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Hannah A. Reynolds, Portland State University, graduate student, “‘I just had to do most everything’: Colonial Implications of Settler Women’s Roles in Nineteenth-Century Oregon”

Abstract: Molly Gloss’s 1987 novel, *The Jump-Off Creek*, is considered a classic work of literature on settler history in Oregon. Her depiction of the main character, Lydia Sanderson, is one of grit and generosity in the face of remarkable challenges. Having read accounts of women homesteaders in preparation for writing the book, Gloss addresses several of the themes that come out of historical studies of such women, such as the opportunity for them to own land and the resulting empowerment that they experienced. Perhaps inadvertently, she also recognizes that by doing so, they contributed to a larger system of structural violence against indigenous peoples. By examining the historiography of settler women, then adding to the narrative with case studies from the North Coast of Oregon, there lies an opportunity to break ground on a new version of remembering homesteading women in a way that honors their considerable labor in search of “boundless possibilities,” while recognizing their foundational role in an oppressive system.

**“I Just Had to Do Most Everything’:  
Settler Colonial Implications of Women’s Roles in Homesteading”**

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“The truth is, Mr. Odell, when my husband died I sold every last thing of his just to get the money to come West. I suppose I was seeking the boundless possibilities that are said to live on the frontier.” She kept her stiff smile. “I imagine you have never been that foolish.”<sup>1</sup>

Molly Gloss’s 1987 novel, *The Jump-Off Creek*, is still considered a classic piece of literature in the canon on settler history in Oregon. Her depiction of the main character, Lydia Sanderson, is one of grit and generosity in the face of remarkable challenges. Having read accounts of women homesteaders in preparation for writing the book, Gloss addresses several of the themes that come out of historical studies of such women, such as the opportunity for them to own land and the resulting empowerment that they experienced. Dominant tropes of homesteading women, while laudatory of how these white women were important companions and contributors to settlement, fall short of addressing just how critical women’s labor was to the settler colonial project. As the study of U.S. settler colonialism shifts to recognize the violent costs of expansion, white women with access to land through homesteading must also be reexamined through this new lens. By examining the historiography of these women, then adding to the narrative with case studies from the North Coast of Oregon, there lies an opportunity to break ground on a new version of remembering homesteading women in a way that honors their considerable labor in search of “boundless possibilities,” while recognizing the structural implications of their opportunity.

The history of the American West has long abounded with semi-mythical figures who “tamed” the land and paved the way for the establishment of a nation that stretched across the continent. Although certainly overshadowed by their male counterparts, there has also long been recognition of the role of women in “civilizing” the West. This attribution would be solidified in the form of Dee Brown’s 1958 publication, *The Gentle Tamers: Women of the Old Wild West*, in which he illuminates and glorifies the contributions of white settler women, such as those who

participated in the movement to take advantage of the U.S. government's homesteading legislation in the late nineteenth century.

In the past several decades, and alongside the growth of social history, there have been many more works written on women in the West, many of which seek to offer a platform for women's voices that had been previously excluded from the narrative. Yet most also tend to remain firmly entrenched in what Margaret D. Jacobs refers to as the "rut" of Western women's history. Jacobs argues that the field has remained overall an exploration of exceptional white women (and a few Native Americans). She compares this to the "rut" that guides a wagon wheel, insisting that even as new ideas and experiences are tossed onto the pile, the white female settler still steers the story of Western women along the same path as before.<sup>2</sup> In an effort to address these significant concerns, Jacobs proposes a radical reconstruction, or "decolonization," of the narrative by integrating gendered analysis of the United States as a settler colonial context. In addition to indigenous erasure, the continued glorification of white women removes their agency as actors with their own economic, political, and social interests, even as this very agency led them to produce and "re"-produce" oppressive structures.

Analyses of homesteading women has tended to revolve around the concept of the "cult of true womanhood" and notions of "republican motherhood" that prevailed in white middle-class culture in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> While these notions would have had a significant impact on many of the women who moved west and settled the Pacific Northwest, the difference in lifestyle and expectations of women involved in homesteading certainly inspired more specific qualities that women were expected to imbue within the regional context. Elwood Evans' *History of the Pacific Northwest*, a two-volume collection published in 1889, gives a series of biographical sketches of those who he identifies as having offered a significant

contribution to the settlement and “civilization” of the Oregon Country. Some of the profiled figures are women, and the portrayals of their lives and qualities shed significant light on the ways in which “true womanhood” was understood in the author’s particular place and time.

Evans’ moral expectations were made clear in his praise for particular roles in the community. Women were remembered for their domestic activity, in the establishment of churches and schools, and for their piety, for which they were praised far more than their male counterparts. The characterization of Martha H. Barlow, who remarried in Oregon City after her first husband passed, reflects the ways in which married women were responsible for domestic duties. The author notes that she, “during more than thirty years has made for [her husband] a beautiful home, and furnished the conditions for his success in life.”<sup>4</sup> These characteristics included those beyond the home as well, as demonstrated in the description of Eliza Cook, who was “generous and unselfish in the highest degree, one of the gentlest of mothers, the most patient of wives, an affectionate friend, and the kindest of neighbors.” The importance of supporting neighbors and others who passed through their area was a critical role in long-term settlement that fell within the realm of women. Ultimately, Evans reveals the place of such women by addressing Cook’s role in “turning the course of events in favor of civilization, education and morality.”<sup>5</sup> In terms of morality, it seems, the expectations of these early settler women very closely reflected those of white, middle-class women in other American contexts at the time.

Moreover, widowhood and remarriage were common subjects, demonstrating the importance both of death and of marriage as institutions in settler society. While the author considered remarriage a necessity for a woman of a certain age, he also recognized the ability of many women to maintain control over their land if they were widowed later in life. One such

example of this was F. A. Campbell, of whom he notes that, “Notwithstanding [her husband’s death by consumption], by which not only her life companion but a sterling and honest man was taken away, Mrs. Campbell continued the management of her farm, and has showed in this relation a marked capacity.”<sup>6</sup> Not only does Evans demonstrate his lofty view of the institution of marriage in this passage, he also makes the important concession that widows such as Campbell were capable of property ownership. The role of independent widows shows how settlement could provide Oregon women with a measure of financial control and property ownership that was deemed valuable to the settler colonial project, and therefore made acceptable within their gendered construction.

Perhaps the starkest manner in which notions of femininity were renegotiated in the settlement context was the apparent value of physical and emotional fortitude in the face of significant challenges. Much of this collection focuses on the various trials and tribulations experienced by women in their journeys west. For many, the death of family members and economic struggles were considerable contributing factors to their forced mobility. Although Evans lauded women for their fortitude, there is also a distinct minimization of the suffering entailed by those who forged west. Describing the challenges faced by C. B. Cary on her journey, Evans writes that she experienced “nothing worse than fatigue, some excitement, some privation and some sickness, losing a little daughter, whom they buried at Ford Bridger. But there were no disasters.”<sup>7</sup> While losing children was certainly more common at the time, there is still a certain callousness to his treatment of the death of Cary’s daughter that reflects the manner in which women were expected to withstand such familial tragedy without significant grief. This societal expectation is apparent even in the reflections of the Oregon women in this study, in

which they minimized tragedy and clearly demonstrated pride in the labor that they contributed to the growth of their communities on the western edge of the country.

Although only forty-six of the over four hundred pages of *History of the Pacific Northwest's* biographical section were about women, Evans demonstrates that even in the 1890s, the role of white women was indeed recognized as critical to the settler colonial project. His appreciation for women's roles is apparent in his assertion that "the labor of creating christian communities in our state fell, as the credit should be awarded, to women like Mrs. Weatherford, who would not lower their conception of life, even though living away from all the ordinary incentives to social exertions."<sup>8</sup> Though in the shadow of "great men," these pieces demonstrate the ways in which some women, who fit very certain expectations (or were depicted as such), were always celebrated as playing a key role in the settlement of the Pacific Northwest, and must continue to be analyzed within the settler colonial structure they helped construct.

The women who were able to record their own accounts of this experience enjoyed the triple privilege of survival, relative success in homesteading, and access to education. One such woman was Jennie Reeher, who wrote an unpublished account of her almost thirty years homesteading outside of Tillamook, Oregon, from her home in Forest Grove a little over a decade later. The role of memory is apparent in her piece, and it is important to consider the way that she would have no doubt internalized, and therefore reproduced, many of the values expressed in ideologically-laden remembrances such as Evans' history. Yet even considering its limitations, Reeher's record of her experience remains a significant contribution to the effort to expand upon the historical narrative of women who homesteaded in the North Coast region of Oregon.

Reeher clearly demonstrates several of the expectations of women homesteaders at the time, both in terms of her fondness for motherhood and committed religiosity. She clearly identified with her role as a key architect in the religious community of Tillamook. On her arrival, there was “no church ... and lots going on all day Sunday. People told me I was the only church member in town, but I found others.” Eventually, she would gather this group to form “a Sunday school, and a big meeting was held in the school house one Sunday morning,” further insisting that “I presided because they forced me to.”<sup>9</sup> Reeher’s assumption of the role of presider in religious services suggests that there was real opportunity for empowerment and public leadership. Her critical account of the consumption of alcohol in Oregon compared with her home state of Kansas further suggests her feeling of responsibility over contributing to the social and moral fiber of her new community. The Reeher family did not stay in Tillamook long, however, and soon they moved to a homestead in the mountains quite a few miles out of town. It was there that she would assume what clearly became the most important role for her personally: that of a devoted mother.

Jennie Reeher’s memories abound with stories of her children growing up on their property in the mountains outside of Tillamook. Moreover, her desire to write down her experiences was inspired by her wish to “preserve some of the incidents of [her] life for [her] children and grandchildren.”<sup>10</sup> Yet, while parenthood was a dominant theme in her retrospection, she did not seem to attribute this entirely to her gender, and insisted that “A child is the greatest pleasure and joy a man *or* woman can ever have and hold.”<sup>11</sup> Even so, her husband often had to take up farm work outside of the homestead, and so she was often left on their land with the children as her only companions. This would expand her role as mother to include duties outside of the home, most notably that of the family fisherman. She spent much of her writing recounting



various river fishing experiences, insisting that “Fishing, to me, was a most necessary part of my job in the first few years we lived on the river.”<sup>12</sup> Her commitment to the subject reflects both her ties to the land and the need to adapt what notions of “womanhood” and “motherhood” meant in the context of homesteading. She took pride in her ability to provide for her family, and the many fond memories she had of fishing with and for her children.

Significantly, at the time that she was writing these memories, Jennie Reeher had been living separately from her husband for at least ten years. While there is no definitive evidence that her time as a homesteader contributed to her capacity to separate from her husband, her account demonstrates that she experienced considerable personal growth during that time. Reeher had apparent pride in many of the things she did on her own, such as measuring the rainfall for government records and administering medical care despite lacking any formal training. She wrote of her use of a medical book to inform her care for neighbors and her own children: “It was taking a chance, but pioneers everywhere must take chances.”<sup>13</sup> In reading her story, it is clear that this was how Reeher would like to be remembered: a woman whose ingenuity, bravery, and skills all placed her firmly in the narrative of the “pioneer” of the American West, an identity that would come to have a dramatic effect on the landscape and lives of those they sought to displace.

Another case is that of Mary Gerritse, who spent much of her childhood and all of her adulthood in the homesteading context, shaping her attitude and perspective toward labor and gender roles. She was young but had already had some schooling when her family took up the homestead in Nehalem, Oregon. In this way, she reflected a different experience than that of her mother who “kept house” while Mary helped her father keep up the cows and other non-domestic labor. When her parents moved back to Scholls Ferry after “proving up,” or officially

establishing legal ownership of, their homestead in Manzanita, Mary commented that “Mother was lonely and he thought it would be better for her nearer neighbors.” Interestingly, Mary never mentioned feeling particularly lonely herself, and while she celebrated moments in which she had the opportunity to spend time with others, she made it clear that she would not have desired a different lifestyle. When reflecting on her own life, she stressed the ways in which she was different from other women. She was well aware, and proud, of her exceptional character as a woman, expressing that, “It was quite a task to take women and children over the trail.”<sup>14</sup> This is one of several examples in which Mary separated herself from other women, and acknowledged the existing expectation of women’s weakness by placing herself in apparent contrast. Her insistence on not riding sidesaddle while delivering mail, as she “was not doing a lady’s work anyway,” is characteristic of her understanding of gendered expectations, and how she proudly defied them.

Mary’s labor for the postal service receives greatest attention and detail in her oral history, far more so than her experiences in the home or with her husband and children. The nature of the source, as an oral history collected later in life, is a necessary factor to analyze when trying to piece together the dominant subjects of Gerritse’s narrative. One would assume that her most tragic experience was the loss of several of her children, but she did not even mention the death of her first daughter, Mary Belle, at the age of 19. Judging by the experiences and periods of her life that she preserved in this oral history, it is apparent she wanted her legacy to be defined by her labor on the land and outside of the domestic context. The fact that she was given the opportunity to carry mail, perhaps as the result of settling such a remote corner of the country, reflects the ways in which women were able to transcend some gender roles through homesteading. Discussions of this fact tend to focus on the ways in which women’s expanded

labor roles were a product of necessity, but accounts such as Gerritse's establish that they were also a product of their own interest.

Even though she worked outside the home and performed many traditionally masculine labor roles, it was clear that in her marriage she was still expected to hold down the realm of housekeeping and childcare. Although she never explicitly says so, the reality of her long absences during the day when she was on her mail route suggests that her husband John would have had to pick up more domestic responsibilities around the homestead, but it is also likely that her eldest daughter Mary Belle took up many of those tasks as well. She does, however, explicitly discuss one period of time while they lived on their Nehalem homestead in which she was not working outside of the home, explaining that "John worked at his job till November and the children and I just played. I kept house and looked after the children. We really did play and were so happy to be free from the schedule of carrying the mail."<sup>15</sup> This is the only time in her account in which Gerritse refers to her domestic duties as a joy in her life. She stresses the value of her labor outside of the home far more frequently. Additionally, this glimpse into her home life in Nehalem suggests a deeper connection to her children than we would know from the rest of her story. In this way, Gerritse sets herself apart from other women of her time, and certainly identifies more with the hearty, self-sacrificing trope of homesteading women.

Perhaps the most apparent reimagining of the "woman's sphere" is the fervent denial of fear that Gerritse, as well as many of the women in other accounts, demonstrated. Despite the many life-threatening experiences that Mary Gerritse had, she remained staunch in the fact that she had conquered fear. While describing particularly dangerous trail conditions (which had scared several men off the trail) she insists that, "I did not know how to be afraid. I lost it all in the woods long before." Yet even considering the ways in which Mary was exceptional in the

case of her working the mail route, her account also reflects many of the challenges that are commonplace in homesteading narratives. The Gerritses ran into many of the obstacles faced by homesteaders in other contexts, such as fire, diseased livestock, and the failure to “prove up” on a claim. To be successful in such a venture, one would have to at least keep fear at bay. The lives of Jennie Reeher and Mary Gerritse are incredible by any account. To place their stories within a settler colonial framework is not to deny the dynamism of their adventurous spirit or the positive effects that they had on many others who settled the North Coast, but it does allow us to more accurately view the settler colonial project as one that was absolutely dependent on women’s reproductive labor.

As Elwood Evans, proclaimed, “It was by the exertions of . . . wives and mothers, who gave all but life and sometimes even that, that our state was purchased from savagery.”<sup>16</sup> For Evans, there was no doubt about the ultimate goal of settlement in the Pacific Northwest. Women’s fortitude in their labor was promoted in the building of the western female ideal because it was apparent that the success of the settler colonial project depended upon it. Their domestic labor, reproductive and child-care capacity, and significant community-oriented employment outside of the home were absolutely critical to the functional land acquisition of white Americans and the U.S. government alike. As Mary Gerritse asserted, “I just had to do most everything.”<sup>17</sup> The accounts of women such as Gerritse and Reeher demonstrate the ways in which women identified with each of these roles differently, contributing in a variety of ways and with different motivations. Regardless, Evans is correct in his assertion that these contributions were crucial to settler colonial expansion in the American West.

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<sup>1</sup> Molly Gloss, *The Jump-Off Creek* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1989), 168.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret D. Jacobs, “Getting Out of a Rut: Decolonizing Western Women’s History,” *Pacific Historical Review* 79, no. 4 (November 2010): 586.

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- <sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Jameson, "Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers: True Womanhood in the American West," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 7, no. 3 (1984): 1–8.
- <sup>4</sup> Elwood Evans, *History of the Pacific Northwest*, 2 vols. (Portland, OR: North Pacific History Company, 1889), 2:206.
- <sup>5</sup> Evans, *History of the Pacific Northwest*, 2:276.
- <sup>6</sup> Evans, *History of the Pacific Northwest*, 2:241.
- <sup>7</sup> Evans, *History of the Pacific Northwest*, 2:245.
- <sup>8</sup> Evans, *History of the Pacific Northwest*, 2:626.
- <sup>9</sup> Jennie Reeher, "Memories of Jennie Allen Reeher: The Homestead Years, 1887-1916," Nehalem Valley Historical Society, 4.
- <sup>10</sup> Reeher, "Memories of Jennie Allen Reeher," 7.
- <sup>11</sup> Emphasis added. Reeher, "Memories of Jennie Allen Reeher," 7.
- <sup>12</sup> Reeher, "Memories of Jennie Allen Reeher," 19.
- <sup>13</sup> Reeher, "Memories of Jennie Allen Reeher," 19.
- <sup>14</sup> Gerritse, "The Journal of Mary Gerritse," Nehalem Valley Historical Society, 26.
- <sup>15</sup> Gerritse, "The Journal of Mary Gerritse," 29.
- <sup>16</sup> Evans, "History of the Pacific Northwest," 2:625.
- <sup>17</sup> Gerritse, "The Journal of Mary Gerritse," 45.

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