

## SECTION TWO

# RE-IMAGINING REGION

SYLVIA VAN KIRK and Susan Armitage, whose essays appear in this section, are senior scholars recognized for unsettling two nations' pasts by casting women as central actors. Armitage, an American historian, and Van Kirk, a Canadian historian, broke historical ground in the 1970s and 1980s by showing how the stories of an androcentric and eurocentric West changed when women joined the cast. U.S. frontiers and the Canadian fur trade had explained how each nation had developed; adding women disrupted those accepted national histories.<sup>1</sup>

Until recently, however, women's historians have accepted as given the western stage on which women acted. We have not really addressed what regions themselves—the West, or the Prairies, or British Columbia, or the Pacific Northwest—might mean, from women's perspectives, or how gender might map regional boundaries. In these articles, Armitage and Van Kirk again take the lead to examine the intersections of region, gender, race, and history.

Gender aside, regions have figured differently in the histories of Canada and the United States. American historians have assumed that the West was a distinct section of the nation, yet they have debated its

boundaries and what defined them. Canadian historians have been less concerned with where the West is and have simply divided the Canadian West into the Prairie provinces and British Columbia while they focus on the 49th parallel as the line that divided the Canadian West from the wild region to the South.<sup>2</sup> The important exception for many years was Walter Sage, who argued that ongoing migrations back and forth across the Canada-U.S. border connected the frontiers of North America and that each Canadian region—the Maritimes, central Canada, the Prairies, and British Columbia—had more in common with the adjacent American region than it did with the rest of Canada.<sup>3</sup> After World War II, some U.S. scholars, like Herbert Heaton and Paul Sharp, also began to map a continuous North American West, and to follow the people, economies, and social movements that crossed the 49th parallel.<sup>4</sup> In the late twentieth century, awareness of globalization led many historians to consider transnational histories, emphasizing migrations and ecological and economic interdependence.<sup>5</sup> Yet until quite recently, historians have not addressed how gender and place are connected, nor have they considered how gender might change the ways we define regions or write regional and national histories.<sup>6</sup>

Armitage and Van Kirk turn to that little-explored terrain of gender and transnational regionalism. Each considers how gender functioned in the region once known as Oregon Country, a territory that stretched from what is now the southern border of Oregon to the current northern border of British Columbia. Oregon Country demonstrates the difference a national border could make, because in 1846 the 49th parallel divided the territory that native inhabitants had never divided and that Britain and the United States had claimed and occupied jointly.

The two articles in this section complement each other. Susan Armitage considers how gender and race operated as two nation states claimed and divided the land; Sylvia Van Kirk provides a micro-historical illustration of Armitage's regional perspective.

Armitage ambitiously asks how a gendered perspective would change the history of nineteenth-century Oregon Country if that region were viewed as a meeting ground of native peoples, British fur traders, and

British and American colonists. She asks how each people acquired the place, perceived it, and used it, emphasizing that people did not act alone but as members of social networks. Kinship was a crucial social network that had everything to do with gender. Social networks and assumptions, too, could extend far beyond the boundaries of Oregon Country, as assumptions formed in other places affected how the British and Americans saw the land itself, how they allocated it, used it, and bequeathed it. Armitage shows how assumptions about marriage, land ownership, and inheritance all became central concerns as two nations claimed their parts of what had been a common territory. She demonstrates how focusing on gender, marriage, kinship, and other social relationships could change regional histories on both sides of the border.

Sylvia Van Kirk narrows the focus of Armitage's Oregon Country to one family and examines how the shifting meanings of race and gender during the processes of state formation affected the family of one fur-trade couple, Charles and Isabella Ross. The early nineteenth-century fur-trade society had depended on couples like the Rosses, Scottish and French-Ojibwa, respectively, who, far from their birthplaces and families of origin, forged relationships that depended on the skills and interdependence of both partners. Van Kirk's pathbreaking *Many Tender Ties* first focused attention on these intimate relationships between European men and native women that were so central to the fur trade.<sup>7</sup> In her article, which originated as a featured luncheon address at the "Unsettled Pasts" conference, Van Kirk extends her analysis and time frame beyond the fur trade to the era of colonial settlement, after the new international border separated two Hudson's Bay Company forts, placing Fort Nisqually in Washington State and Fort Victoria in British Columbia.

In a region marked by considerable social and political flux, the Rosses' ten Métis children faced very different options than their parents had. In colonial settler societies, race became increasingly important in defining who could possess land and inherit it. Van Kirk deftly illuminates those complex changes through the shifting marital and economic fortunes of the widowed Isabella Ross and her children, some of whom settled in British Columbia, some south of the 49th parallel. The children's

class status, marital choices, and the racial ethnic identities that they could claim on either side of the border depended partly on where they settled, and partly on gender. Especially with the surplus of male immigrants to the colony, it seems that sons had great difficulty securing an economic niche for themselves and maintaining their families' status. The daughters fared better, because their ability to operate across cultures made them, for a time, highly regarded marriage partners, at least until the arrival of European women erected new racial hierarchies.

The fortunes of the Ross children, north and south of the 49th parallel, illuminate the concrete experiences of individual human beings who lived the regional history that Armitage outlined. Their options were embedded in how settler societies in the United States and Canada defined race and their differing policies regarding native and Métis peoples. The Ross family's cross-border migrations reinforce Armitage's point that social networks and kinship complicate the boundaries and meanings of regions.

Both articles suggest how colonial and national power affect what stories are preserved as history. Each group with historical claims to Oregon Country passed stories down from generation to generation to explain how they came into the country and claimed it. For each group—native peoples, Métis, the British, and the Americans—gender affected who told these stories and in what contexts. Later, colonial relationships determined whose stories were regarded as folklore, or as family stories, and whose would become histories of European and American settlement. Focusing on gender, then, illuminates not only the history of a transnational region, but also how that history became truncated to stories of white settlers in two separate nation states.

#### NOTES

1. See Susan Armitage, "Through Women's Eyes: A New View of the West," in *The Women's West*, ed. Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 9–18; Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670–1870* (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer; Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980).

2. For debates about mapping the U.S. West, see Donald Worster, "New West, True West: Interpreting the Region's History," *Western Historical Quarterly* 18 (1987): 141–56; David M. Emmons, "Constructed Province: History and the Making of the Last American West," *Western Historical Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 437–59; "A Roundtable: Six Responses to 'Constructed Province,'" *Western Historical Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 461–86; Walter Nugent, "Where is the American West?" *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 42 (Summer 1992): 2–23.
3. Walter Sage, "Some Aspects of the Frontier in Canadian History," Canadian Historical Association, *Annual Report*, 1928; "Geographical and Cultural Aspects of the Five Canadas," Canadian Historical Association, *Annual Report*, 1937.
4. Herbert Heaton, "Other Wests Than Ours," *Journal of Economic History* 6, Issue Supplement: The Tasks of Economic History (1946): 50–62; Paul F. Sharp, "When Our West Moved North," *American Historical Review* 55 (1950): 286–300; Paul F. Sharp, "Three Frontiers: Some Comparative Studies of Canadian, American, and Australian Settlements," *Pacific Historical Review* 24 (1955): 369–77; Paul F. Sharp, *The Agrarian Revolt in Western Canada: A Survey Showing American Parallels* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1948); Paul F. Sharp, *Whoop-Up Country: The Canadian-American West, 1865–1885* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955).
5. See the December 1999 special issue of the *Journal of American History*; Bruno Ramirez with Yves Otis, *Crossing the 49th Parallel: Migration from Canada to the United States, 1900–1930* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001); Randy W. Widdis, *With Scarcely a Ripple: Anglo-Canadian Migration into the United States and Western Canada, 1880–1920* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998); Paul W. Hirt, ed., *Terra Pacifica: People and Place in the Northwest States and Western Canada* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1998); Gunther Peck, *Inventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880–1930* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Beth LaDow, *The Medicine Line: Life and Death on a North American Borderland* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Theodore Binnema, *Common and Contested Ground: A Human and Environmental History of the Northwestern Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001); John M. Findlay and Ken S. Coates, eds., *Parallel Destinies: Canadian-American Relations West of the Rockies* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002); Sterling Evans, ed., *The Borderlands of the American and Canadian Wests: Essays on Regional History of the Forty-ninth Parallel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).
6. Two notable exceptions are Sheila McManus and Nora Faires, both of whom have placed gender as a category of analysis at the center of their scholarship on the Canada-U.S. borderlands. See Sheila McManus, "Mapping the Alberta-Montana Borderlands: Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 20 (2001): 71–87; McManus, "'Their Own Country': Race, Gender, Landscape, and Colonization Around the 49th Parallel, 1862–1900," *Agricultural History* 73 (1999): 168–82; McManus, *The Line Which Separates: Race, Gender, and the Making of the Alberta-Montana Borderlands* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005); Nora Faires, "Poor Women, Proximate Border: Migrants from Ontario to Detroit in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 20 (Spring 2001): 88–109; and John J. Bukowczyk, Nora Faires, David R. Smith, and Randy Widdis, eds., *Permeable Border: The Great Lakes Basin as*

*Transnational Region, 1650–1990* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press; Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005).

7. Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*.