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Review of *Looking Back: Canadian Women's Prairie Memoirs and Intersections of Culture, History, and Identity* by S. Leigh Matthews

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Looking Back: Canadian Women's Prairie Memoirs and Intersections of Culture, History, and Identity. By S. Leigh Matthews. Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press, 2010. x + 418 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 paper.

In *Looking Back*, Leigh Matthews, a literary scholar, argues that memoirs written by white, English-speaking women who settled in western Canadian prairie communities have been “lost or ignored” and have received little “critical attention from both historians and literary critics.” These published accounts of the Euro-Canadian “prairie settlement project” or “homesteading project,” terminology used throughout the book, allow Matthews to

assess the "Prairie Woman," the stereotypical image of the white, English-speaking female settler, against the more nuanced and diverse experiences of the "prairie woman" who actually migrated to the region. These memoirs, Matthews asserts, both "confirm and challenge cultural images of the Prairie Woman." They also contest the masculine settlement narrative while at the same time remaining a part of the broader English colonialist narrative.

Matthews analyzes memoirs "by or about married women . . . because the predominant Prairie Woman image is inherently the dependent of a prairie farmer," the mythic symbol of the prairie settlement project. According to Matthews, these memoirs enable scholars "to re-vision key elements of the traditional story of western settlement." This re-visioning includes, among other things, an analysis of "Home" (the cultural image) and "home" (the actual place inextricably linked to the process of settlement and the creation of a farm), the migration experience, prairie spaces, and national identity. Indeed, these memoirs reinforce the work of western women's and gender historians who have documented women's and girls' essential domestic roles, which could also be economic, in the settlement process. Particularly intriguing is Matthews's treatment of "the physical space of the female body" in "the geographic space of the Canadian west," which was idealized as a masculine space, through "the textual space" of memoir. Her discussion in chapter 4 of the white, English-speaking, female body as colonizer and of women's dress and female bodily functions is intriguing and illustrates how memoir can effectively illuminate the gendered settlement experience.

Matthews reminds us that memoirs, when used critically, can be important sources for studying prairie and Plains history. For example, they may provide insights on very private concerns, such as menstruation, child-birth, and emotional well-being, which may not be readily found in other sources. For those grounded in the history of women and gender in prairie/Plains settlements, many of

Matthews's arguments will be familiar. Indeed, she frames *Looking Back*, in part, with western women's and gender history.

This is a book targeted toward scholars. Lay readers may well become frustrated with the academic jargon and theoretical frameworks, especially the discussion of "animalcide" and the "non-human 'Other'" in chapter 5. At times, lengthy excerpts impede the book's readability. Despite these minor quibbles, Matthews effectively demonstrates how memoirs can be used to gender (or re-vision) the Euro-Canadian (and American) settlement process.

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