

UNDERSTANDING GENDERED & RACIALIZED POWER & OPPRESSION AT RED RIVER: FOSS VS PELLY

Negotiating Female Morality: place, ideology and agency in Red River colony by FitzGerald & Muszynski

Context: Red River



By 1811 Red River Colony was established in Rupert's Land (the lands now known as "Winnipeg, Manitoba,") at the convergence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. With the Fur trade moving west, this settlement became a busy "contact zone" for Indigenous nations and Fur traders, and eventually marriage à la façon du pays/common law partnerships ensued, producing a culture and nationhood of Métis and Countryborn peoples.

- Métis referred to the children of French and Indigenous peoples, who spoke French, and were raised Roman Catholic. Countryborn referred to peoples who spoke English, were raised Protestant, and of Indigenous, British, and Irish decent. These divisions shift over time, creating and encompassing a whole nationhood which is ongoing, with various languages (including Michif), backgrounds, and cultural practices.

Métis and Countryborn women fully participated in the social, political, and public life of Red River, "benefiting the rank and station into which they were born or married." So how did this shift?

The Arrival of White Women

By the 1830s there was an alteration in European middle-class notions of gender roles which were interconnected with racist ideas of 'mixing' the white 'race.' Because of this shift, white women were granted the ability to settle at Red River as agents of colonization in order to adequately "civilize" the "immoral" character of the colony. They settled at a time when Indigenous struggles for self determination threatened British authority, causing them to be implicated in this reconfiguration of racial hierarchy as Britain attempted to assert its authority over Métis homeland. Implicated in the colonial project, white women worked to establish British authority in the colony by bringing with them victorian patriarchal notions of female morality, domesticity, and agency, which they utilized to distinguish "real" whites from those they produced as 'other.' FitzGerald & Muszynski suggest the arrival of white women intensified racial tensions, though they were not entirely responsible for this, since the colonial ideas which they enforced coincided with, rather than reconfigured, the racial hierarchies in Red River at the time.



Discourse, Rumour, & Surveillance

European nations created an arbitrary idea of whiteness as superior by constructing particular "racialized class and gender categories linked to characteristics such as 'Englishness.'" As a result, the discourse of Métissage as representative of immorality, described by British reverend William Cockran as "the progeny of the adulterer and the whore" provided white women with the tools to further racial divisions.

Since white women had restrictions over their own behaviour, in order to be viewed as respectable under patriarchy, their sites to assert their power and surveillance over Métis/Countryborn women had to be within spaces deemed 'appropriate.' Thus, white women utilized the discourse of sexuality and by default racialization, through the tool of rumour within the private sphere, as a strategy to deflect and ultimately heighten their own position. White women used domesticity to legitimate what they deemed as their colonial task of establishing the private sphere, by looking at the household, bodies, clothing, and agency as signifiers of difference. The home then became a site of surveillance, as white women employed rounds of social visits (they labelled "calling") to police Métis & Countryborn women's ability to reproduce British notions of domesticity, as indicative of their character. Therefore, rumour became the powerful means to position Métis/Countryborn women as the 'other' whilst domesticity enabled the spaces to do so.

Case Example: Foss vs Pelly



In 1850, Sarah Ballenden, a Countryborn woman and wife of the Chief factor of Red River, found herself subjected to rumours by white women. White women, including Anne Pelly, a Scottish wife of an HBC accountant, spread rumours that Ballenden was having an affair with Christopher Foss, an Irish Company officer. Since Sarah could not defend herself in court under English law, Foss filed a civil suit to dispute the claims. Testimonies during the trial exemplified the use of rumour and the sites of surveillance by white women. Their rumour's assaulted Sarah's character by focusing on the discourses of her sexuality, exemplified in the rumours spread by Mrs Logan that, "Mrs. Ballenden was a woman that must always have a sweetheart as well as a husband." Further, Letitia, the wife of the Chief Factor of York Factory wrote a letter describing how she heard rumours about Mrs. Ballenden, alluding to her 'difference,' through the accusations of her being flirtatious with Captain Foss. These examples outline how white women produced themselves as 'sexually pure' and moral by comparison to Countryborn women who they produce as the deviant or the 'other.' Moreover, Ann Cockran suggested that whilst visiting the home of Ballenden, Sarah was unable to reproduce British etiquette. Cockran used this as proof of her character as a true outsider, effectively locating domesticity as the site of surveillance, and discourse as the means to separate her from 'true' white women. The policing and subsequent exclusion of Sarah from "white power relations" was not simply symbolic either. Over the course of the trial the Ballenden family moved to Fort Garry, and thus white women accomplished their goal of literally separating themselves from Countryborn women. Understanding the case of Foss vs Pelly is extremely significant as it "[allows] for a glimpse into how the 19th century discourses on sexuality and the racialized 'other' could be used to redefine a new hegemonic order" by white women and therefore, paints a larger picture of the use and formation of power and place.



What does this tell us about power?



The authors centre Foucault in their description of power, suggesting, "rather than focusing on who possessed power and who did not, Foucault considered how groups or individuals modified their power relations to suit their needs." Thus, Foss vs Pelly demonstrates how white women applied and constructed the discourse of Countryborn women, in order to participate in power relations themselves, while strengthening their own collective identity (to suit their own needs). Rumour proved to be a powerful tool as white women blurred the lines between the 'private' and 'public' spheres by utilizing the domestic sphere as a space for political discussion which evidently shaped the power relations in the public sphere, "placing British women and the domestic domain at the heart of colonial power relations." Consequently, FitzGerald & Muszynski dispute the present discourse of white women as passive within colonization by exemplifying them as active subjects and agents of colonization who asserted British authority to solidify their own social status. Thus, this case demonstrates how power, and therefore place-making, function to create the world as we know it, by looking at the politics and formation of power and oppression in Red River.

SHARRON A. FITZGERALD & ALICIA MUSZYNSKI, "NEGOTIATING FEMALE MORALITY: PLACE, IDEOLOGY AND AGENCY IN THE RED RIVER COLONY," WOMEN'S HISTORY REVIEW 16.5(2007): 661-680. [HTTP://WWW-TANDFONLINE-COM.EZPROXY.LIBRARY.UVIC.CA/DOI/PDF/10.1080/09612020701447624?NEEDACCESS=TRUE](http://www.tandfonline.com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/doi/pdf/10.1080/09612020701447624?NEEDACCESS=TRUE)