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“Scandalously bifurcated garments”: Ecocriticism, American pioneers, and novelizing women of the west

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Abstract

While the Western novel is typically associated with cowboys and overarching masculine accomplishments of “settling,” the representation of women’s work beyond narratives of being “tamed” and the settling-down of motherhood has been overlooked by writers and ecocritics alike. Ecofeminist scholarship of the late 1980s and ‘90s, primed to take up such questions, focused primarily on the relationship between women and nature in abstract terms rather than on regionally-specific interpretations. This thesis, therefore, examines the representation of female-identifying protagonists in pioneer narratives of North America in three popular novels of the last century: Zane Grey’s posthumous *Woman of the Frontier* (1940/1998), *Mrs. Mike* (1947) by Benedict and Nancy Freedman, and the Oregon-specific *Little Century* (2011) by Anna Keeseey. Using principles from feminist and ecocritical literary theory in combination, I consider the ways in which landscape is conscripted to convey a character’s interiority—an anthropocentric tactic that ultimately equates the objectification of women with the conquest of territory. As a twenty-first century pioneer woman born and raised on a rural Oregon ranch, identifying the significance of pioneer women and interrogating their representations beyond being extensions of the tamed landscape helps rewrite the conventional masculine lens of Manifest Destiny and the “West.”

Keywords

Pioneer literature, Western (genre), Ecofeminism, Ecocriticism, Feminist theory

Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

Who populates the “Wild West”? While in popular culture, the attention lands on cowboys and outlaws, the population of the American frontier was much more diverse. Women were instrumental in caring for the home, developing intercommunity relations, and running a range of businesses. They were a key part of the homestead that is often overlooked in favor of the flashy cattle operations and dances popularized by John Wayne films and the musical *Oklahoma!* Equally overlooked at times is the homestead itself. The American frontier reached from Texas through Washington on the west coast, and this stretch of land contains many biomes, all different in their appearances. Environmental descriptions can be instrumental in illustrating not only the scene but character relationships as well.

The “settling” of the American west, and especially what is referred to as the Pacific Northwest has long attracted the imagination of novelists. While the representation of women’s lives and work in the west concretized around a set of sexist tropes, those narratives attached to the Pacific northwest of the US and western Canada challenge a number of these tropes by problematizing the relationship between women and this unique environment beyond narratives of being “tamed” and the settling-down of motherhood. Ecofeminist scholarship of the late 1980s and ‘90s, primed to take up such questions, focused primarily on the relationship between women and nature in abstract terms rather than on regionally-specific interpretations.

This thesis, therefore, examines the representation of female-identifying protagonists in pioneer narratives of the North American west in three popular novels of the last century: Zane Grey’s posthumous *Woman of the Frontier* (1940/1998), *Mrs. Mike* (1947) by Benedict and Nancy Freedman, and the Oregon-specific *Little Century* (2011) by Anna Keese. These novels were chosen for their location and central female character over any other identifying characteristic. A similar

locale, in this case the North American west, helped to limit differences in the stories, as Central American, Texan, or Midwestern American novels would have focused on varying difficulties experienced in the respective pioneering lifestyles people lived in those areas. Books from one region limited this variety, making it easier to apply the ecofeminist theory uniformly. Using principles from feminist and ecocritical literary theory in combination, I consider the ways in which landscape is conscripted to convey a character’s interiority—an anthropocentric tactic that ultimately equates the objectification of women with the conquest of territory. The thesis that follows is organized into three sections that first provide an overview of ecofeminist scholarship, close-readings of three novels applying this framework to a specific cultural region, and then offering conclusions about what avenues such an approach offers future gender studies of the environment.

Literary Representation, Women, and the West

The field of ecofeminism has undergone many developments since its inception in the mid-1970s. Originally coined by the French writer Françoise d’Eaubonne as *écoféminisme*, ecofeminism relates the domination of marginalized groups, such as children, people of color, women, and the poor, with that of nature; this form of domination is performed exclusively by male-identified figures. Male-oriented domination is not always physical and often involves perpetuating patriarchal ideas instead of allowing for change toward equity between women and men. Ecofeminism can be split into five major commitments: “femaleness,” spirituality, the environment, social injustice, and the non-human. Most current advancements occur within these groups instead of forming new ones.

Females. One of the most prominent pieces of ecofeminism involves exploring and

examining what is meant by “femaleness,” and so it has been the site of greatest debate. Defining the female has been a constant problem in the field and often leads to essentialist claims (i.e., “all women are like x”). Defining the female in any cohesive, all-encompassing manner is impossible; there is no one definition of it (Diamond 176). When ecofeminism was in its developmental stages, the types of femaleness it centered upon were mainly biological. Women were claimed to have a close relationship with nature because of their ability to reproduce. This connection was accepted up until reproductive rights and freedoms became a prominent issue and the inherent misogyny of this definition of women came to light (Mies and Shiva 199). Now, the motherhood connection is often accompanied by the details of reproductive rights and freedoms and how including them gives women more agency over their reproductive selves as well as broadened definitions of women (Mies and Shiva 201).

Essentialism. Up until now, scholars have not spent much time advancing the field of ecofeminism. New avenues have opened, such as with ecowomanism, motherhood environmentalism, and intersectional studies, but after the initial introduction of advancement in these areas the field of ecofeminism fell quiet again. This is due mainly to the constant issues of essentialism within the field. The most prominent charge of essentialism came in the early 1990s with Janet Biehl’s book, but hers is by no means the only. Essentialism in ecofeminism stems from finding the connection between “the female” and nature. What is the essential femaleness of nature? Is there an essential female component in nature, or is the connection in ecofeminism created not because women and nature are connected “essentially” but “similarly” due to the experiences both undergo by men? This essence-or-semblance issue has grown in prominence during recent work, but no strides towards a solution have been made. Beginning with “some essential ‘essence’ or necessary

connection” in ecofeminism blinds us “to the multitude of ways in which the concept of ‘womanhood’ is implicated in the . . . exploitations experienced by women and the natural environment” (Kings 77). This statement was made in early 2017—is it time to make an effort to change the necessity of a female essence in ecofeminism? Some might argue that changing this would allow men and “patriarchal ideas” into a space that has been historically claimed for women, but I disagree (Twine 34). The original definition of ecofeminism protected not only women, but children, people of color, and the poor.

Motherhood environmentalism. In the field, motherhood is not only referenced as a connection to nature but as another, smaller subfield of ecofeminism known as “motherhood environmentalism,” which arose in the late 1990s (Clark 118). Motherhood environmentalism is a “form of ecofeminism that . . . asserts that women have a privileged position vis a vis either their social assignment to, or biological ability to gestate, birth, and nurture children” (Mallory 25). This connection with nature “remains objectionable” because constructing female power solely on motherhood is “inherently ambiguous and risks an antifeminist complicity with patriarchal ideas,” which perpetuate ecofeminism’s core issue of male domination over women (Twine 34). Despite this issue, the Mother Earth comparison to nature and other spiritual imagery still exists on the fringes of modern ecofeminism.

Spirituality. Spirituality is closely tied to the female with the inclusion of goddess theory and the Gaia hypothesis, but current ecofeminism does not adhere as strongly to spiritual imagery as it did in the 1990s. These two spiritual connections with nature were the driving force behind many well-known ecofeminists like Starhawk, who influenced much of current goddess theory. The goddess movement claims Earth is a living goddess, figuratively or literally, and that humans need

to maintain wholeness and balance with other living things. While the spiritual component of nature-based religions may have been a strong portion of ecofeminism in the past, not many current scholars still adhere to these thoughts, and “nowhere is ecofeminism more fraught and fractured than over the question of spirituality” (Mallory 18). The essentialist damage of associating with these religious ideas, especially in the past developmental stages of the field has already happened, and scholars uneducated on ecofeminism’s overarching timeline still believe that ecofeminists are “anti-intellectual goddess worshippers” (Gaard 32).

This is not true, and sweeping summarization of the field in this way discredits its contributions to modern ecocritical studies. The idea that “women possess a ‘special’ connection to nature that men do not, or that women have privileged epistemological access to an animate, enchanted, maternal earth . . . is precisely what has periodically exiled ecofeminism from ‘serious’ scholarly attention and analysis” (Mallory 19). There has been a general move away from this portion of the field because spiritual work is difficult to anchor in textual evidence and tends to be culturally and historically vague. Exploring the environment through a feminist lens was and is the goal of ecofeminism, a goal that is often pushed aside in favor of arguments over spirituality and similar divisions in the field that draw the focus away from the main problem ecofeminism is attempting to address.

The environment is the other major half of ecofeminism, yet it receives the least attention despite the onomastic forecast. Research exploring the environment as a composite of biological, chemical, and geological phenomena are rarest on the ground. This is due in part to the ongoing argument about what ecofeminism is, and the essentialist issues surrounding femaleness. These arguments have pushed the environmental aspects aside. Additionally, a scholarly expertise in both gender theory and

hard science presents unique interdisciplinary challenges. Ecofeminism has not made any leaps in the last decade because it has stagnated in these arguments and needs to be revitalized with current feminist and ecocritical work. Many successes in modern ecocritical theories exist because of the groundwork ecofeminism set with the initial examinations of marginalized groups in works like Carolyn Merchant’s *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1990), and the messiness of the field is to blame. Modern scholars do not want to dredge through ecofeminism due to the divisions constantly at odds within the field.

Intersectional Ecofeminism. The environment has been used to focus on relationships between humans and non-human natural beings, substances, and communities, as well as drawing attention to environmental justice. People of color have not always been aided with ecofeminism despite their inclusion in d’Eaubonne’s essays. To help combat this, *ecowomanism*, a subfield linking women of African descent and environmental justice, emerged in 2017, and fostered intersectional applications (Harris 158). *Intersectional ecofeminism* holds that the freedom of humanity is not only reliant on the freedom of nature and women, but liberation for all those oppressed (Kings 71). Some scholars claim focusing on the specific types of oppression perpetuate them, similar to drawing the line between hierarchical dualisms, which potentially perpetuate the dualisms themselves. Hierarchical dualisms are pairs of topics written in order of domination. For example, man/woman is a dualism—man is written first, and in this way man is represented to dominate woman. Other dualism examples include mind/body, human/animal, white/black, and culture/nature. The human/animal dualism is important to current work in ecofeminism because of the “non-human other” component. Animals are the most frequently mentioned non-human others, and their oppression and domination has been brought

to the forefront of the field as the next major group to be targeted with ecofeminism's critical lens.

Nonhuman Nature. Ecofeminism is undergoing "radical reevaluation" and new exploration with non-human others, a topic arising in the late 1990s (Clark 118). Originally, non-human others were viewed in opposition to humans and were used as something to compare humans against. In 1997, traits most highly regarded as "authentically human" were identified as those unshared by "nonhuman nature" (Warren 195). Human traits in conjunction with non-human traits have taken a backseat in new work. The latest advancement involving nonhuman others in 2018 sets this comparison aside and introduces *species privilege*. Species privilege is frequently used for defending environmental concerns with climate change and states that humans view themselves as higher in importance than animals, and this must change in order to ensure the survival of both humans and animals (Mallory 28). Like other privileges, species privilege is something to measure in equity, and it is only by humans giving up our species privilege that nonhuman others and humans can coexist together outside of an oppressing dualistic relationship.

Other Ecocritical Theories. There are other ecocritical theories and pieces to ecofeminism that are related to but not part of the field. The few necessary to mention for this project are children's rights, queer theory, and settler colonialism. Children used to be a part of ecofeminism's core group of marginalized peoples, but over time they have become less prominent (d'Eaubonne 1974). The reason for this is not clear, but finding research related to the oppression of children within ecofeminism has been difficult. Children's rights are so buried in ecofeminism that it was brought up as a new issue for ecofeminism to focus on in the late 1990s (Warren 194). Including children within the field of ecofeminism is important because not only are they a marginalized group

but they also work well with the motherhood component of ecofeminism.

Because scholars now accept that there are many ways in which to be "female," queer theory presents many opportunities for growth when in combination with ecofeminism. While not being a solely ecocritical field of study, queer theory can supply some of the inclusive language needed to steer ecofeminism in the right direction when referring to women, people of color, and nonhuman others. Queer theory mainly deals with gender ambiguity that occurs in a variety of ways, and this kind of fluidity is present in ecofeminism when it comes to defining women.

Similar inclusive language concerning the environment is needed. While ecofeminism discusses the domination nature faces from humans, targeted vocabulary must be used to avoid generalizing this domination. Settler colonialism, while used frequently in intersectional studies, fills this language need. The characters in these novels colonized not only the new land of their homesteads, but the men also "colonized" their wives.

Upon surveying the field of ecocriticism, its investments and developments, it is my contention that removing assumptions about "the female essence" from an ecofeminist approach will better equip scholars to interrogate literary representations of the environment, and the ways in which that representation relies on gendered privileges. To demonstrate this productivity and revitalize a waning interest in ecofeminism as an approach, I examine three novels dramatizing the transformation of female-identifying lead characters localized in the American and Canadian frontiers, specifically in Arizona, Oregon, and Alberta, Canada.

"Offending material": Lucinda in Zane Grey's *Woman on the Frontier*

Novels concerned with the status of women on the western frontier typically focus on their difficulties in securing a husband and

developing a new home space on the frontier. For example, in *Woman on the Frontier*, Lucinda travels west from her home in Missouri to marry Logan Huett, a military man turned homesteading pioneer. Lucinda settles down in a cañon in Arizona where she will go on to rear three boys, and adopt a young girl. Together, they overcome many of the hardships for which the “Wild West” is notorious before they make it big with beef sales in World War I. Originally titled *30,000 on the Hoof*, this novel by Zane Grey has undergone a few rewrites since the early 1940s. The most controversial part of this book involves a rape scene halfway through the novel. In the original text, the entire scene and much of Lucinda’s story was removed as “offending material,” a move which drastically changes Lucinda’s character (“Foreword” 8). In 1998, Loren Grey, Zane’s son, “restored” the original manuscript with the missing scene, original title, and some “holographic pages . . . which help greatly to describe Lucinda’s . . . ordeal” (“Foreword” 9). The controversy surrounding this novel and the changes to Lucinda’s story is an early case of a rape scene in a popular Western. I argue that, instead of nature as an externalization of the interior life of Lucinda, the novel positions her as coworkers with the central Arizona landscape gradually over the course of the novel; as she becomes a coworker with the landscape, so too does she gain status as a coworker with her husband.

Lucinda views the landscape not as a companion, something to be conquered, or a spiritual center, but as a separate entity she must struggle to coexist with. Sycamore Cañon is “the most wonderful range in Arizona,” with “splendid pine trees . . . a magnificent spring [and] deer and elk trails,” or at least this is how Logan describes it. Lucinda sees it as “drab, silent rocks, the lonely pines shouted doom . . . the brook babbled in mockery. There was no view, no outlook except down the gray . . . terrible, forbidding walls. Savage wilderness encompassed her on all sides” (Grey 62–63). Before arriving at the cañon, she describes the central Arizona territory as “magnificent” and

“glorious” until she arrives at the homestead with a future as a “pioneer wife chained irrevocably to her toil and her cabin” (Grey 28, 63). When Lucinda first looks out across the homestead, all she sees is “death to girlish hopes and dreams,” foreshadowing her later rape (Grey 63). She is unmatched to the land, and her expectations of life on the range illustrate this: instead of bringing work clothes or other useful housewares, she brought a “trunk full of bride’s dresses and flimsy garments,” items that were “useless here on the range” (Grey 98). Rather than as a coworker, her first contact with the cañon is a site of struggle and violence.

A desire to control the land and make it Logan’s own is what brings most of the misfortune upon the homestead. Logan does not appear to experience these strains, because as soon as they arrive at the cañon he sets to work on homesteading tasks without complaint. He is bent on bringing the cañon under his hand, while Lucinda never discusses ways to tame the “savage wilderness” but only how to work with it (Grey 62). Lucinda is depicted as a willful woman, despite performing housework and other chores. Logan never makes a move to control her or order her around. He even goes so far as to say “he had been considerate of Lucinda, far more than most husbands would have been” when he reflects on their relationship (Grey 76). Before building the homestead, Logan spoke the same way about his ranch, but when he tries to exert his will and dominance over the land it fights him every step of the way. Even after the cabin is built he still struggles to raise crops and cattle while fending off wild animals. Why does Logan struggle so much? His nearest neighbor, Holbert, a few miles away has a successful cattle operation by the time Logan’s lost two separate herds from winter conditions, and Holbert never complains in excess about wild animals or even cattle bandits, a threat more prominent on the mesa where his ranch is. It is as if the cañon wants Logan to fail, to be controlled as he is trying to control it. In the same breath, Lucinda does not experience the

same struggle outdoors that Logan does. When she runs the homestead while he travels to town, she finds an "abounding yield" of potatoes in their desecrated vegetable patch (Grey 102). This nature-versus-man showdown continues until Logan's sons finally age enough to be of use to him, and with four men the dualism is reversed.

By extension, the novel sets up this similar conflict when it comes to animal husbandry. The treatment of animals aside from useful ranching stock like the oxen, cattle, and horses is one-sided. Logan says, "wild animals sort of excite me" and Lucinda notices his "passion to kill," but after this initial discovery, Lucinda makes no move to stop Logan from shooting whatever wild creature he stumbles upon (Grey 56). For more than one winter, they survive off the money gathered from animal pelts, and he makes significant dents in the local wolf and cougar populations. This novel is indeed set in the late 1800s and modern advances in food webs and keystone species had not been developed for Lucinda to argue these animals had scientific necessity. In response to his constant hunting, Lucinda decides to change her behavior based on Logan's actions, saying "she must conquer her disgust . . . regardless of her own feeling in this matter" (Grey 56). She is quick to dismiss the plight of the animals around her because the social expectations of a pioneer's wife are deeply ingrained in her. She does not acknowledge Logan's "considerat[ion]" of her needs and feelings, and it is as if she does not notice his efforts in this way (Grey 76).

Lucinda's disregard for animal life is not consistent, however. After the birth of her first child, she "developed a deep satisfaction in the birth of living things" and appreciated the beauty of chicks hatching from her laying hen (Grey 94). Despite this, she does nothing to ensure their survival, such as penning them up or attempting to control their ranging, and she does not reflect on their loss after they have been eaten. She treats the pullets this way because of her motherhood-or-mothering decisions. Motherhood and mothering are

separated in the novel, where mothering is the act of being a mother, of raising a child, while motherhood is simply the state of being a mother. Lucinda's nurturing capabilities are more closely related to motherhood: "mustn't let [her]self love anything out here" and she sticks to this decision (Grey 68). Her attachment to the various animals Logan captures as pets are limited, as are the connections to her own children. She rarely addresses them by name before they are grown, more often than not treated only as "the child" or "the baby" (Grey 103, 129). While a counterpoint to the stereotypical matriarch character of the Western willing and eager to start a family, this is in keeping with Lucinda's view of the natural world. She is not beholden to the natural and struggles to make her own way alongside nature instead of linking herself to it. Through the experience of giving birth she better understands her environment rather than understanding herself as a mother.

A familiar reading of the Western novel is that the conquest of the land is used to mirror and validate the conquest of women. The two printed versions of *Woman of the Frontier* read with an ecocritical framework sensitive to indigeneity complicates this trope. Despite the familiarity of dealing with disempowerment, sexual misconduct is not a commonly addressed topic within ecofeminism. Carolyn Merchant did write about the mistreatment of women by men in *The Death of Nature*, but focused on the treatment of witches and bodily corruption through sex (133). While marital sex is mentioned rarely and never in any detail, the original 1940 printing included a substantial episode dedicated to the rape of Lucinda by Matazel, a "young buck" of the Apache nation and fictional son of its chief, the historical Geronimo (Grey 47). This "offending material . . . had to be removed" because it was "not proper," according to Grey's son in the foreword to the 1998 "restored" version (8). The removal of the scene has significant implications for Lucinda's characterization and plot cohesion. To the former, it removed a

significant experience of “anguish” and subsequent development for Lucinda, including the necessary introspection for her that follows (“Foreword” 8). Additionally, it changes to what extent Lucinda is framed as a co-worker with the landscape, as well as unfairly implicates indigenous populations in her domination.

Both versions maintain an “invasion” of the homestead by a group from the Apache nation, but the resolution of this conflict differs between both versions. In the publisher-edited version, Logan returns home early from traveling to Flag and scares the Apaches off (Gutenberg Project). After this scene, Lucinda gives birth to a son that is “indigenous” in appearance for no explained reason. By contrast, the “restored” version includes the original scene as Grey wrote it: Matazel rapes Lucinda to “get even” with Logan for forcing him and his people onto reservations (Grey 108). It uses an indigenous, “natural” representative to cause this trauma so that the conquest of the land is mirrored by the forced conquest of her body. The fertility of the cañon is mirrored in Lucinda as well: she gives birth to the half-indigenous child of rape after this encounter. This connection in appearance is never explicitly stated, but the description of his “black hair” matched Matazel’s description closely (Grey 129). The child grows up to marry his adopted sister, a child of Lucinda and Logan, implying a kind of peace-able co-conquest of this Arizona plot unique under a mixed-race marriage. Lucinda’s coworker status continues is thus brought to the fore by the marriage of her two children from different groups, metaphorically uniting the indigenous peoples with the white settlers homesteading the land and, by extension, using its fertility like she was used by Matazel.

The original version of the novel uses the mutual conquest of the Arizona landscape to justify Lucinda’s rape on behalf of race relations and the environment. It is only after the rape that she “matures,” transforming from an outsider on the homestead to a pioneer’s housewife, environmental coworker, and

mother. As a coworker, Lucinda has the same status Logan does with the landscape. Readers are thus invited to see her rape as a necessary sacrifice in order develop personal “agency,” a fraught term frequently used but undertheorized in feminist studies. As evidenced in *30,000 on the Hoof*, the desire to represent “empowered” female characters to attract female readers is at odds with the limitations of historical fact—an ambivalence uniquely foregrounded in the Western.

“Sheep family” and “cattle girls”: Esther in Anna Keeseey’s *Little Century*

The display of forms of male power and conquest has historically been a key selling point of the Western genre—from cowboys to range hunters trying to “strike it big” by monetizing their newfound ecology. Female characters may have strong agency by themselves, but around these male characters they typically lose it due to the hypermasculine behavior they must endure. This visions of the limited empowerment of prisoner women necessarily withering in the face of domineering men frequent *Little Century*, a novel focusing on the journey of Esther, a young woman traveling west to live with her cousin after her mother passes away due to illness. She makes several friends in the little town of Century, Oregon, only to find herself in the middle of a love triangle before she swears off men and decides to settle down by herself as a writer. I argue that Esther is unknowingly a target of male domination in *Little Century* because of her inexperience with rural life and work. The gradual degradation of her social position mirrors that of the land where, despite growing accustomed to her new lifestyle and gaining some freedoms, she like the Oregon landscape remains a subjugated figure.

Prostitution is often relied upon in Westerns as a starting place for depicting women’s lives, shown as a lucrative business for women in the pioneer west, so much so that

"Scandalously bifurcated garments"

they earned their own set of terms: "sportin' women," "painted ladies," and "soiled doves." Descriptions of the women of Century, Oregon's inner lives are laden with sexual innuendo or, inversely, anxiety around sexual propriety, which is never more present than in spring. For example, Esther, awaiting a spring she assumes will look like that of her home back in Illinois, describes it instead as an "explosion . . . the return of heat and softness" (Keesey 130). Lambing and calving would also take place in early spring, filling Century with oodles of young animals. The land and its animals are bursting with life, but it is not one that she recognizes, as "one knows it is spring only because one sees men fighting" (Keesey 130). The other women of Century do not experience this disjointedness of conflict during a time of rebirth. Underscoring this disjointed relationship between women and their ecology is that no one dresses for the season: none, Esther included, wear trousers or jeans that would survive the labor involved. Despite running their own homesteads and performing farm work, the women are depicted working still wearing full dresses. While the novel does not explicitly mention in which "century" it is envisioned, women homesteaders were certainly wearing practical work wear in the mid-nineteenth century. The depiction of railroads, Oregon migration, and range wars place it somewhere between 1880 and 1930. In fact, the novel dramatizes a fictional account of women's wear: Jane Fremont helps Esther make a dress into a pantsuit-like garment, as if staging the invention and Esther is eager to work in "the comfort of the new split skirt" (Keesey 121). While trousers have been worn by women more than three thousand years ago, there was an increase in the US in the early 1800s, followed by a run of anti-cross-dressing laws in the 1860s—although none were ever passed in any of the Pacific northwest states (PBS News Hour).

The hyper-sexed imagery of spring is literally freighted onto the female body through the ahistorical anxiety around changing

women's dress. Jane explains that she "split some of my dresses into a sort of trouser, and I ride to town in the most scandalously bifurcated garment that ever shamed a dance hall" (Keesey 63). That normal dress of the dancehall becomes a possible site of unladylike exposure, where pants offer a new prudishness: spring involves the "change of tree, narrow and brown and crouching in ice, into a dancing girl, the overnight decision by the redbud to turn itself inside out and display its brilliant crimson underclothes" (Keesey 130). Why are the buds revealing their intimates here instead of changing their outerwear? A dress is the site of sexiness that pants cannot provide; since they are showing off undergarments the suggestion is that by the mere act of "dancing" the "girl" is a prostitute. The eastern redbud tree is a large flowering tree native to Illinois, and its flowers bloom early in springtime. A flower is the reproductive organ of a plant, and contains both male and female anatomy, and revealing these parts through exposing its underclothes contributes problematic fertility and virility to this image.

Girls are treated as a delicate resource in Century. Even though the major livestock families are constantly fighting, the women are usually left out of these scuffles. Long hair is an important feminine symbol to women in this time period. This importance was acknowledged by the men, who gave Esther and other women ample time to wash, take care of their hair, and ensure enough soap was present, and so haircutting is also of particular import. A girl who has been assaulted, Lenore, "thought he was joking . . . and then one of the others just took out his knife and cut" her hair before throwing "her braid on the road" (Keesey 144). There is a palpable pause after Maudie finishes speaking, and none of the characters contribute to the dialogue for nearly half a page after this story is shared. The forcible taking of the hair and then the treatment of it after it is cut reads like a rape scene, alluding to Alexander Pope's "The Rape of the Lock" (1712). While the girls are upset, consoling Lenore, and they give Esther a

warning: “when girls from a sheep family have this kind of trouble, it’s just wise to keep an eye on the cattle girls” (Keesey 144). The Century-native girls are aware that their livestock associations also frame their availability to sexual assault. This is reinforced by the fact that the attack on Lenore mirrors their work, especially the logging mentioned in a northern town.

Sheep and cattle ranchers are constantly at war with each other in *Little Century*, drawing on the actual range wars of this period. Esther initially witnesses this fighting without understanding its motives, later explained by Pick as part of the removal of the local indigenous community to reservations:

She grasps his idea about the sheep killing. The past of this Oregon—settlers duped, children abandoned, Indians deported and murdered—this past guaranteed that someday this band of sheep would be destroyed. Domination begets domination. (Keesey 210)

The irony is glaring here: she is dominated by the men around her without even consciously knowing it despite being able to describe it in other groups. The domination Esther, her fellow women, and the environment endure throughout *Little Century* is a revolving door. The women reclaim some of their “agency” through split skirts only to be injured in other ways. Whenever the women are injured, so too is the land made lesser. The best Esther can manage by the end of the novel is to strike out on her own without settling down with either man in her love triangle, or with her friend, Jane Fremont. The constant loss of agency not only by the women but by nature in this novel perpetuates the hypermasculine ideal for male characters in female-centric Westerns.

“Junos” and “sled dogs”: Kathy in Benedict and Nancy Freedman’s *Mrs. Mike*

Mrs. Mike follows the story of Kathy, a young woman who arrives in Canada to relieve her pleurisy and ends up marrying a Canadian Mounty. She travels further north with him and experiences several natural disasters and the joys and horrors of motherhood on the Canadian frontier. Kathy and other women she meets on the frontier have their own “expertise” that the men acknowledge and typically do not infringe upon unless it is an area of male “expertise.” I argue that Kathy’s relationship with the Canadian frontier is didactic: the intense series of natural disasters throughout the novel train Kathy to cope with the demands of childbirth and motherhood, as well as reshape her relationship with Mike.

When Kathy reflects on the past Junos in her life, she invariably returns to thinking of the first, “Irish Juno,” who, in her own mother’s bedroom, “had had her first pups” (Freedman 69). Juno provides a link not only to Kathy’s past, but to her own mother and childbearing as formative symbols of continuity. Kathy never makes the explicit connection to herself as a possible mother and instead focuses on animal reproduction as proof that she can make a new life anywhere if she can have a Juno there, whether “Boston” or “Northwest” (Freedman 69). While Kathy has seen other women, indigenous and settlers alike with children, to her childbirth appears to be a separate experience not yet her own. To her, “only male dogs could do that hard-sled-pulling. But then the only dogs I’d seen in the North were sled dogs” (Freedman 69). She recognizes the fallacy behind this, because “if they were all males,” then where do puppies come from (Freedman 69)? Females must exist somewhere, and to Kathy the use of dogs in the North were for sled-pulling, so there must be some female sled dogs, just as there are some women who can do the work equal to men in the Canadian wilds. What Kathy “reassures herself” of in this moment is not only that she can build a new life with Junos as the tether to who she once was, but that in this frontier while the role of women is limited, it is not unthinkable or impossible (Freedman 69).

"Scandalously bifurcated garments"

Kathy's first significant experience with the Canadian frontier takes place over dinner with the hired hands at her uncle's homestead. They discuss "working in three feet of water" while trying to save the cattle herd, but all Kathy can think of is the "thousands of beasts helpless in the flood" (Freedman 18). Kathy views animals this way throughout the novel: as "beasts" (Freedman 18). The language she uses to describe the cattle is violent and fearful when compared to the domesticated horses the hands use to corral them. The cattle are "thrashing," "churning," "water lashed," and "cry of terror" (Freedman 18). In contrast, the horses gently "nudge" them (Freedman 18). By referencing them as beasts, she does not see the cattle as an extension of the ranch and instead connects them to "the north" and the uncivilized. The opposite treatment occurs with the horses: because of the beneficial rescue and their taming to do so (literally "broken"), they are part of her rhetoric to describe their actions and she connects them to what she knows as safe, domestic life. The fear-filled language used to describe the cattle not only demonstrates Kathy's inherent dread of the Canadian "wilderness," but sets her up for growth later in the novel when her views change. Part of this growth is foreshadowed here when she admits that "this, too, was the north" (Freedman 18).

The growth of Kathy's relationship with the Canadian frontier progresses over the course of the novel, peaking during the forest fire. Her view of the "beasts" has changed: she calls them by name, "moose, deer, otters, mink, bears," instead of lumping all of the animals into one category (Freedman 129). In this way, she is demonstrating a kind of trust in nature's processes. She also does not fear the animals as she once did, even as they are moving "into the river with the humans" (Freedman 129). Up until this point, Kathy was hesitant to fully embrace the Canadian frontier, but her view of the wilderness was constantly evolving. The final process of this evolution occurs during her description of the river. Mike tells her not to "leave the river. It's safer there than

anywhere else" while the fire is developing, and without much hesitation Kathy obeys, only spending a moment wading "up and down the edge until my ankles were used to it" (Freedman 126, 127). When she first steps into the river, she describes the water as "imprisoned all winter" under the ice, but as the fire progresses she calls it "wonderful, cold and wonderful," and it provided comfort to her with how "it was time moving by. It flowed without stopping" (Freedman 130). This connection to the river as a place of safety is the evolved form of her once-fearful expectations of undomesticated nature.

Halfway through her northwestern travel, Kathy encounters another natural disaster: a burned barn of their hosts, the Howards, with the "bodies of the horses" still inside (Freedman 77). "A wolf pack's out there crying to get at the bodies," Mrs. Howard further elaborates, and Kathy latches onto this imagery as she did with the drowning of the cattle on her uncle's ranch. This time, instead of imagining the scene in her mind, Kathy is at the scene of the natural crime and is drawn to scream "on the same note as the wolves," connecting her to the pack. This time she is not afraid of the wolves and found the men's reactions to her screaming "so funny" (Freedman 78). She is accepting, not resisting, the naturalization process. The acceptance of her own growth demonstrates that she understands the value of this relationship and welcomes the changes it makes on herself. This acceptance stems from Mrs. Howard's reactions to the wolves. She dismisses the howling as "it's nothing," modeling the behavior Kathy needs to learn.

The novel suggests that the instruction the Canadian frontier imparts to Kathy through these experiences are in preparation for childbirth and motherhood. The trust she extended to the river in protecting her from the forest fire was given to the other natural entities in the north afterwards, including herbal treatments for childbirth. During the birth of her first child she was given a "bitter . . . yet sweet" herbal tea made from "squaw

root. Squaw root for help squaw with baby” (Freedman 146). Kathy does not hesitate to accept the concoction, even though “it smelled of the woods” (Freedman 146). Early in her journey she would not have tolerated drinking this, and the description of the herb’s scent is a recent addition to her descriptive vocabulary. Even in the very beginning of the novel when she is first arriving on her uncle’s ranch, she does not describe the scent of the breeze that runs over the homestead, and the one mentioned by name. The “chinook,” the breeze of fast thawing spring, which would have brought the scent of fresh growth or crisp snow, is glossed over as feeling “hot and warm” and is mainly an irritation to her sleep (Freedman 14). Now, during the birth, which occurs sometime after the forest fire, Kathy still carries the connection with nature that she developed during the fire and the time she spent in the river. She has fully evolved into a woman connected with nature and is allowing it to help her through birth, a very difficult, novel process for her. Trusting nature during this new sensation and series of events supports and cements this evolution.

The birth of Kathy’s first child comes somewhat unexpectedly on her journey north with Mike. This is still during the time when she has no dog and because of this, limited “agency.” Kathy would rather have her baby “beside the river . . . than have it in that close and musty cabin” (Freedman 141). She does not trust nature fully because she does not want to “have it on the trail,” but she is never given an option to choose where to have her baby because Mike wanted her to “have a trained nurse” but she finds Mrs. Mathers’ cabin “big, rambling, and untidy. It smelled of food . . . as though every meal had left its grease and its smell behind” (Freedman 145, 142). This “option” (or lack thereof) is brought up in a dream she experiences on the trail, where “all the Junos we’d ever had” were leading her unborn child to her mother (Freedman 141–42). Both Juno and her mother are sources of preparation, Juno being the name of the Classical goddess of childbearing. Together

they model Kathy’s seeming inevitable function in the wild. Without much experience in the natural world, the novel suggests through parallels with natural disaster and animal kinship that Kathy requires instruction from the Canadian frontier.

Some Conclusions

In 1862, George Jewell Callahan traded his stage stop to Franklin White in exchange a land claim in Oregon. The Callahan family, made up of George, his wife, and five children, took two years to travel to Oregon and arrived in 1864. After founding a ranch on the claim, two more children were born into the family. The first child to be born on the ranch was Nan, who developed a strong attachment to the land. After her father passed away years later and the ranch was distributed among the children as inheritance, Nan returned from her life in California and bought-out her siblings’ shares. For thirty-six years afterwards she managed the ranch. From there, my grandfather inherited the ranch from Nan, where he raised a family. Pioneers are part of my identity and family history in rural Oregon. I have the privilege of living on a ranch that has been passed down on my mother’s side through multiple generations from the original pioneer family that founded it in the mid-nineteenth century.

Nan spent the majority of her life without a husband, and her resilience as a single rancher has made her a pillar in the Roseburg community. How was Nan so seemingly connected to the land? I have felt linked to the ranch, but I can only imagine the way Nan must have felt towards it, not only as the source of her livelihood but as her first home. This question drove my interest towards other pioneer women and their attraction to their own homesteads. Westerns rarely focus on female characters, and if they are present they are often tied to a husband’s desires and ambitions. Is there a reason female pioneers do not have their own narratives in these Westerns? Using ecofeminism as a framework, I found in this sample of novels that the literary

representations of women in northwest were indeed connected to their respective homesteads, but in varying ways. Lucinda evolves in her relationship with the cañon to become coworkers with it and ultimately her husband. Esther barely acknowledges Century as a place (except when it fit her aesthetic needs) and is nearly as corrupt as the men when it came to working with the land. Kathy's relationship with nature is primarily didactic as it instructs her that the primary experience of western womanhood is through childbirth.

When examined with a historically sensitive ecofeminist lens, the women in these novels are much more complex than originally thought, but are still a limited representation of the Western experience of the women who actually lived it. Exploring their stories through these literary characters is important because it highlights how far away from cohesive representation Western novels have developed as well as how different these women are from one another from a regional perspective. Using ecofeminism to explore the varying representations of women yields a way to investigate this representation in specific ecologies while also focusing on their place of residence as a factor. In the future, more work is needed on the Western novel not only to examine the representation of pioneer women, but to separate the Western into categories based on region in order to better understand the importance of womens' stories in connection with the land.

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