

***Keepers of the Land: Indigenous Women on the Prairies (19<sup>th</sup> Century)* edited by Rhonda M. Kronyk, Sara V. Komarnisky, and Kisha Supernant**

**Overview of the Project**

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At the end of March 2016, Rhonda Kronyk saw a notice from the University of Regina Press (URP) that the book *Women's History* in the *History of the Prairie West Series* had been released. She had been researching nineteenth-century Indigenous women and noticed a lack of material. As a result, she was immediately excited about the prospect of reading this anthology. Unfortunately, Indigenous women are wholly absent from the *Women's History* collection. After a series of Twitter interactions with the URP and a short email exchange with Karen Clark, Rhonda realized there was a gap in the literature and began to conceptualize a book project to fill it: *Keepers of the Land: Indigenous Women on the Prairies (19<sup>th</sup> century)*. She invited Sara Komarnisky and Kisha Supernant to join her as co-editors for the project.

Traditional prairie narratives either elide Indigenous women, erasing them completely from the page and the landscape, or include them from a patriarchal and colonial perspective. Indigenous women often disappear in the historical narrative because they were rarely included in colonial sources. This leaves little room for understanding their vital role in communities and families. It also encourages scholars and readers to focus on colonial narratives in lieu of Indigenous ones, and the history of the prairies is then reduced to a story of progressive settlers versus recalcitrant natives, rather than a story of Indigenous peoples adapting to a life in flux and contributing to the settlement of the west.

Indigenous women played significant roles in their own communities and in interactions with neighbouring communities. The title of the book, *Keepers of the Land* references Indigenous women's responsibilities in protecting the land and its waters. As part of that responsibility, they ensured language and stories were passed down; they maintained their homes, made clothing and provided meals; and they helped young people with rites of passage. They were also central to the lives of many European traders and trappers; they processed furs, supplied clothing, hunted for food and become wives and mothers. But understanding what these women did as a homogenous entity tells us little about individual women and ignores the daily realities of their lives. It allows the negative stereotypes created by colonial officials and settlers to persist.

Our proposed volume represents a distinctive contribution to our knowledge of Indigenous women in the nineteenth century, not only in its approaches to the subject, but also in the source material: we will encourage contributors to be creative in their use of sources in telling stories that have otherwise been lost to the historical narrative. When Indigenous women rarely appear in colonial sources, scholars and interested writers must be imaginative in telling their stories to expose the myriad ways Indigenous women actively shaped the Canadian prairies. We wish to expand the historical record and the kinds of information available to university classrooms and the popular audience to include both scholarly work and biographical or creative work about Indigenous women. To that end, we will call for proposals that utilize oral history, songs, poetry, traditional stories, recipes, family stories, arts and crafts, biographies, and the prairie landscape itself in addition to colonial sources. We will encourage collaborative work between scholarly and non-scholarly contributors. Source material and the ways it can be used will be the thread that connects the essays into a cohesive narrative.

The manuscript will be composed of 12 scholarly essays of 6000 – 6500 words each and 7 essays of 2000 – 2500 words written from a personal or family perspective. This mixed approach was used in *Unsettled Pasts: Reconceiving the West through Women's History*, edited by Sarah Carter, Lesley Erickson, Patricia Roome, and Char Smith (University of Calgary Press, 2005). As the editors argue: "...when both approaches are brought to bear on the past, a more nuanced history of the West results." *Keepers of the Land* will focus on scholarly work, but will introduce academics to the value of more creative works such as traditional stories and songs. The approach privileges Indigenous knowledge and ways of learning and allows us to access stories that are not told in colonial sources. A similar approach is used in *The Winter we Danced: Voices from the Past, the Future, and the Idle No More Movement* by the Kinq-nda-niimi Collective (ARP Books, 2014). The use of poetry, lyrics, and art as well as essays written by scholars expose readers to voices and stories not heard in most scholarly writing. Much like James Daschuk's *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* (University of Regina Press, 2013), the essays will be written in a tone that will encourage a lay audience to read the volume.

The scholarly essays will be written in an accessible format—jargon will be kept to a minimum, while maintaining high standards of research and interpretation. The volume will be cross-disciplinary, so essays could be from several disciplines including Indigenous Studies, Anthropology, History, and Women's/Gender Studies. The personal stories may be based on songs or family histories that can be traced to the nineteenth century. All contributors will demonstrate ways of using records that do not privilege masculine or colonial voices and experiences, and will give insight into the cultural and community importance of Indigenous women on the Canadian Prairies: the complexity of their lives, their families, their relationship to the land, and their struggles.

Emma Laroque has agreed to contribute an essay that will provide a contextual framework for the volume. The introduction will be co-written by the editors and will describe the development of this project and the reasons for collecting the essays into a single volume. Finally, the editors will write a 100-200 word introduction to each essay. These introductions will show how the essays fit into a cohesive narrative and will make connections between the essays apparent to readers.

Canada is at a crossroads: we can embrace reconciliation in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report, or we can shelve it, much like we did the recommendations of the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal People. The editors of *Keepers of the Land* choose to believe that Canada is ready to work towards an equitable relationship with First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) peoples. They believe one of the most important ways to foster new relationships in Canada is to help bring important stories to light that expand our knowledge of Canadian history beyond settlement and colonial institutions and are confident this volume will be a step towards that goal.

## Editor Bios

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*Rhonda Kronyk* holds an MA in history and is an independent scholar exploring the intersections of her First Nations and settler heritage and identity creation. She is a freelance copyeditor and writer whose work appears in several Alberta magazines and newspapers. Her essay “White Indigenous Woman” is included in *In This Together: Fifteen Stories of Truth and Reconciliation*, edited by Danielle-Metcalfé Chenail (Brindle & Glass, 2016). She is in the early stages of a project that will foster reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous women.

*Sara Komarnisky* is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Department of History and Classics at the University of Alberta. She is a collaborator on the project “Object Lives and Global Histories of Northern North America” ([www.objectlives.com](http://www.objectlives.com)). Her work explores themes of interconnection, mobility, and material culture across North America in two projects: lives and livelihoods of Mexican migrants in Alaska, and the circulation of art and craft made by Indigenous patients at tuberculosis (TB) hospitals from the 1940s-1970s. She is a settler Canadian of Ukrainian heritage.

*Kisha Supernant* is Métis and an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Alberta, specializing in the application of mapping methods to the human past and present and how archaeologists and communities can build collaborative research relationships. Her research interests include the relationship between cultural identities, landscapes and the use of space; Métis archaeology; indigenous archaeology; indigenous feminisms; the legal and ethical implications of archaeology; and the role of digital mapping and GIS spatial analysis in archaeological research. She has published in local and international journals on GIS in archaeology, collaborative archaeological practice, and conceptual mapping in digital humanities. She is currently the PI on a SSHRC-funded project exploring the archaeological signature of Métis daily life on the Canadian Prairies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.