dozen premature babies, “dying in their mothers’ arms [or] born barely human, already dead” (214), and delivers even more babies “who would live, only to become orphans when their mothers died from shock” (215).

In an episode where this novel challenges the romanticized mother-of-the-nation trope, Dora describes birthing the baby of Colleen O’Brien, a young woman brought into the hospital “on a stretcher, her face covered with bloody bandages, [and with] several pieces of glass buried in her swollen skin” (216). Although blinded by flying glass from the explosion, Colleen succeeds in delivering a “pink and healthy” baby boy, and she remains “joyful over the birth,” despite realizing she will never be able to see her child (216). Depictions of joyful births following a national tragedy can work to uphold the notion of young women as willing mothers – harbingers of hope ready to re-populate a devastated nation. Yet Dora’s narrative mitigates this mother-of-the-nation ideal by including a woman blinded while giving birth. Colleen’s physical aberration counters the expected purity of the Christian settler woman. Colleen’s bloody, “barely recognizable” eyes (216) draw attention not only to the dreadful situation of giving birth during the aftermath of a disastrous explosion, but, moreover, to the overall messiness and even grotesqueness of childbirth and motherhood in general – a literary maneuver that tends towards negating traditional, romantic, Victorian notions of settler colonial motherhood. Furthermore, Dora’s experiences in the Halifax

hospital also comment on the messiness and grotesqueness of war (the explosion was caused by a cargo ship carrying dangerous explosives bound for the war in Europe), and how this detrimentally affects women, children and families. Dora reflects on how the war in Europe has torn families apart, and also on how this Canadian wartime tragedy has also torn apart families left at home. Colleen ponders, “Who could have guessed that the trenches would be safer than Halifax?” (217). As Dora attends to labouring women like Colleen and others who arrive at the hospital “clutching at their bellies or holding a hand between their legs like it was all they could do to keep the child in” (214), *The Birth House* demonstrates that happy motherhood and healthy babies are not straightforward settler experiences, nor are they foregone occurrences for settler women. Instead of unquestioningly allowing for women’s duty to populate the earth after a devastating humanitarian crisis, the novel uses Dora’s experience in Halifax to query that blind faith somewhat. Dora’s diary entry for December 26, 1917 reveals her musings over the pressure of such mother-of-the-nation expectations for women, and her reoccurring Christmastime nightmares over the Christian pinnacle of motherhood – the Virgin Mary – and the daunting pressure Mary must have faced as the mother of Christ: “December is a month shadowed in darkness and fear ... As a young girl, I felt the shock of the annunciation, my belly sinking into hurt every time I listened to Gabriel standing winged and menacing over Mary” (217). Dora’s dreams reveal the horror she associates with such high expectations of predestined motherhood: “My dreams were filled with the hiss of Gabriel’s whisper bringing the terrible message that heaven had made a mistake and *I* was to take the Blessed Virgin’s place” (217). While Dora’s caregiving activities at the Halifax Explosion represent at once her personal desire to use her healing skills and abilities to help others and also the carer role that the settler colonial system expects of her as a settler woman, the novel

nevertheless is at times critical of the social expectations put upon women to participate in motherhood as a patriotic (or Christian) duty.

Dora resumes the nursing skills she hones during her work in Halifax when she spends time in exile in Boston during the Spanish Influenza outbreak. Dora's place of refuge is the house of her brother Charlie and his partner Maxine Cabott, a "brazen-looking woman," puffing on a cigarette holder, wearing the "tailored trousers of a man" and with her hair "cut short and tucked behind her ears" (302–304). Maxine contracts the illness after spending an evening at a suffrage meeting, and Dora administers the kind of care she recalls receiving from Miss B. when she was younger: "I've been putting mustard plaster on [Maxine's] throat and chest, oil packs on her body, and have even started singing Miss B.'s old songs and prayers" (333). Maxine refuses to ask for a doctor, trusting instead in Dora's caregiving instincts: "Charlie says you were a born healer; that's enough for me" (332). Dora's traditional Acadian remedies, which Maxine teasingly describes as "Cajun witchery" (338), prove more effective than the "new found cures" Charlie brings home from the pharmacy: "They are useless, made mostly of soda water and boric acid. I'm sticking with Miss B.'s advice" (332). Dora also tries to help the sick prostitutes in the brothel next door, by passing chicken soup through the window and advising them to open the windows for fresh air (331). After witnessing the "many shrouded bodies ... brought out of houses each day" in Boston, Dora sends letters of warning to her friends back in Scots Bay, with suggestions for how to avoid the sickness when it makes its way there, such as washing hands and wearing muslin masks (327). She also implores them to use her unoccupied house "as a sick house" to place any person with the 'flu: "No sense in a whole family suffering from this terrible disease" (327). While nursing Maxine, Dora tells her of Dr. Thomas's maternity hospital, of his threats, and of her now tentative position as midwife in the Scots Bay community. Maxine, "wide-eyed with concern," begs Dora to "get back there, to fight

for [her] place” (327). But Dora views her caregiving duty as more immediate: “I need to stay here and take care of you” (337). Even the influence of Maxine’s unorthodox, modern, suffragist lifestyle cannot deter Dora’s sense of duty as a caregiver. While Maxine’s interpretation of feminism involves women “fighting” for a position in settler society by challenging established notions of femininity, Dora’s identity is inextricably linked to a version of settler feminism that promotes women as caretakers of the sick or needy. Dora’s “need” to take care of Maxine suggests Dora’s caregiver role is essential to her own sense of subjectivity. Dora’s experiences in Boston also illuminate how her caregiving activities, particularly the way she takes pity on the neighbouring prostitutes, contribute to the construction of her identity a settler feminist in a more superior social position.

Dora’s time in Boston is a time of social and moral awakening, and it contributes significantly to her growth as a feminist and to her passage to self-determination – particularly as it occurs after she is released from her unhappy marriage when her husband dies at sea. Maxine’s house, “lined with bookcases and paintings” (304), is “a community of artists[:] writers, painters, photographers, musicians, even an actress or two” (304–305). Maxine invites Dora to stay as long as she likes, as “every woman must have a sanctuary” (305), and it is here that Dora witnesses new possibilities for feminist expression. Maxine’s controversial suffragist antics are displayed in a newspaper clipping Dora spies framed on the wall: “The headline read, ‘Woman Bares All for the Vote!’ A photograph hung next to it. Maxine was standing naked in front of a grand building with nothing on but a ‘Votes for Women’ sash” (306). Despite the risks of fines or imprisonment, liquor is abundant at Maxine’s house, as are copies of books such as *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* that have been “banned in Boston,” and that Maxine has recovered “from a raid of her mother’s estate” (323). Maxine has inherited her financial freedom from her family “of high society snobs” (306),

and she provides an example of a settler woman whose ability to take part in feminist activities stems from her position of privilege. Maxine's roommates include Rachael and Judith, a lesbian couple with their "Boston Marriage" (Maxine explains to Dora that "even the mother of temperance, Miss Frances Willard herself, had a constant companion in her dear friend Anna" (326)), and it is Rachael who cuts Dora's hair short, "leaving it bobbed just below [her] ears" (313). With her new haircut and her black widow garments thrown in the trash by Maxine, Dora and her new roommates spend a day picnicking in a burial ground, drinking from a flask and taking "lunch among epitaphs and stone angels" (315). In this scene the novel relies on stereotypes to illustrate these feminists' capacity to violate expected social norms: the cemetery alludes not only to Dora's witch-like reputation, but also to the enchanting, transgressive natures of Maxine, Rachael and Judith. These stereotypes reveal the novel's effort to find a place of feminist challenge to patriarchal colonialism; however, the novel's reliance on (or appropriation of) the lesbian couple to emphasize the radical nature of feminist activity is similar to its reliance on Dora's Indigenization to explore her liminal position and her healer identity. In addition to her new friends, Dora is also exposed to the prostitutes next door at "Paddy Malloy's Playhouse," and she admires the independent, take-charge style of Miss Honey's lovemaking: "So pleased, so proud of herself ... Maybe it's the women who are quick to be married off for the sake of marriage ... who have sold ourselves for far too little a price" (325). All of these eye-opening experiences lead Dora to reconsider her role in the community of Scots Bay, and she muses on how she might take more of a leadership role in campaigning for the rights of women: "Why is it that I have often thought to myself how unfair life has been for women, or for the men who are made to fight in the trenches, but have never been strong or bold enough to protest? Women have been imprisoned, have died for these [voting] rights, while I was complacent, happy enough to sit at home and knit" (322). Dora

returns to her home in Scots Bay when she receives word that she has been cleared of involvement in the death of Experience Ketch, after Experience's husband Brady Ketch is charged with her murder following his children's testimony (335). Dora brings with her a newfound commitment to her local feminist cause: the protection of women's rights during pregnancy and childbirth and the promotion of the value of the practice of midwifery.

After her Boston education Dora comes home wiser and more confident in her midwife practice. She finds Ginny pregnant with a second child, yet "swollen all over, suffering from crippling headaches [and] her face ... puffed up [with her] features gone coarse" (340). These symptoms indicate a state of advanced preeclampsia, which Dora attributes to the poor pre-natal healthcare provided to Ginny by Dr. Thomas: "It's clear that the hard-earned money [Ginny's husband] Laird paid for Dr. Thomas's obstetrical theory hasn't done Ginny any good ... No woman, no person, deserves such thoughtless care" (342). Dora insists Ginny stay with her to be taken care of until the baby is born. Using Miss B.'s remedies, she is able to reduce Ginny's swelling and prepare her to deliver the baby. In the novel's climax, Ginny's husband, who has already paid for Dr. Thomas's services for the birth, sends the doctor to Dora's house where the doctor pushes his way into the birthing room, "pull[s] out several medicine bottles and brandish[es] a pair of forceps" (346). With almost Frankensteinian imagery, Dr. Thomas, with his scientific instruments, pins Ginny down on the bed so that he can perform his medical miracle of creation, while Ginny, the victim in his clutches, protests loudly: "Ginny was squirming, trying to get loose from his hands ... 'What is *he* doing here?' ... Dr. Thomas grabbed her wrist, attempting to take her pulse 'I see she's still neurotic. A dose of Pituitrin should speed things along.' ... Ginny began to scream, her face turning red. 'Get him away from me! ... I don't want that man anywhere near me. Get out, get out, get out...' " (346). Dora hauls the doctor outside where, true to her

notoriety as a witch, she flourishes the ultimate symbol of the devil's work, a pitchfork: "I held the points of the fork to the doctor's chest. 'You're going to do exactly as I say from here on out'" (347). By depicting Dora wielding the pitchfork, the novel also usurps the motif of the witch-hunt where villagers sport pitchforks and torches. Here, the witch holds the pitchfork and becomes a symbol of feminist triumph. While she delivers Ginny's baby, Dora keeps Dr. Thomas captive in her front parlour, guarded by Pepper her black dog – perhaps more illustrative of Dora's loyal qualities than a black cat would be.

Afterwards Dora and her friends agree to "go after" (360) the doctor: "We'll all have to take up our pitchforks and run him out of the Bay ... Let's do something about Dr. Thomas, once and for all" (360–361). The "something" turns out to be a protest march, modelled after Maxine's suffrage marches: "[Dora's friends] Bertine and Sadie delivered letters to local women, asking for their support at a Mother's May Day march in Canning. Precious and Mabel have sewn a large banner for the women to carry, and I have agreed to speak (to anyone who'll listen)" (361). With a banner reading "Women and Children First!" (361) two hundred women "from communities all along North Mountain" march through town to Dr. Thomas's maternity home "to raise their voices in support of rural midwives" (361). At the march Ginny draws attention to Dora's instinctive healing abilities: "She just knows what to do. She had the tradition handed down to her. Just like a ... farmer who knows his family's land, she knows what to do" (362). Here, again, Dora's Indigeneity and natural affinity with the land is appropriated to define both her unique settler subject position and her settler feminist activity. Meanwhile Dora's transition to independence culminates with the speech she gives in front of the maternity home, where she calls for "cooperation and trust' between doctors, midwives and the women they serve" (362) – an acknowledgement of the artificiality of the doctor/midwife binary. Nevertheless, the women bring

enough attention to their cause that Dr. Thomas is forced to close his maternity home. He is quoted in the newspaper: “I regret to report that I cannot find good reason to maintain my practice in your fair town at this time. The need is simply not great enough to support such an endeavour” (363).

Dora’s journey to feminist independence culminates when she establishes her home “as a birthing house for the Bay” (363), recalling Maxine’s words, “Every woman needs a sanctuary” (366). Earlier in the novel, Archer’s mother the Widow Bigelow (the richest woman in Scots Bay) contrives to have Dora marry Archer by offering to pay entirely for Dora’s father to build the newlyweds’ house, much to Dora’s mother’s excitement: “She will pay for it all Dora. The windows, the shingles, the timber, as well as everything in it. All the finest draperies, linens, china...” (139). Dora gains her house through traditional patriarchal processes of property and wealth transfer via marriages (the widow’s and Dora’s) with the expectation that the house be used for traditional marital, domestic and family uses of space. In the novel’s challenge to these patriarchal social expectations, then, Dora transforms her marriage house – “a private place of confinement associated with her abusive marriage” (Hétu) – into a quasi-public caregiving facility where “no woman or child shall be turned away” (*The Birth House* 363).

Hétu’s study of the novel analyzes the nuances surrounding the gendering of depictions of care in history and in fiction, and the social importance of caring relationships and of interpersonal care which, she argues, this novel works to emphasize in its depiction of domestic spaces as “geographies of care.” Hétu discusses the novel from the standpoint of care ethics, a field of research that encompasses “practices and attitudes that have been historically devalued and traditionally associated with the female: nurturance, responsibility, attentiveness, and preservation.” Hétu employs care ethics and space theory to demonstrate how the novel’s female characters negotiate the patriarchal system and ultimately find their own spaces (culminating in

Dora's "birth house") to engage in hospitality and healing, as "alternatives to the living spaces limited by economic, patriarchal and political forces." Hétu argues that by representing a space "associated with a particular geography of caring relations," the novel brings attention to the importance of these "ordinary and familiar practices of care," and that Dora "reconfigures [her] subjectivity by appropriating and reclaiming [her] living space through these caring practices." However, by reading this novel as a feminist text because these characters resist the unwanted intrusion of the medicalization of women's health by retreating to a traditionally female space, we miss an opportunity to investigate the nature of these women's activities in the settler context. A reading of the novel that reflects upon Henderson's and Devereux's insights into settler feminists' missionary and colonial activities can reveal that *The Birth House*'s depiction of feminism may align more with traditional notions of what constitutes caregiving, in the way that it places women's caregiving activities in a domestic space segregated from the mainstream community and isolated in the semi-private sphere, and in the way these caregiving activities enable the more privileged settler women of the community to position themselves in superior, mothers-of-the-nation roles. Furthermore, by reading Dora's birth house as a "sanctuary" for women, or as a metaphor for empowerment, we miss the opportunity to explore the colonial implications of the occupation of space, or perhaps to be mindful of the kinds of housing established by missionary organizations – organizations which may have been havens of self-government for ambitious settler women, but which created institutions with severe ramifications for Indigenous populations. Asserting their feminism in this way (i.e. retreating from unwanted medical interference) within a settler society means that these women's activities become constrained within the domestic space, however liberating that space may feel. The domestic sphere is a space already constructed and positioned as feminine, or other, within the settler space – a space which is itself inherently

patriarchal. Although this novel may depict settler women as feminists asserting ownership over their own health and reproductive choices in the face of a patriarchal system seeking to control them, their resistance in this instance restricts these women to the confines of domestic space, and is an illustration of one of the paradoxes of feminist activity in the settler setting.

The novel's epilogue continues to emphasize Dora's Indigenous lineage in her role as the recognized midwife/medicine-woman in the community. Her birth house is located on Spider Hill (a fitting location for a witch-like figure) on land that was passed down from Dora's grandfather. The hill affords views of "Cape Blomidon, the great throne of the Mi'kmaq god, Glooscap" (146), and Dora adds her own interpretations to the Indigenous history of the area: "I've often imagined that Spider Hill is Glooscap's eye ... On summer evenings I'd ... pretend I was Glooscap's watcher, a little brown-backed spider" (146). *The Birth House* concludes twenty-eight years after the main action of the story, with Dora "perched up ... on Spider Hill" (368), continuing the "midwitchery" legacy of Miss B. (Stanger-Ross D10), "catching a baby or two when they come, [and] singing Miss B.'s lullabies" (*The Birth House* 368). Dora describes her life's work and her now established position of authority in the community: "My house became the birth house. That's what the women came to call it ... They all came to the house, wailing and keening their babies into the world. I wiped their feverish necks with cool, moist cloths, [and] spooned porridge and hot tea into their tired bodies" (ix). By combining her Indigenous ancestry, her Indigenous affinity with the land she occupies, and the Acadian knowledge of midwifery passed down from Miss B., Dora's settler feminist independence ultimately relies on a colonial process of settler Indigenization. Furthermore, by closing decades later, the novel seems to suggest that this kind of independence allows Dora to live this way for the rest of her life without needing to acknowledge her position as a settler woman in this colonial process.

Dora's independent position at the conclusion of the novel demonstrates a feminist victory over patriarchal institutions and their control of women's lives. Not only has Dora the midwife won her battle with the medical establishment represented by Dr. Thomas, she has also resisted other social conventions. She lives alone in her house, supporting herself with her midwife career. She adopts an orphan child (the granddaughter of Experience Ketch) and raises the child on her own. She refuses to marry again but she does kindle a long-term romantic, domestic relationship with Archer's older brother Hart, to the Widow Bigelow's chagrin. Hétu observes that Dora's "unconventional living choices open boundaries of domesticity," and the novel certainly highlights the way women find alternative modes of expression within existing patriarchal colonial structures. Nevertheless, Dora's feminist forms of expression are necessarily caught up in a settler colonial construct. The settler activities and feminist actions Dora engages with enable her to perform this self-determination, while her privileged position as a white settler woman – a property owner no less – allows her the opportunity to embark on a personal journey of autonomy, to organize a feminist protest, to forge her own career, and to refuse to marry. Her social position also enables her to create a space in her community – the birth house – that expresses her feminism and that of her close friends. However, this form of feminism is reminiscent of the missionary activities of colonial settler feminists, especially in the way Dora finds ways to give care to marginal or liminal figures, thereby entrenching her own superior social position, and at times it is outrightly caught up in settler conceptions of the othering of domestic spaces. The novel also depicts Dora embracing settler colonial forms of identification, especially in the way her caregiving activities become essential to her self-determination. Her mother-of-the-nation persona is cemented in the way she brings new (settler) babies into the community, especially against the backdrop of lost lives from the war and the explosion. The way Dora identifies as a "born healer" is similar to the way that

many settler feminists were characterized (or characterized themselves) when conducting missionary activities designed to uplift those they saw as underprivileged, including Indigenous populations. Furthermore, Dora's passage to autonomy within a settler colonial setting depicts Dora engaging in a form of identification as the unsettled settler subject caught between two identities. By emphasizing and accentuating her Indigenous heritage alongside her settler status, the novel cultivates an Indigeneity in Dora that allows her to perform the medicine-woman figure. This Indigeneity legitimizes Dora's authority over her midwifery practice and therefore her authority over the caring of women in her community. In all of these instances *The Birth House* demonstrates that the ways that settler feminists enact their independence often cannot help but be influenced by the patriarchal colonial system of which they are a part, and such a reading of the novel can reveal the paradoxes and complexities of the history of settler feminism.

The Birth House presents a feminist version of Canadian history by incorporating contemporary interests surrounding women's maternity healthcare into historical narrative. The character of Dora has been celebrated as subversive for her refusal to submit to social and gendered expectations, and the novel successfully depicts women finding their own spaces, voices and autonomy to make their own healthcare decisions. Such celebration is valid, as feminist historical fiction can contribute to a revision of traditional patriarchal historical narratives. However, celebrations of feminist figures like Dora might be tempered by acknowledging that their ability to forge an independence that subverts gendered expectations is available to them because of the privileged space they already occupy in the settler colonial structure. In *The Birth House*, this privileged space enables Dora to elevate her standing in the community by performing the traditional settler feminist caregiver role: the 'mother of the nation' who delivers the nation's babies and nurses the ill. It also allows her to appropriate her Indigeneity to legitimize and

naturalize her traditional medicine-woman healing skills. In the challenge *The Birth House* mounts to patriarchal control of women's bodies and healthcare options, it at times turns to settler colonial stereotypes and forms of representation. A reading such as this might enable us to consider how feminist challenges might be framed within a viable counter to patriarchal colonialism, one that does not normalize settler colonial prejudices.

Chapter 3

“And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once?”

Settler Women as Ambiguous Settler Subjects in *Alias Grace*

While *The Birth House* presents domestic space as a location where women can create a familial sanctuary, Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* is a historical novel that considers domestic space as a site of capitalist and patriarchal power relations, insofar as the novel explores the daily pressures experienced by female domestic servants. *Alias Grace* takes its protagonist’s status as female, Irish immigrant, servant and convicted felon to explore issues of gender, race and class within the settler colonial system. Atwood’s novel considers the “possibilities for female resistance and agency in the face of social structures of dominance” (Mannon 552), as gendered issues of mental illness, marriage, pregnancy, and the exploitation of female servants collide with the patriarchal authorities of settler law and modern medicine. Herb Wyile describes *Alias Grace* as a novel that evokes the world of nineteenth-century “class-bound Anglocentric Toronto,” and he suggests it makes an “important contribution” to Canadian historical fiction in its “highlighting of both gender politics and assumptions about class in constructions of the past” (*Speculative* 73–74). This novel has been the subject of various feminist readings that analyze the way it reclaims histories of settler women and domestic workers that have been obscured in traditional, official interpretations of the past (Howells; Hulan, *Canadian*; Thomas; Tolan). As such, it has been praised by many for the way it gives “voice to those marginalized in national history” (Hulan, *Canadian* 76). Much of the critical and feminist scholarship on this novel was produced in the years following its publication – decidedly before the emergence of settler colonial studies as a discrete critical field and before much of the more recent critical engagements with the concept of settler subjectivity. Consequently, while most studies of *Alias Grace* have focussed on the text as

one that explores feminist concerns against a patriarchal backdrop, conversations on this novel have had little to say about the colonial nature of this backdrop.

The foundation for the novel is Atwood's research into the historical records of the actual Grace Marks: a domestic servant who, in 1843 at sixteen years old, was convicted of murdering her gentleman employer Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper-mistress Nancy Montgomery. Marks subsequently spent twenty-nine years in Kingston Penitentiary (with part of that sentence served at the Toronto Insane Asylum) before receiving a pardon in 1872. At the time, the case received sensational attention in Canadian and international newspapers because of the "combination of sex, violence, and the deplorable insubordination of the lower classes" (Atwood, Afterword 555). The central narrative of the novel is Atwood's fictional account of Marks's life story, as narrated by the protagonist Grace. Grace's narrative blends her experiences in prison and as a servant in the Penitentiary Governor's house with her memories of her early childhood, of her career as a domestic servant in Toronto, and of her occupation as a maid at the Kinnear residence at the time of the murders. At times Grace addresses the reader directly, but most of her story is told as she discloses it to the fictional psychologist Dr. Simon Jordan. Dr. Jordan has been enlisted by a group of evangelists petitioning for Grace's release from prison, and he interviews her using the latest scientific psychoanalytic techniques he brings from Europe, including suggestion, dream analysis and, ultimately, hypnotism. The novel alternates between Grace's first-person narration and Dr. Jordan's third-person point of view, and at the same time it is constructed as a montage of various text types: letters (between professionals and between family members), court documents, excerpts from the original 1843 newspaper reports, the Penitentiary Warden's journals, a ballad about the murders, and snippets of poems and other historical texts including Susanna Moodie's infamous 1853 account of the actual Grace Marks. All of these elements are framed within a

quilting motif, and with its multiple stories told in myriad voices, *Alias Grace* has been widely read as a “quilt” of patched-together stories and voices (Ingersoll; Michael; Murray; Rogerson), as a “mosaic” of different textual elements (March) and as a dialogic, intertextual piece (Peters; Staels).

Alias Grace differs from the other novels examined in this thesis, as does this chapter’s analysis of it. The discussions of those novels’ critiques of feminism in settler contexts explored how each protagonist’s metamorphosis to freedom is often facilitated by her already relative freedom as a white settler woman. In this novel Grace, as an immigrant, servant and prisoner, lacks the freedoms and privileges that Mary and Dora possess. Although Grace does achieve her release from prison by the conclusion of the narrative, this liberty is not acquired via any real personal transformation on Grace’s part. She even confides in the reader that she understands how to manipulate the penal system to her benefit: “If I am good enough and quiet enough, perhaps after all they will let me go” (5). Grace’s transformation from murderess to reformed woman is dubious, but she works hard to cultivate the persona of a “good girl with a pliable nature” (23) to satisfy the people who can help her. These people include a group of evangelical settler women, a liberal Methodist minister, and Dr. Jordan the psychoanalyst. Despite the questionable nature of Grace’s journey to ‘freedom,’ her experiences as a woman in a settler colonial setting, and the experiences of the women around her, help to illustrate some of the complexities of settler women’s activities in nineteenth-century Canada. In particular, the fact that Grace constructs her narrative while telling it to Dr. Jordan indicates how the figure of the Doctor functions as a reminder that whatever agency Grace expresses is always aligned with this representative of the patriarchal system, and as such her complicity here (however unconscious) is similar to settler feminists’ predicament within the patriarchal settler colonial context.

This chapter reads *Alias Grace* in its settler setting and suggests that this context is what aids the novel's criticism of Grace's situation. In doing so, it suggests that the settler context of the story is what allows for the ambiguity or oscillation in Grace's subjectivity. Alan Lawson argues that the settler colonial context produces ambiguous, in-between settler subjects, and this thesis argues that settler subjectivity is especially evident in settler women. *Alias Grace* showcases Grace and other women – servants, housekeepers, ladies, wives, mistresses – as excellent examples of this kind of female unsettled settler subject. In particular, this chapter explores how Grace's Irishness and her class position as a domestic servant contribute to her oscillating subjectivity. This chapter also discusses this novel's interrogation of British imperial notions of virtuous womanhood, and how these conceptions are, firstly, used by the patriarchy to suppress deviant (or mad) women, and, secondly, wielded by women, however paradoxically, to secure a stable position within the patriarchal social structure. This chapter suggests that the settler context perpetuates Victorian stereotypes that contribute to patriarchal aspects of colonialism. It also examines this novel's presentation of imperial systems of class divisions in an exploration of the relationships between middle-class settler women and their servants. This chapter proposes that class divisions are transgressed by settler subjects as part of their in-between nature, and that these patriarchal class distinctions are exploited by middle-class settler women both to suppress domestic workers and to improve their own social standing. In their attempts at agency in the settler context, settler women often succumb to the sexist attitudes of that system by reinforcing gender and class divisions that perpetuate patriarchal colonialism. Finally, this chapter examines this novel's criticism of the medical industry's intrusion on women's health in the settler setting, and Grace's response to that intrusion. By projecting a persona that the masculine medical system expects from a woman (virginal/obedient/mad/innocent/stupid), Grace manages to secure a release

from prison. However, and as this reading demonstrates, the medical industry in the settler context requires Grace to perpetuate Victorian stereotypes in order to benefit from those sexist attitudes. Ultimately, this reading suggests that Grace is not merely a working-class immigrant female victimized by a patriarchal justice system, although that may be true to the extent that these factors place her in a less powerful position within that system. (As Bethany Ober Mannon observes, Grace's "memoir may enable [her] to gain her release from prison, but it does not allow her to ultimately escape or dismantle the ideologies and institutions manifest in her life" (564).) Grace, like the settler feminists described by Jennifer Henderson and Cecily Devereux, actively participates in a complex and paradoxical negotiation of settler structures to achieve her own ends and her own (relative) freedom. Scholars have already recognized Grace as a woman who negotiates her way verbally and behaviourally through patriarchal social structures (Lovelady; Mannon; Siddall). This chapter extends these feminist readings of *Alias Grace* when it suggests that Grace's negotiation is also one of the settler subject in a colonial setting: a fact that has been neglected by other, more gender-based readings of the female subject as suppressed yet self-determining. This chapter aims to explore those aspects of settler culture that can be illuminated by a settler feminist critique.

Aided by its multi-voiced text with a fragmented structure, *Alias Grace* explores shifting and multiple identity positions for its protagonist – a signature characteristic of many of Atwood's novels. The novel's title immediately calls into question certainties about identity, and Atwood's portrayal of Grace as "unbound" (March 80) and as a "fluid subject" or "shape-shifter" (Rimstead) certainly works to establish the protagonist's ambiguous nature. Lawson's description of the settler subject position as one that is inherently unstable and constantly shifting helps to inform our understanding of Grace's characterization. Lawson demonstrates that settler sites are liminal sites

“at the point of negotiation between the contending authorities of Empire and Native” (155). This negotiation creates a space where traditional ways of knowing are challenged, creating a lack or an absence – “a place of nonmeaning” (155). In fact, Lawson quotes Atwood’s poems based on (Atwood’s interpretation of) Moodie’s settler experiences in the Canadian bush, to highlight the notion of colonial space as “lack, absence,” or “epistemological crisis,” and to describe the colonial experience as “deconstructive of the coherence of European epistemology” (Lawson 155).⁵ It is in this settler space where traditional ways of knowing are challenged, and where an alternative way of being – the settler subject – emerges. For Lawson, the settler subject is where “the operations of colonial power as negotiation are most intensely visible” (155). Lawson’s “non-unified” (155) settler subject is caught between “colonizing and colonized” identities (156); it represents the imperial, colonizing culture at the same time it resists that culture, in a desire to assert its own settler subjectivity and, subsequently, nationhood. Lawson’s notion of the settler subject is relevant to Grace’s presentation as an in-between or liminal subject, and the settler colonial context of this novel is pertinent to Grace’s ambiguous nature. In her quest for freedom from prison, Grace must adhere to the patriarchal assumptions of the colonial ruling power, including British imperial notions of gender and class. She must also use – and mimic – these assumptions as leverage to assert her own identity as an independent settler subject. In doing so she is in constant flux between the imperial and the other. Grace mimics the “authentic imperial culture” (Lawson 156) to gain her own ends, in the way she conforms to patriarchal stereotypes like the virtuous Victorian woman and the “stupid” Irish immigrant (*Alias Grace* 42). As Lawson argues, “mimicry is a necessary and unavoidable part of the repertoire of the settler” (156). In their parsing of settler subjectivity using psychoanalytic theory, Scott Kouri and Hans Skott-Myhre read

⁵ Lawson showcases the following lines as examples: “The moving water will not show me my reflection” (Atwood, *Journals* 11); “What does he [Moodie’s husband] change into [when he enters the forest?]” (19).

settler colonialism as a system of patriarchal rule where, to legitimize land appropriation, “the rule of the father [in this case, “European Empire”] must eradicate and clear all preceding forms of sovereignty and any alternative modes of production” (283). It does this by reading “Indigenous and all colonial others [including feminist perspectives] as lack” (283). Kouri and Skott-Myhre argue that the “construction of settler subjectivity is always to be found” within such a patriarchal system (283). Grace’s subjectivity as a settler woman is formed within a patriarchal colonial system, and because of this her character exhibits the ambiguity and liminality of the settler subject as it oscillates between colonizer and colonized and between patriarchy and the other (female). The settler setting of the novel, then, is what constitutes Grace’s constantly shifting subjectivity. It also influences the liminal and shifting subjectivities of other female characters in the novel. By drawing upon Lawson’s (and others’) definitions of the settler subject, this reading of *Alias Grace* can offer not only a unique analysis of this text, but can also offer a new perspective on feminist activity and female subjectivity in Canada’s colonial past.

The novel affirms Grace’s ambiguous position from the outset. The story opens with Grace who, as part of her sentence at Kingston Penitentiary, is working as a housemaid in the residence of the Penitentiary’s Governor. The Governor’s wife has extended Grace this privilege because she is “a model prisoner, and give[s] no trouble” (5), because “she is a wonderful seamstress, quite deft and accomplished, [and because] she is a great help” (24). Grace’s role at the Governor’s residence places her in a liminal position, somewhere between a prisoner and a domestic worker, while her position as an Irish immigrant similarly places her somewhere between a settler and a foreigner. The novel’s representations of Grace are “decidedly plural” (Macpherson, *Courting* 45), and throughout the narrative Atwood maintains multiple, simultaneous characterizations of Grace as at once a murderer, a victim, a prisoner, an immigrant, a servant, and at once guilty, mad, cunning,

possessed, and innocent. Grace's fragmented personality is in part Atwood's exploration of the inaccuracies of historical record and the instability of historical truth. The novel itself "continually reminds us of the intense public interest" in the historical Grace Marks (Siddall 88–89) by including primary sources such as newspaper clippings from the Toronto *Mirror* and the Kingston *Chronicle and Gazette*, a published sketch of Marks, and excerpts from Moodie's account of her visit to the Toronto Insane Asylum, where she describes Marks as "lighted up with the fire of insanity" (*Life* 224). As Grace stares into a mirror in the Governor's wife's parlour, she ponders the varying descriptions of herself that she has read in the press:

... that I am an inhuman female demon, that I am an innocent victim ... that I was too ignorant to know ... that I have blue eyes, that I have green eyes, that I have auburn and also brown hair ... that I am brisk and smart about my work, that I am of a sullen disposition with a quarrelsome temper ... that I am cunning and devious, that I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot. And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once? (23)

As an ambiguous settler subject, Grace harnesses the enigmatic nature of her public identity to continue to construct an uncertain, unstable identity in her narration of her life story to Dr. Jordan, so as to confound him and deny him the truth about her role in the double murder: "It may well be that Grace is a true amnesiac. Or simply contrary. Or simply guilty. She could of course be insane... What he [Dr. Jordan] wants is certainty, one way or the other; and this is precisely what she's withholding from him" (386–387). As part of her unsettled subjectivity, Grace's inconclusive narration works to obscure the truth of a violent past, in a similar way to how the "psychotic delusion of the settler subject" "obscures and eviscerates memory, producing the settler as innocent and desiring of democracy, fullness, and opportunity" (Kouri and Skott-Myhre 281).

Gillian Siddall says the novel foregrounds the “complex politics of self-representation, in this case the self-representation of a woman oppressed by public discourses of gender, class and ethnicity” (85). Grace’s attempts to narrate her way to freedom work within a patriarchal colonial system of oppression and are therefore necessarily complicit with it. Grace’s characterization can serve as an illustration of the complex nature of feminist responses in the settler colonial context, and Grace’s character is one that can be productively read in the context of settler colonialism. In this setting, feminist activities remain as a construct of the assumptions and attitudes of a patriarchal colonial system. For example, missionary and suffrage work undertaken by settler women in Canada deliberately cast Indigenous people and other minorities as infantile or primitive in order to further women’s own agendas for independence, and in doing so this work furthered the ambitions of the colonial project. In Grace’s case, by trying to assert power within a system by which this power will always be confined, her attempt to assert her autonomy and her own subjectivity culminates in an unstable subjectivity as she becomes not one subject but a subject who is multiple and shifting: the settler subject as produced by the settler colonial system. Grace’s “dexterity in moving between different identities” (Rimstead) is a hallmark of settler subjectivity and it is also her method for pursuing her own autonomy within a patriarchal social structure.

Grace’s identity as an Irish immigrant is an integral part of her in-between settler nature, and the settler context of the novel works to emphasize this. Her immigrant status automatically places her in a liminal position, as she is a white settler yet she is not a member of the colonial ruling class. As a settler who is not quite a settler, Grace’s Irish-immigrant status complicates her relationship to the British imperial power. Grace experiences anti-Irish sentiment early in life on her journey across the Atlantic Ocean to Canada. Her family is housed down in the hold of the ship, “everyone together, crammed in like herrings in a box” or like “suffering soul[s] in hell”

(130, 133). In her reading of the novel, Sandra Kumamoto Stanley observes that “the immigrants who exist in the waste- and rat-infested bottom [of the ship] are coded as the bottom of society – even as the waste products of this ship of state” (375) – and Grace similarly concludes that “the ship was after all only a sort of slum in motion” (134). Her experience is compounded by the prejudiced and sexist attitudes of the ship’s doctor, who refuses to “be pestered over trifles” and to come below deck to assist Grace’s sick and dying mother (137). Once Grace arrives in Toronto and, at twelve years old, leaves her father to find employment, she experiences anti-Irish and anti-Catholic sentiment (although she is Protestant) when interviewing for her first domestic position: “[Mrs. Honey] asked if I was bad-tempered, as redheaded people frequently were; [and she asked] if I was a Catholic, as those from Ireland generally were; and if so she would have nothing to do with me, as the Catholics were superstitious and rebellious Papists who were ruining the country” (147). Grace’s red hair is also foregrounded by the press at the time of her trial: “Red hair of an ogre. A wild beast, the newspaper said. A monster” (35–36). After the murders Grace is arrested along with her alleged accomplice, fellow employee at the Kinnear residence and fellow Irishman James McDermott. Grace declares her indignation over the press’s assumption that Irishness equates to deviance: “I thought it very unjust when they wrote down that *both of the accused were from Ireland by their own admission*. That made it sound like a crime” (116). Described by Kinnear as a “surly black-browed rascal” (331), McDermott represents the “criminal, rebellious Irishman Anglo-Canadians so feared” (Lovelady) and, as Stephanie Lovelady suggests, “it is largely because of the perception that Grace is the paramour of the Catholic, Celtic-identified McDermott that she cannot escape the taint of Irishness during the trial.” Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson similarly discusses how anti-Irish sentiment in nineteenth-century Canada, coupled with “manufactured concerns” over rising immigration and urbanization, meant that the historical

Grace Marks's guilt was practically a foregone conclusion: her Irishness indicated that Marks was "almost automatically, then, deserving of punishment" (*Courting* 39). With Grace marked as Irish in these ways, yet now separated from her family and country and with a diminishing sense of national origin, her liminal, in-between, ambiguous settler status is magnified. Grace's Irish-immigrant identity is an essential part of her shifting subject position in the settler colonial context, while at the same time it is also key to her characterization in the novel (by the settler colonial framework) as a felon, if not an outlaw. Portraying a character's Irishness as part of what labels him/her as criminal is a common strategy in settler narratives. In *Roughing it in the Bush*, Moodie describes a group of "singing, drinking, dancing, shouting" Irish immigrants she spies on an 1832 visit to Grosse Isle, Quebec, as "such thieves that they rob one another of the little they possess" (9). The trope of the Irish criminal was often one that (non-Irish) settler women used to contrast themselves against as the antithesis of the 'undesirable' Irish immigrant, so as to enhance their own 'virtuous' and morally-superior identities. In *Alias Grace*, characters like Mrs. Honey and the Governor's wife position themselves in this way by exploiting Grace's assumed deviance.

Grace is careful to acknowledge that her identity as a murderess is only alleged; the novel's refusal to articulate whether Grace is innocent or guilty compounds her ambiguous subjectivity. In her narration, particularly where she addresses the reader directly, Grace often reflects upon her notorious public image that was generated in and by the press. While *The Outlander's* murderess Mary Boulton experiences some notoriety and curiosity when held in prison, Grace's reputation extends beyond small-town borders and into international infamy. She recognizes the attraction for others of her criminal status: "The reason they want to see me is that I am a celebrated murderess. Or that is what has been written down" (23). With cynicism directed at the media, Grace sarcastically points out that there were few descriptions of Thomas Kinnear in the press: "It is

more important to be a murderess than the one murdered” (352). She also questions the validity of the epithet: “What is there to celebrate about murder?” (23). Nevertheless, Grace understands the intensity of the publicly-assigned label of murderess: “*Murderess* is a strong word to have attached to you. It has a smell to it, that word – musky and oppressive, like dead flowers in a vase ... It rustles like a taffeta skirt across the floor. *Murderer* is merely brutal” (23). Siddall notes how the word “in its feminine form glamourizes and sexualizes the violence that it denotes” (91), and the novel depicts Dr. Jordan succumbing to the seductiveness of the murderess persona: “Before the murders Grace would have been entirely different from the woman he now knows ... tepid, bland, and tasteless. A flat landscape. *Murderess, murderess*, he whispers to himself. It has an allure, a scent almost ... He imagines himself breathing it as he draws Grace towards him, pressing his mouth against her. *Murderess*” (467). Dr. Jordan’s fantasy underlines the wider social assumption that “violent women are concomitantly lascivious women, [and] that a woman capable of murder is inclined to cross other moral boundaries as well” (Siddall 91). Indeed, Grace becomes a “celebrated murderess” more for her supposed affair with McDermott than for the actual killing: “That is what really interests them – the gentlemen and the ladies both. They don’t care if I killed anyone ... No: was I really a paramour, is their chief concern, and they don’t even know themselves whether they want the answer to be no or yes” (28). Added to the bawdiness of the media accounts of Grace’s involvement in the murders are the reports, including Moodie’s, that Grace murdered Kinnear’s housekeeper Nancy in a fit of “wild jealousy,” wishing to keep Kinnear as a lover for herself (*Alias Grace* 222). As Dr. Jordan concedes, “the public will always prefer a salacious melodrama to a bald tale of mere thievery” (222).

Grace’s image as a murderess is titillating because it contradicts conventional images of the virtuous woman. Cecilia Morgan observes that one way nineteenth-century settler society

prescribed the correct behaviour for “virtuous womanhood” was to offer examples of “deviant femininity” in the colonial press (228). The construction of “good and bad femininity” also helped separate “the ladies from the maids” (Rimstead): “In popular discourse of the time, the image of the virtuous woman created an ideal against which all could be measured, but working-class women, especially domestic servants, were most apt to be found wanting” (Hulan, *Canadian* 77). In the press, then, Grace becomes a warning: “a negative image to highlight the normative definitions of femininity, female sexuality, and, by extension, class identity” (Siddall 89). While the notion of virtuous womanhood held little meaning for working-class, immigrant or Native women, it still shaped the social and legal frameworks in which all women lived and, furthermore, created divisions between working-class women and middle-class feminists “who sought to create common ground in an ideal of shared womanhood” (Morgan 229). As Sarah Robertson observes, Grace consequently finds that “the individual Grace has been subsumed by the public Grace” (154), something that serves to further accentuate Grace’s in-between, ambiguous subjectivity. While her ambiguous subject position encompasses various versions of an outlaw identity, the way Grace wields the general uncertainty over her guilt is at times paradoxical, as ultimately she must play into certain settler colonial stereotypes of femininity in order to achieve her release from the patriarchal colonial power that incarcerates her. She does this by acting “stupid” (42) and “prudish” (368) for Dr. Jordan, and as a “good girl” (23) for the Governor’s wife. At times Grace’s behaviour anticipates the paradoxical attitudes of settler feminists, who sometimes furthered sexist, as well as racist, stereotypes in order to strive for their own independence in a patriarchal social structure. As such, this novel affords us the opportunity to see how the settler context contributes to the ambiguous, in-between nature of settler women’s subjectivity.

Atwood's novel also includes other female characters who exemplify the notion of settler women as in-between, ambiguous figures. Mrs. Honey the housekeeper is actually "an English gentlewoman in distress who was only a housekeeper through the death of her husband, and being stranded in this country, and having no money of her own" (146–147). Caught between nations and fluxing between classes, Mrs. Honey represents a woman forced into a liminal position and kept there by a patriarchal society. Meanwhile Rachel Humphrey, Dr. Jordan's landlady and wife of "the sodden and straying Major" Humphrey (84), finds herself cooking breakfasts and serving meals to Dr. Jordan when her husband leaves and she can no longer afford to employ her maid. With "a hint of malicious irony" Rachel remarks on how "women like me have few skills they can sell" (167); she then attempts to seduce Dr. Jordan with midnight sexual encounters, in the hopes of persuading him to marry her. Rachel is caught between lady/maid states and married/unmarried identities, forced into this ambiguous position by a patriarchal society that offers few alternatives to settler women. This in-between subjectivity can be seen as representative of the settler subject. While a feminist reading might highlight the virgin/whore binary and suggest that Rachel wavers between the two in her uncertain position within the patriarchal society, a reading that incorporates an understanding of settler subjectivity can demonstrate how the character of Rachel disrupts the Victorian binaries of lady/maid or virgin/whore to present an alternative: the female settler subject who is caught between these states. Class divisions that would demarcate Mrs. Honey and Rachel become elastic and blur as the new settler nation attempts to shed structures from the old imperial power. However, these imperial patriarchal structures cannot help but remain in the settler context: "The new lands must by definition serve to help define the empire to itself as empire, and in doing so must demonstrate the universality and inevitability of the empire's constructs of meaning" (Seaton 7). It is within these imperial social structures that settler feminists negotiated a place for

themselves, and this negotiation at times resulted in activities that furthered the damaging racist and sexist consequences of colonialism. Two of the novel's major female characters, Mary Whitney and Nancy Montgomery, also straddle class lines and obfuscate the boundary between master and servant, and are worth further exploration as female settler subjects.

Mary Whitney works alongside Grace as a fellow servant under Mrs. Honey in the Parkinson household, Grace's first domestic position. Slightly older than Grace, sixteen-year-old Mary's sparkling personality and "democratic ideas" (183) seem progressive to Grace, who describes Mary as "a fun-loving girl, and very mischievous and bold in her speech" (173). Mary "does not have much respect for degree" and is angered that "some people [have] so much and others so little" (173), because she believes "one person [is] as good as the next" (182). Mary asserts that servants need not remain trapped in service roles, and she dreams of when she will one day have her own farm house and perhaps hire a "maid-of-all-work" of her own (182): "Being a servant was not a thing we were born to, nor would we be forced to continue at it forever; it was just a job of work" (181–182). Grace attributes Mary's unbridled coarse language and egalitarian opinions to Mary's "being a native-born Canadian" (173), and Mary does exhibit the "postimperial" notions of the settler subject who speaks "of and against both its own oppressiveness and its own oppression" (Lawson 158). Mary also crosses the boundaries of race, claiming her grandmother was "a Red Indian, which was why her hair was so black" (173). Mary sees her Indigeneity as one way out of a lifetime of servitude, and she declares that "if she had half a chance she would run away into the woods, and go about with a bow and arrow, and not have to pin up her hair and wear stays," and that she would "scalp" people "which she had read about in books" (173–174). Mary's description of Indigeneity is an absurdly stereotypical one, but nevertheless her claim to Indigeneity – "whose authority the settlers not only effaced and replaced

but also desired” (Lawson 158) – forms an integral part of her settler identity. Her attitude combines a knowledge of the land (however self-proclaimed and dubious) with a rejection of colonial control. As Lawson describes it, “the settler subject is signed, then, in a language of authority and in a language of resistance” (156). Mary therefore represents a settler woman who blurs class and race boundaries to assert an ambiguous identity for herself. Furthermore, in gauging Mary, Grace views Canada as a quintessential settler colonial nation, one whose people can resist traditional imperial notions of class. Grace sees Mary’s lack of respect for the colonial power’s institutions of class as a way the people of the new Canadian nation assert their difference.

Mary’s attempt to cross class boundaries ultimately ends in tragedy. She pursues an affair with the master’s son George, hoping to marry him and become a lady herself, as he “had given her a ring” (201). But Mary finds herself cast aside when George goes “back on his promise” when she tells him she is pregnant (201). After pooling their money, Grace accompanies Mary to a “severe”-looking doctor (203) who performs a rough abortion in his kitchen. Mary dies from the procedure later that night (203–204). Grace is distressed at the unfairness of the matter, and she bemoans the injustice of a patriarchal social system that punishes women for the transgressions of men: “It is my true belief that it was the doctor that killed her with his knife; him and the gentleman [George] between them. For it is not always the one that strikes the blow, that is the actual murderer” (207). In the colonial context, the Victorian notion of the sinfulness of the debased woman persists, and even Mary’s democratic ideas cannot save her.

Mary’s ambiguous subjectivity is further highlighted by the novel in the way her identity merges with Grace’s. When Mary dies, it appears that her spirit possesses Grace’s body for a short time the next evening, perplexing the servants of the house (209). In addition, when Grace and McDermott flee Toronto after the murders, Grace decides to adopt the alias Mary Whitney “to

allay suspicion” (408). Grace also often takes on Mary’s speech patterns or turns of phrase when narrating her story to Dr. Jordan, especially when relating something tawdry or uncouth, so that Grace can avoid seeming uncouth herself: “Lady or lady’s maid, they both piss and it smells the same, and not like lilacs neither, as Mary Whitney used to say” (253). Lovelady explains how “Mary becomes a crutch to say what Grace cannot while Simon [Dr. Jordan] is listening.” Finally, Grace appears to be possessed by Mary again while hypnotised by the “noted medical practitioner” (or “professional charlatan”) Dr. Jerome DuPont, as part of the evangelists’ exploits to attempt to reveal the true extent of Grace’s culpability in the Kinnear murders (364, 94). Mary’s ghost, occupying Grace’s bodily form, confesses to taking over Grace’s body the day of the murders to kill Nancy and Kinnear (480–481). Afterwards the two doctors and the Reverend debate possible explanations for the apparent possession, and decide upon “*dédoublement*,” or split personality, where “two distinct personalities ... may coexist in the same body” (486). By blurring the boundaries between Grace’s and Mary’s subjectivities, the novel demonstrates two in-between or liminal characters merging to become one deeply ambiguous subject which, in its settler colonial setting, echoes the ambiguity of Lawson’s unsettled settler subject.

After Mary’s death Grace moves between a string of short-lived domestic positions. At one of these posts Grace meets Nancy Montgomery, Kinnear’s housekeeper. Similar to Mary’s and Grace’s, Nancy’s characterization is also illustrative of the ambiguous, in-between nature of the female settler subject. Moreover, the unconventional mistress/servant relationship between Nancy and Grace allows for a reading that can employ the insights of settler feminist criticism to explore how the novel depicts settler women in a more nuanced exploration of the world of female domestic servants. Atwood’s depiction of nineteenth-century settler colonial Canada is one of scathing criticism of the patriarchal settler system and its exploitation of women in general and of

working-class women in particular. Indeed, Wyile suggests that Grace's narrative reveals "not the pathological inclinations of a nineteenth-century murderess but the pathology of class and gender power relations in a rigidly stratified nineteenth-century society" (*Speculative* 74). But rather than viewing the novel as a binary paradigm of feminist resistance to patriarchy, this reading explores *Alias Grace*'s representation of the complex relationships between middle-class women and their female domestic servants. *Alias Grace* depicts settler feminists in a way similar to Mallory Allyson Richard's description of early twentieth-century advocates of women's suffrage: "They were, as Martin Banton and Gurnam Singh have put it, members of a marginalized group who had themselves succumbed to oppressive ideologies, seeking 'to identify a position within the strata [of society] that is superior to as many other groups as possible'" (Banton and Singh 113 qtd. in Richard 126). The novel illustrates what Jodi Byrd identifies as the "horizontal struggles" between those with competing claims to oppression (xxxiv). Focussing on the "vertical interactions of colonizer and colonized," Byrd argues, distracts "from the complicities of colonialism and the possibilities for anticolonial action that emerge outside and beyond the Manichean allegories that define oppression" (xxxiv–xxxv). She suggests that the "cacophony of competing struggles for hegemony... serves to misdirect and cloud attention from the underlying structures of settler colonialism. ... As a result, the cacophony produced through ... colonialism and imperialism ... often coerces struggles for social justice for queers, racial minorities, and immigrants into complicity with settler colonialism" (xvii). *Alias Grace* explores the machinations of settler women as they jostle for social position and privilege in nineteenth-century colonial Canada by depicting settler women's complicity in the patriarchal system's oppression of working-class women in general and household domestic workers in particular. In doing so the novel highlights how the actions of bourgeois women can keep servants "in their place" (Macpherson, *Courting* 39)

– with “the double signification of ‘keeping one’s place’ meaning staying in the kitchen and acknowledging inferior status” (Rimstead) – in a system “where one class of women can afford to own the domestic labour of another class of women” (Rimstead).

In the same way that Grace occupies an ambiguous domestic position in the Governor’s house, Nancy occupies an in-between and transgressive position in her own household. Attracted by Nancy’s bubbly personality (Grace describes how Nancy “laughed and joked as much as Mary Whitney had done, and seemed very good natured” (233)), Grace accepts a job offer from Nancy in the hopes of regaining the type of friendship she had with Mary, despite Grace’s concerns over the position “being out in the country, rather than in town” (235). However, upon arrival at Kinnear’s Richmond Hill estate, Grace is shocked to find Nancy passing as “a gracefully dressed lady with a triple flounce” (244). Reminded of the tragedy that arose from Mary’s attempt to traverse class boundaries, Grace sees this cross-dressing as an omen of the horror to come: “Something squeezed tight about my heart” (244). Nancy occupies a liminal place in the Kinnear household as she is both Kinnear’s housekeeper and his mistress. Nancy has in effect hired Grace to help conceal her affair: “A single woman alone with a gentleman, ... people would talk” (234). However, there are many clues to the affair, and Grace is perturbed “at [Nancy’s] chamber being on the same floor as Mr. Kinnear’s” (250). Nancy flaunts the clothing and accessories – important signifiers of social class – Kinnear has clearly bought for her, including “real gold” earrings (246), some “fine gloves” (233) and a “lovely parasol, pink in colour” (234). She shows Grace the crimson silk she has bought to make a new dress and Grace “wonder[s] what a housekeeper would be wanting with a dress like that” (233), in the same that way she wonders how Nancy could afford gold earrings “on the salary of a housekeeper” (246). Cristie March observes that Grace’s skepticism surrounding Nancy’s dress is at odds with the social implications of being a “lady,” and

she notes that “if Nancy were in fact a lady, Grace would not have reason to question [her choice of dress]” (68). Nancy’s clothing therefore signifies the ambiguity of her own social position: it “occupies a space where labels like ‘lady’ and ‘housekeeper’ become confused and elastic as one identity blurs into, but does not merge with, another” (68–69).

In addition to her clothing, Nancy’s behaviour demonstrates her desire to climb in social position. Grace is surprised at Nancy learning to play piano, because “it was not the usual thing for a housekeeper” (248), and she later resentfully listens to Nancy reading aloud to Kinnear (while seated on his knee): “She liked to do it, as she thought it was genteel; but she always pretended that Mr. Kinnear required it of her” (329). Grace soon discovers that Nancy, because she is caught in this in-between position – a wife but not a wife – is shunned at the local church (300) and that even Kinnear “is not received” by the more respectable families in Toronto, because of his unconventional relationship with Nancy (269). Nancy’s ambiguous status in the household directly affects Grace; sometimes Nancy treats Grace like a friend and fellow maid, and at other times like a servant decidedly below the rank of lady-of-the-house that Nancy sees herself occupying: “Nancy was very changeable, two-faced you might call her ... One minute she would be up on her high horse ordering me about and finding fault, and the next minute she would be my best friend, or pretend to be” (264). As Stanley observes, Nancy’s behaviour towards Grace “alternates between vigilance and indulgence, reflective of her own unclear place in the household” (375), and this ambivalence ultimately undermines her authority, as Grace admits: “I lost much of the respect I’d once felt for Nancy ... and I let my scorn show” (303). Nancy asserts her authority in the domestic space in a similar way to how the settler subject attempts to assert authority over the settler space. Nancy has acquired her (untenable) position as lady of the house via illegitimate means, so she draws upon imperial systems of class divisions to reinforce Grace’s lower household

position and boost her own standing. Nancy's maneuvers are similar to the activities of settler feminists that sought to repress other races and classes in an effort to achieve some degree of power in the patriarchal colonial system. Grace's attitude to Nancy cools further when she realizes Nancy is pregnant and, after the heartbreaking outcome of Mary's similar situation, the possibility of Nancy marrying Kinnear is almost too much for Grace to bear: "It would not be fair and just that she [Nancy] should end up a respectable married lady with a ring on her finger, and rich into the bargain.... Mary Whitney had done the same as her and had gone to her death. Why should one be rewarded and one punished for the same sin?" (328–329). Both Mary's and Nancy's affairs with gentlemen, and their hopes for marriage arising from sex, exemplify the limited opportunities available for working-class settler women in their pursuit of a better social position. The gentlemen are at liberty to seduce the maids because of their position of power, yet the men refuse to marry these women because they are servants. As Kinnear insists, "there were three servants in the house, not two, as she [Nancy] was a servant herself" (331). Their liminal position is dangerous for these women: Nancy's affair leaves her rejected by the household and by the community, while Mary's affair leaves her dead. As settler subjects seeking to reject a European construct (the imperial patriarchal system), Mary and Nancy attempt to climb out of their confining servant roles – roles dictated to them by the settler colonial social class system. By conducting affairs and friendships across social classes, these women blur the boundaries between master/lady and maid and behave as ambiguous settler subjects. However, by resorting to their only option – sex – to traverse these boundaries, Mary and Nancy nevertheless succumb to the sexist confines of the patriarchal social system, and they remain complicit in the sexist behaviour and attitudes of the system. This kind of complicity is illuminated by a reading of the novel that is cognizant of settler feminist criticism that highlights, for example, how settler feminists immersed themselves in stereotypically sexist

roles in an effort to assert autonomy. While settler feminists often emphasized their roles as caregivers, mothers and safeguards of virtue, Nancy, Mary and Rachel attempt to play into one stereotype, the sex partner/whore, as a means to achieving another patriarchal typecast: wife.

Similar to how Grace's identity merges with Mary's, the novel also presents Grace's identity merging with Nancy's. After Nancy and Kinnear are murdered and as Grace and McDermott prepare to leave the house, Grace dons Nancy's clothing: "I put on one of Nancy's dresses ... the same one she had on the first day I came to Mr. Kinnear's. And I put on her petticoat with the lace edging ... and Nancy's summer shoes of light-coloured leather... And also her good straw bonnet; and I took her good cashmere shawl" (400). She also takes Nancy's trunk of clothes and other belongings with her. Grace then burns her own clothes in a process of transformation and self-cleansing, and she imagines, "It was like my own dirtied and cast-off skin that I was burning" (401). This transformation means that Grace is now the one dressing above her working-class station: "He [McDermott] told me with a bit of a sneer that I looked very elegant, and quite the lady, with my pink parasol and all" (407). On the run from the law, and with her new alias (Mary Whitney) and her new wardrobe, Grace feels her old identity fading, and she muses, "It's as if I never existed, because no trace of me remains ... It is almost the same as being innocent" (412). The novel later concludes with Grace sewing herself a quilt: "The first one I have ever done for myself" (551). She includes fabric from a petticoat of Mary's, from a prison nightdress of her own, and from the same triple-flounce dress of Nancy's. Grace's quilt becomes the final assertion of the interwoven subjectivities of the three women: "I will embroider around each one of [the three patches] ... to blend them in as part of the pattern. And so we will all be together" (552).

The merging of Grace's identity with those of Mary and Nancy, along with Grace's and Nancy's ambiguous household positions and the way Mary contests boundaries of class and race, serves to highlight not only the in-between nature of the settler subject, but also the liminal places that settler women find themselves occupying as they negotiate and survive the "strictures and restrictions of nineteenth-century patriarchy" (Wyile, *Speculative* 73). To Mary and Nancy, moving upwards along class lines is an attractive alternative to a life in servitude. To Grace, remaining ambiguous is her way of avoiding accountability and of hoping to secure a release from prison. Many times the confines of these liminal places lead the women to participate in behaviours and activities that reinforce Victorian gender stereotypes or, in Nancy's case, perpetuate strict imperial class divisions that exploit others. In these ways *Alias Grace* illustrates some of the ambiguities and paradoxes of the feminist figure in the settler setting, and by presenting these female characters as ambiguous, shifting and multiple, this novel addresses some of the nuances of the relationship between the female settler subject and early Canadian patriarchal social structures.

In addition to the dysfunctional relationship between Grace and Nancy, the novel also portrays a group of secondary female characters who anticipate the missionary activities or rehabilitation projects of settler feminists. Grace's domestic position at the house of the Kingston Penitentiary's Governor is at the behest of the Governor's wife, "a handsome woman of forty-five or so, of an obvious respectability" (92). The Governor's wife, who "would prefer the Governor to be the governor of something other than a prison" (22), nevertheless aspires to "make the most of her social position and accomplishments" (22). She holds a certain power in her class position and in her marriage to a powerful man, and she provides an illustration of settler feminist attitudes, as described by Henderson and Devereux, when she takes it upon herself to rehabilitate the

incarcerated Grace by allowing her to work as a servant in the Governor's mansion during day release from her prison cell. The Governor's wife is an "invaluable member" of a committee of libertarian Spiritualists (91), led by the "well-connected" and "affluent" Methodist Reverend Verringer (86), that seeks to petition the Government authorities for Grace's release. Grace recognizes the Governor's wife's generosity is not completely altruistic, and that its truer intention is more to display her "Christian charity" (25) and to cement her own position in the upper-middle class of settler colonial Canada. As Grace contemplates, "although I am an object of fear, like a spider, and of charity as well, I am also one of [her] accomplishments" (22). The Governor's wife's mission to rescue and redeem the "celebrated murderess" is, Grace recognizes, simply another form of exploitation, particularly as Grace still must return to her prison cell each evening, where the guards "lock her up properly, otherwise [the Governor's wife] wouldn't be able to sleep a wink" (25). The Governor's wife relishes the attention she receives in her social sphere, from citizens who discuss the "Woman Question" or "the emancipation of this or that" or who attend the "Spiritualist Circle, for tea and conversing with the dead" (22). In her Afterword, Atwood remarks on the popularity of Spiritualism in the Kingston area in the 1850s, and she notes how Spiritualism "was the one quasi-religious activity of the times in which women were allowed a position of power" (559). As the Governor's wife participates in feminist activity and surrounds herself with "reform-minded persons of both sexes" (*Alias Grace* 22), this novel provides insight into how the notion of libertarian reform is used pragmatically by middle-class women as a means to bolster their social status, and not as a humanistic ideal or an actual experience of freedom. In moments where she addresses the reader directly, Grace satirizes the gushing compliments of the bourgeois women who sardonically congratulate the Governor's wife on her "accomplishment:" "Oh imagine, I feel quite faint, they say, and You let that woman walk around loose in your house, you

must have nerves of iron, my own would never stand it ... a leopard cannot change its spots and no one could say you have not done your duty and shown a proper feeling” (24–25).

Many of these comments are made while the ladies pore over the Governor’s wife’s scrapbook. The Governor’s wife likes to preserve stories of crimes and murders in her book to “horrify her acquaintances” (27). The scrapbook has

all the famous criminals in it – the ones that have been hanged, or else brought here to be penitent ... The Governor’s wife cuts these crimes out of the newspapers and pastes them in; she will even write away for old newspapers with crimes that were done before her time. It is her collection, she is a lady and they are all collecting things these days ... I have read what they put in about me ... A lot of it is lies. (27–28)

This kind of “morbid fascination” with the violent crimes of women – along with the suggestion that criminal behaviour was not appropriate for “ladies” – was popular in the nineteenth-century press, in Canada and abroad (Morgan 229). Indeed, Moodie’s account of Grace Marks, which includes a “graphic description of blood and madness,” was, Judith Knelman asserts, written to impress an English audience and to appeal to the trend of sensational crime reporting (“Can We Believe” 681). Renee Hulan suggests Atwood’s inclusion of the scrapbook contributes to the novel’s theme of the unreliability of newspaper reports and denotes the “distance between representation and reality” (*Canadian* 77), particularly as Grace objects to the “lies” such as the reported fact that she was illiterate: “I could read some even then. I was taught early by my mother” (28). Katie Day Good explores the process of scrapbooking as “simultaneously social and archival,” and how the process of storing memories as “scraps” necessarily implies that the memory or truth is incomplete (557–558). Nevertheless, the scrapbooking device is a powerful reinforcement of Grace’s violent past, particularly as it gives legitimacy to newspaper reports by

enshrining them forever – including stories the Governor’s wife collects from “before her time.” The scrapbook, and the sensational articles it showcases, helps to affirm the middle-class women’s social position by presenting Grace as the antithesis of the virtuous woman, as a debased individual, and therefore as someone they can use to further their own social status. As the Governor’s daughter Lydia explains to Dr. Jordan when she shows him the scrapbook, “It helps [the Governor’s wife] to make up her mind, as to which among the prisoners may be worthy objects of charity” (98). The irony is that the Governor’s wife supports Grace not because she is inherently charitable or because Grace is innately worthy, but because Grace’s story is infamous and the Governor’s wife is using the era’s fashionable interest in such a sensational crime story to boost her own social standing. As Grace scornfully acknowledges: “Help is what they offer but gratitude is what they want” (45).

Alias Grace explores some of the ironies and paradoxes of the attitudes of ‘enlightened’ middle-class settler women in its depiction of “the Committee.” Macpherson relates how the historical Grace Marks “became a cause célèbre amongst individuals who did not believe that women could be capable of such monstrosity” (*Cambridge* 68), while Jeanette King highlights how, although Grace has already been convicted and imprisoned when the novel opens, “so deeply does her crime transgress the female ideal that the authorities are still driven either to find her innocent, or to classify her as ‘criminal,’ ‘idiot’ or ‘minor’ in order to explain that transgression” (72). Atwood recreates these historical attitudes by including in the novel a Committee petitioning for Grace’s release. In addition to the Governor’s wife, the Committee includes Mrs. Quennell, the “celebrated Spiritualist and advocate of an enlarged sphere for women” (93). Mrs. Quennell is the “leading light” of the ladies’ Woman Question discussion circle, and has spent time in Boston (a known centre of feminist activity). Dr. Jordan surmises the ridiculousness of Mrs. Quennell with

her huge crinoline skirt, her “small grey poodle” hairstyle (94) and her “girlish wiggle” (97), and he concludes that she has been included on the Committee merely because “evidently she is wealthy” (95). Mrs. Quennell represents the type of ambitious woman hoping to further her own aspirations through the campaign for Grace’s release. As she says when addressing Dr. Jordan, “We are sure she is innocent ... All of us on the Committee! We are convinced of it! Reverend Verringer is getting up a petition. It is not the first, but we are in hopes that this time we will be successful ... Do say you are on our side!” (97). In the same way the novel critiques the Governor’s wife’s motives in her charity towards Grace, *Alias Grace* also highlights Mrs. Quennell’s frivolous display of wealth, which leads the reader to question Mrs. Quennell’s ability to empathize with Grace’s position. In doing so, the novel seems to ridicule middle-class settler women who accrue agency through their pre-existing access to power in their privileged social or economic situation. The historical political situation in a nineteenth-century “Canada West ... still reeling from the effects of the 1837 Rebellion” (Atwood, “In Search” 1514) and how it influenced Marks’s case has been articulated by Atwood and Knelman (“Can We Believe” 679) in their parsings of the historical accuracies of the novel. In *Alias Grace*, these political maneuverings – and those of the Committee – are revealed by Reverend Verringer, who confides in Dr. Jordan. Reverend Verringer describes the “widespread feeling against Grace Marks” amongst the Tory supporters, who consider “the murder of a single Tory gentleman ... to be the same thing as the insurrection of an entire [Irish] race” (90–91). The reformist Committee therefore has a vested interest in demonstrating Grace’s innocence, and in furthering its own political agenda rather than achieving true justice for underprivileged women: “We would not want the opponents of reform to be given an opportunity of crowing over us” (91). The actions of the women on the Committee somewhat anticipate the evangelical, missionary activities of Canada’s settler feminists. Henderson

and Devereux describe the racist implications of settler feminists' attempts to evangelize Indigenous populations in missionary and suffrage activities that portrayed Indigenous groups as infantilized and uncivilized. Although a far less extreme and deleterious example, the Governor's wife's project of rehabilitating a murderess also serves not only to cement Grace's inferior class position – as domestic worker and prisoner – but also to further the advancement of the wife's and Mrs. Quennell's reputations as independent activists, and bolsters their own superior middle-class positions. This example also illustrates settler women's complicity in the patriarchal system's oppression of working-class women. The various contests for power and autonomy occurring in this novel across and between the privileged middle-class women, the working-class domestic servants and the patriarchal social system itself help to illustrate Byrd's "cacophony" of struggles between peoples with competing claims to oppression within the settler colonial structure. From a feminist standpoint, the conundrum with Grace's struggle is that, as a female working-class immigrant, her autonomy remains at the mercy of patriarchal settler institutions, within which settler women with more power than Grace can conduct evangelical, missionary-style feminist activity at the expense of underprivileged women. From a settler colonial standpoint, we can see that this kind of feminist activity continues to reinforce gender and class demarcations within the colonial project and, consequently, perpetuates patriarchal colonialism itself.

Besides critiquing the classist attitudes and actions of bourgeois settler women, *Alias Grace* also critiques the intrusion of the patriarchal medical establishment on women's health in the settler setting. The novel explores the relationship between sanity and gender, and the sexist assumptions inherent in nineteenth-century psychological diagnosis and treatment of women. Grace's limited access to power constricts her ability to challenge these assumptions, yet she is shrewdly aware of her capacity to disclose or withhold information from Dr. Jordan, and she

constructs her tale according to what she knows will appeal to him by playing into the hysterical female trope. In this way *Alias Grace* provides an example of a complex feminist self-narration that is at once confined by the patriarchal settler system yet manipulates gender assumptions to the narrator's own ends. Grace's paradoxical response to the limitations put upon her by a patriarchal medical system exemplifies the ambiguity and instability of the settler subject, and such a reading of this novel can help us understand the complexities and constrictions of early feminism in the settler colonial context.

As discussed in Chapter Two, Ami McKay's *The Birth House* examines how women's bodies become a location of gendered power struggles by exploring the consequences of the patriarchal medical industry's intrusion on women's healthcare. *Alias Grace* explores a similar theme and, like Dora's opinions of Dr. Thomas in McKay's novel, Grace's descriptions of doctors are particularly uncomplimentary. Her attitude supplies an interesting perspective on how those with limited power – women, domestic workers, prisoners – are treated by the medical profession. Doctors are aligned with scientific discovery rather than with human care, and are preoccupied with their own positions more than with helping patients, such as the doctor Grace encounters on the passenger ship when her mother dies. Other doctors censured by Grace include a phrenologist who comes to measure Grace's head, arranged by the Governor's wife in her desire to show what a "liberal-minded person" she is with such "forward-looking aims" (29). The phrenologist "is measuring the heads of all the criminals in the Penitentiary, to see if he can tell from the bumps on their skulls what sort of criminals they are ... then they could lock those people [with similar bumps] up before they had a chance to commit any crimes, and [the Governor's wife says] think how that would improve the world" (29). For Grace, the irony lies in how people like the Governor's wife and the phrenologist are more interested in improving the(ir) world(s) than in

helping patients. In addition Dr. Bannerling, who treats Grace at the Toronto Insane Asylum, is presented as a molester: “Take your hand off my tit, you filthy bastard” (37). He is also presented as a hard-nosed skeptic who aligns Dr. Jordan’s psychology with the “preposterous tomfoolery [of the] ‘Neuro-hypnotic trance,’ which is second in imbecility only to Spiritism, Universal Suffrage, and similar drivel,” and he warns Dr. Jordan against Grace the “cunning woman” (519). Finally, the doctor who performs Mary’s abortion is depicted as wealthy and uncaring. He lives in a “large-enough house, in a good neighbourhood,” but “the first thing he [does is] to count the money” that Mary brings him, before saying to Grace that if she ever tells “anything about it, he would deny ever having seen [her]” (203).

Meanwhile Dr. Jordan himself personifies the intrusion of masculine scientific knowledge into the realm of women’s healthcare, and the sexist assumptions inherent in this intrusion. As an American from Massachusetts, Dr. Jordan is already deemed an outsider: as Reverend Verringer grumbles, “Everything is so different in the United States” (87). The doctor’s foreign notions include the innovative psychological practices he brings to Upper Canada from his studies in Europe, including techniques developed from the ideas of eighteenth-century philosophers, such as “Thomas Brown’s work on association and suggestion, and Herbart’s theory of the threshold of consciousness” (161). Similar to Dr. Thomas’s fascination with modern medical science in *The Birth House*, Dr. Jordan is also intensely interested in the science of machines and how it might be applied in a healthcare setting. Dr. Jordan dreams of opening a “comfortable” asylum for the insane, with “facilities for hydrotherapy, and a good many mechanical devices [with] little wheels that go around with a whirring sound, there must be rubber suction cups. Wires to attach to the cranium ... He will include the word ‘electrical’ in his prospectus” (495). And in contrast to feminine notions of care, Dr. Jordan believes “the afflicted [do] not need your compassion but your

skill” (217). The intrusion of masculine, scientific practices into the care and/or incarceration of working-class women echoes the intrusion of Dr. Jordan’s kind of cultural imperialism on the settler colonial setting. Dr. Jordan’s medical treatment of Grace is a singular kind of intimate intrusion: “My object is to wake the part of her mind that lies dormant – to probe down below the threshold of her consciousness ... [and to] open her up like an oyster” (151–152). Grace is subjected to these attempts at probing and opening, by a person in a position of power, because of her inferior and powerless status as female, working class, and prisoner. In her attempt at freedom, Grace must negotiate these sexist patriarchal assumptions about women and women’s health. Grace’s response, in terms of how she appeals to these assumptions to navigate the system, demonstrates a contrariness and duality that exemplifies her status a settler subject in the colonial structure. Her complicity with patriarchy in this model helps us to understand the kind of (unconscious) collusion in which settler feminists participated.

Wendy Mitchinson describes how Victorian doctors’ attitudes towards madness were part of a “long tradition of associating hysteria with women ... [and] the consensus was that hysteria was essentially a female disorder” (282). By leveraging off Moodie’s notorious “raving maniac” description of the historical Grace Marks (*Life* 224), and by including a psychologist as foil to the fictional Grace, *Alias Grace* critiques the patriarchal nature of the settler colonial medical establishment’s treatment of women. It also explores the close relationship between the medical establishment and legal institutions, as Grace’s incarceration takes place both in prison and in an asylum, suggesting the criminality or deviance assumed to be inherent in madness (especially female madness). Grace’s self-narration is interspersed with and surrounded by medical discourse in the form of letters between various doctors who have either examined Grace or who are advising Dr. Jordan. These letters depict a discourse on female hysteria conducted by those

representing patriarchal power and include suggestions such as “physical restraint and correction, a restricted diet, and cupping and bleeding to reduce excessive animal spirits” (79). Grace sardonically imitates the language of doctors who all meet “together in their black coats” after examining her: “Ahem, aha, in my opinion, and My respected colleague, sir I beg to differ” (35). In her analysis of the novel, Stanley discusses how scientific discourse becomes “linguistic matrices of power” (378), and she references Bryan Turner:

The growth of nineteenth-century scientific discourse does not “inaugurate a period of individual freedoms, but rather forms the basis of more extensive systems of institutionalized power. ... The categories of ‘criminal,’ ‘insane,’ and ‘deviant’ are the manifestations of a scientific discourse by which the normal and sane exercise power along a systematic dividing of sameness and difference.” (Turner 21 qtd. in Stanley 378)

Hence, Grace is caught up in a framework in which she must negotiate sexist and patriarchal assumptions about her gender and class. The paradox for Grace is that in her effort to secure a release from prison and find freedom and independence in a patriarchal settler colonial system, she manipulates to her own ends established settler colonial prejudices regarding women and hysteria.

For example, from her incarcerated position, Grace realizes that any petition for her release must be based on proof of her insanity or of her ignorance. Neither of these options is particularly empowering, especially from a feminist standpoint. However, Grace recognizes her situation and uses her storytelling opportunity to cultivate a persona apt for a virtuous yet clueless Victorian lady who may or may not be prone to periods of madness. Atwood says of her character, “Grace ... – whatever else she is – is a storyteller, with strong motives to narrate but also strong motives to withhold; the only power left to her as a convicted and imprisoned criminal comes from a blend of these two motives” (“In Search” 1515). As such, Grace illustrates some of the complexities and

paradoxes for women within the settler colonial system. She uses her narrative performance to assert agency and to attempt to control her future by constructing a story that would make possible her release. However, she recognizes her release from prison will be solely on the terms of the patriarchy – she may be freed only if her story is convincing enough – and she therefore needs to negotiate those terms within her own limited agency. Ultimately, it is Grace’s ambiguity as a settler subject that inflects her narrative performance with enough uncertainty to convince those in power to release her.

Grace’s power over Dr. Jordan lies in her ability to narrate her life story in a way that will project an image of herself that she knows will appeal to him: innocent, virginal, demure, stupid and, most conveniently, mad. In sections of narration directed at the reader, Grace confides that her strategy of selective storytelling is deliberate: “What should I tell him, when he comes back? He will want to know about the arrest, and the trial, and what was said. Some of it is all jumbled in my mind, but I could pick out this or that for him, some bits of whole cloth you might say, as when you go through the rag bag looking for something that will do, to supply a touch of colour” (424). When recalling a jailer who tried “to take advantages” and how she “told him to keep his filthy self to himself,” Grace contemplates, “I will tell Dr. Jordan about this, as he likes to hear about such things, and always writes them down” (427). When Dr. Jordan brings her a radish to eat, Grace, thankful for something fresh, discloses to the reader, “I set to work willingly to tell my story, and to make it as interesting as I can, and rich in incident, as a sort of return gift for him” (291). But when Dr. Jordan presses Grace to tell him about a previous night’s dream, Grace confesses to the reader that although she had dreamed about disembodied hands, she tells Dr. Jordan she does not remember the dream because, she admits to the reader, “I have little enough of my own ... I need to keep something to myself” (114). At other times she clearly articulates the control she has over

Dr. Jordan: “Just because he pesters me to know everything is no reason for me to tell him” (253–254), and she even articulates this power in a direct address to Dr. Jordan: “Perhaps I will tell you lies” (45). Finally, Grace also uses her “good stupid look which [she has] practised” (42) to avoid Dr. Jordan’s attempts to explore her psyche, and to maintain her manner of childish innocence.

What Grace does willingly include in her story are the episodes that indicate she is prone to fits of fainting and to episodes of amnesia, because, the reader assumes, Grace knows that a diagnosis of hysteria (or possession) would excuse her culpability in the murders of Nancy and Kinnear. For example, Grace narrates how on the night that Mary Whitney died she appeared, to the household servants, to be possessed by Mary’s spirit for a short time. She claims that she was ignorant of it all: “I had no memory of anything I said or did during the time ... and this worried me” (209). Grace also narrates that during her short time at the Kinnear residence she was “frightened into a fit” by a thunderstorm, dreamed about a strange sexual encounter beside the outside water pump, then awoke with “the marks of earth and grass” on her feet (335). During this narration she is pleased to see Dr. Jordan writing eagerly, “as if his hand can scarcely keep up:” “I have never seen him so animated before ... I wonder what he will make of all that” (335). She uses the handy excuses of sleepwalking and amnesia to discount behaviour unbecoming to a virtuous woman (the more to appeal to Dr. Jordan’s clemency) in other points of her narration, too, such as when she says she awakes to find McDermott on top of her, with “a hand feeling up under [her] petticoats” (403). Finally, when Grace is hypnotised in the novel’s climax, she offers Dr. Jordan convincing evidence of the source her hysteria: her possession by Mary Whitney. In a voice that “doesn’t sound like Grace” (478), she claims that Nancy “had to die. The wages of sin is death” (481). She further insists, “I am not Grace! Grace knew nothing about it! ... [I am] Mary ... I only borrowed her clothing for a time ... Her earthly shell. Her fleshy garment” (481–483). Upon

waking from hypnosis Grace smiles calmly, like “a dutiful child. ‘I must have been asleep,’ she says” (483). As Mrs. Quennell leads Grace from the room, “[Grace] walks lightly enough ... and seems almost happy” (484). By embracing Mary’s persona Grace is able to confess to the atrocity of murdering Nancy, yet still retain her innocent, virtuous demeanour. Grace deliberately adopts these patriarchal stereotypes of women as innocent and virtuous yet ignorant (“stupid”) so as to appeal to the expectations of a system that has the power either to keep her incarcerated or to release her. Grace’s expectation is that the more she can please these men in power, the more likely they are to grant her the favour of release. The paradox is that in order to achieve freedom from prison and a measure of personal agency, Grace must perpetuate sexist stereotypes such as these.

This virtuous demeanour is achieved, Mannon argues, by Grace employing “strategic girlishness” in her dealings with Dr. Jordan as she manipulates conventional assumptions about femininity, female virtue and naiveté (558, 553). Wyile similarly agrees that Grace performs her narration in a “consciously directed performance of femininity” (*Speculative* 77). Grace is very careful to display her femininity, as in performing needlework and sewing in front of Dr. Jordan, but she is also very careful to hide her sexuality, glossing over anything sexual and refusing to discuss whether or not she slept with McDermott or Kinnear, and also voicing disapproval of the morally questionable behaviour of Mary and Nancy. This decorous attitude is one way she plays into Dr. Jordan’s expectations of a chaste, virtuous woman but, as Siddall notes, Grace’s “refusal to respond to Simon’s treatment constitutes a form of empowerment for Grace, and the impact of that empowerment is evident in his gradual loss of control” (93). Dr. Jordan realizes that “the more [Grace] relates the more difficulty he himself is having. He can’t seem to keep track of the pieces” (346), and his frustration begins to show: “She’s told him a great deal; but she’s told him only

what she's chosen to tell. What he wants is what she refuses to tell" (386). When Dr. Jordan's sessions with Grace conclude, he reluctantly admits, "the truth eludes him. Or rather it's Grace herself who eludes him. She glides ahead of him, just out of his grasp, turning her head to see if he's still following" (488). Lovelady identifies the "Eve, Pandora, and Scheherazade motifs" in the novel, all of which underscore how Grace is "able to take advantage of the roles available to her, even when they are severely limited." Grace's narration, then, is her "strategic manipulation of an untenable situation" (Siddall 93). Her only possibility for resistance against and liberation from a patriarchal system of confinement – i.e. prison – lies within another system of confinement – stereotypical ideals of nineteenth-century Victorian women. Grace therefore manipulates these ideals and seduces Dr. Jordan with her tale – like the mythological Scheherazade – and a carefully crafted persona that she knows will please him and consequently hasten her release from prison. Mannon suggests Grace performs a "double-voiced" narration, "speaking simultaneously within and against her male-dominated society," and that her fictive memoir demonstrates "a complex shifting perspective that allows her to understand and resist the pressures that marginalize her" (553). This within-and-against action is part of Grace's ambiguous, in-between subjectivity as a settler figure. Herein lies a paradox of feminist activity within a settler colonial setting: Grace must perpetuate class and gender stereotypes, that ultimately confine her and all women, so that she can benefit from them.

By the end of the novel Grace has attained her freedom in the form of a Pardon or "general amnesty" granted to her by the Government (528). Grace's freedom, however, is dissimilar to the freedoms achieved by Mary and Dora, who each find independence by rejecting patriarchal institutions, especially marriage, and freeing themselves from masculinist social systems. Grace's 'freedom' is more tempered and conditional. Grace weaves her tale for Dr. Jordan and maintains

the façade of innocence, but it is left unclear whether or not Dr. Jordan writes a recommendation letter for Mrs. Quennell's Committee, particularly as Dr. Jordan worries that including a description of Grace's possession by Mary Whitney would make him "an instant laughing-stock, especially among the established members of the medical profession" (488). Nevertheless, the Committee ultimately achieves its aim of freeing Grace, and Grace's release and her life after prison are carefully orchestrated by and depend upon the 'liberal-minded' women around her who, like Mrs. Quennell, are keen to use Grace's situation for their own evangelical purposes.

Grace's release from Kingston Penitentiary occurs some thirteen years after her interviews with Dr. Jordan. A new prison Warden resides in the Governor's mansion, but Grace has continued to "serve in a household capacity" (527). The Warden's daughter Janet is "one of those who never did believe [Grace] to be guilty" (528). Janet nominates herself to be the one to inform Grace that her "Pardon has come through" and, reminiscent of the Governor's wife, Janet takes a particular pleasure and pride in her role in Grace's redemption: "She [Janet] clasped her hands and at that moment she looked like a child ... gazing at a beautiful gift ... I could see that she felt some tears were in order, and I shed several" (528). Other members of the Warden's family also become involved in preparations for Grace's release, but Grace receives all this support with skepticism: "[Janet] had the assistance of her mother, as my Pardon was indeed an unusual event in the dull routine of the prison, and people like to have some contact with events of that sort, so they can talk about them to their friends afterwards; so I was made a fuss of" (529). Grace recalls how the next day at breakfast the family "sat beaming at [Grace] with moist eyes, as if [she] was some rare and cherished thing, like a baby snatched out of a river; and the Warden said we should give thanks for the one lost lamb that had been rescued, and they all said a fervent Amen" (529). Rather than a moment of celebration, Grace feels uneasy about her newfound life of freedom: "That is it, I

thought. I have been rescued, and now I must act like someone who has been rescued ... It was very strange to realize that I would not be a celebrated murderess any more, but seen perhaps as ... an object of pity rather than of horror ... It calls for a different arrangement of the face” (529). The boundaries of Grace’s identity again become blurred and ambiguous: “I felt as if my face was dissolving and turning into someone else’s face” (529).

Grace is conscious that she cannot simply walk out of the Penitentiary as an independent woman, as her gender, class and now her former prisoner status leave her with bleak prospects outside of prison: “I have no money, nor any means of earning money, and no proper clothing ... So now, instead of seeming my passport to liberty, the Pardon appeared to me as a death sentence” (530). Grace must therefore acquiesce to all Janet, “the good soul” (529), has planned for Grace’s life as a woman saved and reformed. These plans include “a good home” (530) provided for her in the United States and a marriage to Grace’s childhood sweetheart Jamie Walsh, arranged by Janet “as a happy ending ... just like a book” (534). Janet stands in a “flood of sentimental tears” as Jamie meets her and Grace at a train station in Ithaca, New York (539), and when Jamie asks Grace to marry him Grace admits, “I did not have many other choices, and it would have been most ungrateful of me to have said no, as so much trouble had been taken” (541). Grace’s “simple” wedding ceremony, where “Janet [stands] bridesmaid, and crie[s],” is a romantic occasion for everyone involved except Grace (542).

The conclusion to Grace’s story highlights the complexities and paradoxes of the ‘feminist’ victory of Mrs. Quennell’s Committee; within her newfound freedom Grace remains confined within a patriarchal system when she is forced to accept an arranged marriage or else face destitution. Grace’s release from prison is “an improvement, but not a triumph” (Lovelady); in order to escape from one patriarchal authority (law/order or medicine/science) she must conform to

another (marriage). While Dora's and Mary's stories each conclude with romantic relationships with partners, but not marriages, Grace's story ends in a peaceful marriage where she is not romantically attracted to her husband. Macpherson suggests this novel's conclusion, with Grace "ensconced in domesticity," "resembles a generic nineteenth-century closure, as Grace's individual story is subsumed in the larger one of marriage ... However, this 'happy ending' is undercut through ways that the domestic space resembles and reflects the space of the prison ... In this reading she is never really free after all" (*Cambridge* 72).

Alias Grace is a novel that very much concerns itself with disturbing patriarchal binaries such as truth/lies, guilt/innocence, lady/maid, and sane/insane, and this has been highlighted in many earlier feminist critical readings of the novel. By reading this novel through a settler colonial lens, one that incorporates Lawson's notion of an unsettled settler subject, we can see that Atwood's text offers alternative, ambiguous, liminal and in-between conceptions of subjectivity that help to illuminate new aspects of this well-read historical novel. We can also see the fruitful opportunities the novel offers for explorations of feminism in settler contexts. *Alias Grace*'s patchworked structure and variety of narrative voices, together with its "quasi-fictional" genre (Wyile, *Speculative* 73), all serve to maintain the theme of transgressing boundaries. Meanwhile, Grace's performance of femininity and her exploitation of established Victorian notions of virtuous womanhood to serve her own needs illustrate how she as a settler woman must participate in confining sexist attitudes in order to gain independence from another type of confinement – prison. In addition, the novel critiques nineteenth-century class wrangling between settler women in positions of (relative) power and the women they suppress or at least infantilize to maintain that class position. *Alias Grace* therefore provides ample opportunity to explore the paradoxical aspects

of feminist activity in Canada's settler colonial context – activity that often underlined class and racial divides to further women's own causes.

Conclusion

If, as Judith Knelman asserts, “[in contemporary historical fiction] history provides atmosphere rather than substance” (Review 349), then the substance of the novels in this study is formed by contemporary feminist attitudes towards the patriarchal nature of Canada’s colonial history. This project’s focus on contemporary Canadian historical fiction aims to demonstrate how the past is viewed from a contemporary position, and how current concerns about Canada’s history continue to contribute to a sense of nationalism. The novels studied in this project, as works of Canadian literature, offer important contributions to contemporary notions of Canadian culture insofar as they articulate the ambiguity of the settler subject in the settler colonial setting.

The critical work of scholars like Jennifer Henderson and Cecily Devereux acknowledges the phenomenon of feminist activity as it occurs within the imperialist colonial framework, and highlights how feminism often benefited from the racist practices of colonial settlement and national progress. In arguing for the validity and usefulness of reading historical fiction through the lens of settler feminist critique, this thesis aims to highlight the value of viewing such fiction in light of settler women’s participation in Canada’s “race making” settler colonial objectives, to use Henderson’s phrase. As discussed in this thesis, there are many patriarchal aspects of settler culture that can be illuminated by a settler feminist-focussed critique, including: the dominant role of masculine medicine; the ways settlers (especially women) jostle and compete with other women for class position; how a woman’s race and/or ethnicity (especially Irishness, as seen in *Alias Grace*) complicates her position in the settler context; the notion of Victorian womanhood and how women are viewed as guardians of the morality and virtue of the British empire; settler women’s assigned roles as caregivers; the feminization of domestic spaces; the Indigenization of settler characters; and settler characters’ relationships to the Canadian wilderness or landscape. In addition, by applying Alan Lawson’s (and others’) theories of settler subjectivity, we can see how

the oscillation or ambiguity in the characters in these novels is a result of the settler context; that is, the characters' shifting subjectivities can be read in these instances specifically as settler subjectivities (as not all shifting subjectivities are necessarily settler subjectivities). When applied to the novels in this project, or perhaps other, similar works of historical fiction, a settler feminist critique reveals new possibilities for analysis. Such a method can highlight the notion that these novels' female characters operate within a settler colonial framework, one that is inherently patriarchal. Their actions are therefore constrained by the settler system and oftentimes perpetuate patriarchal colonial attitudes in their attempts to assert autonomy or gain position within the settler social system.

As works of women's historical fiction, these texts also contain other feminist aspects that can be read through a lens of settler feminist or settler colonial criticism (in other words, aspects of feminism that this thesis has not had space to address). For example, deeper analysis could be conducted on the specifics of women's domestic obligations, especially the domestic work of pioneer women on the frontier, work by female domestic immigrants, or the domestic work involved in the processes of reproduction as settlers populated (or 'birthed') a new nation. Marriage in settler colonial settings, and domestic violence within that institution – and feminist responses to marriage and/or violence in the settler setting – are also topics that could be further illuminated using this approach. In addition, explorations of mental illness or madness as an aspect of settler subjectivity in literature (as depicted in *The Outlander* and *Alias Grace*) could also be supplemented by an analysis that reads mental health in relation to the particulars of settler feminism. Further analysis of any of these themes could enhance this thesis's argument about the validity of studying the patriarchal nature of settler conditions.

Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates that contemporary historical fiction for women – as it continues to appeal to writers, publishers and readers – and the celebratory reception of it, is evidence of the ongoing prevalence of settler feminism in present-day Canada; that is, promoting women’s progress sometimes still occurs at the expense of Indigenous and other marginalized groups. By examining contemporary historical fiction through a lens that is critical of settler feminism, we can see that feminist novels such as those studied in this thesis actually promote and sustain a white settler fantasy of the individual seeking liberation in a new land – albeit one that depends on a white female protagonist substituting for a white male one. This kind of analysis offers the potential to critique how that settler fantasy is promoted in these texts and in other works of feminist historical fiction, and indeed in other texts, narratives and cultural assertions of white settler feminism. Readings that are cognizant of settler feminist criticism can also reveal that contemporary fiction’s centering of “Whiteness”⁶ persists in the current Canadian cultural climate, even as governments attempt to address reconciliation or decolonization issues (or perhaps as a response to settler anxiety over perceived threats to settler ascendancy).

Finally, this thesis seeks to underscore the value of contemporary historical fiction to feminist and settler colonial scholarship by examining different aspects of settler feminism in these texts, and by examining these novels’ critiques of patriarchy in particularly settler contexts. It also wishes to highlight the value of a critical approach that includes settler feminist criticism. While these texts are open to many other angles of critique (feminist, historical, and other angles), the opportunity contemporary women’s historical fiction supplies to productively critique feminism in settler contexts is one that should not be missed. As Diana Wallace has noted, “our representations of ‘the past’ tell us a great deal about the most powerful ideologies of the present” (*Woman’s xi*).

⁶ Ruth Frankenberg describes Whiteness as the way that “race shapes white women’s lives,” and she defines it as at once a “location of structural advantage, of race privilege,” a “standpoint,” and “a set of cultural practices” (1).

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